

Film Discussion Groups in China: State Discourse or a Plebeian Public Sphere?

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I.

The Chinese term “film criticism among the masses” (*qunzhong yingping*) refers to a system of loosely organized film discussion groups which have emerged in several Chinese cities in the wake of the economic reforms of the 1980s. The term “masses” (*qunzhong*) belies the political origins of this phenomenon in the 1950s when the new socialist state sought to bring about the political self-education of what it called “the masses” and at the same time, to create a basis of popular legitimacy for itself. It is therefore a historical irony that in the 1980’s revival of these film discussion groups, can be detected an emerging rupture between state and popular discourse, and a decline in the hold of official messages on mass media audiences.

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the interrelated notions of “civil society” and “public sphere.” Civil society refers to the structural and institutional dimension of a democratic society, where voluntary associations operate outside of and independent of the state (Keane 1988ab; Taylor 1990). The public sphere, most thoroughly analyzed by Habermas for the Western context, refers to the discursive realm of social criticism and public opinion formed through public debates which are independent of state as well as market domination (Habermas 1989; Calhoun 1992). Sites for the emergence of the public sphere in 18th century Western Europe were coffee houses, salon societies, newspapers, magazines, and novels.

First developed to discuss social changes at the inception of capitalism in the West, and as a way for the

new bourgeoisie of the 18th century to band together against the absolutist state, the notions of “civil society” and “public sphere” have recently been re-appropriated for a different historical and political context. They have witnessed a renewed vitality in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. From the 1970s to the 1990s, these notions have informed the self-interpretations of those seeking to liberate the realm of “society” from the totalizing socialist state (Arato 1981; Wojcicki 1981; Pelcynski 1988; Hankiss 1988; Kligman 1991). With regards to art, these social movements can be seen as efforts to free art from the dual processes of what Benjamin called the “aestheticization of politics” and the “politicization of art,” which modernity had inaugurated by severing art from its traditional association with religion and cult values (1968).

In this paper, I would also like to address the question for post-Mao China of the possibilities for a public sphere developing in the context of state-dominated production of mass media.¹ The economic reforms launched in China in the 1980s have had the effect of pluralizing culture and beginning the dissolution or weakening of the state at the peripheries of its organizational apparatus (Yang 1989a). In this gradual retreat of the state, what indications are there of social self-organization and new discourse-formation in the realm of mass media culture? My paper is very much an in-progress report and reflection, based on six weeks of preliminary fieldwork visiting film discussion groups in the cities of Xi’an and Shanghai in early 1992, and a perusal of two dozen film criticisms in print.

While art in state socialist contexts seeks to extract itself from state politics, art and public culture are also

threatened by market values in capitalism. Following the Frankfurt School, Habermas sees in the post World War II spread of television, a decline of the public sphere in the West. In the face of corporate business interests and the increasing commodification of popular culture, modern mass media soon became a "culture industry" rather than a forum for public debate. Whereas in early capitalism, market distribution made a formerly elite art and culture more accessible to a larger pool of people, in advanced capitalism, market values start infiltrating the very substance of cultural production, pre-digesting the product and rendering it more "consumption-ready" (Habermas 1989:166). There is a blurring of the boundaries between commerce and art, entertainment and advertising, as cinema and television help produce a mass consumer culture (Anderson 1991).

The Chinese situation is different from those of Eastern Europe as well as the West. Unlike the former, the state socialist apparatus is still very intact in China, thus ensuring the continued production of state discourse and culture in film and television. Unlike the West, market forces have only just begun to leave their mark on the media² and therefore do not yet have quite the dominance that market values have over the Western media. Market forces in China have developed much further in the world of manufacturing and trade than in the realm of art, literature, and culture. Although film attendance and box office receipts have experienced a sharp and steady decline in the past decade, this has not galvanized the Chinese film industry to make an all-out effort to win back the market. This is because Chinese mass media, especially film, are entangled in a power field quite different from, but just as hegemonic and invincible as those of the market. This is state power.

Baudrillard has decried the way that modern Western mass media works, in a uni-directional transmission-reception model, without reciprocity from the audience. That is to say, media consumers are denied any response or feedback into the system, as in the model of gift-giving (1986). Gift repayment in non-market or pre-capitalist societies is often a mechanism to level hierarchies (Weiner 1992). By becoming the

receiver or consumer of mass culture, a person or group's status is both symbolically, as well as actually, lowered (Yang 1989b). For the consumer, the way to gain back position is by giving back something, such as a response to the messages received.

In Western market societies, it is mainly the elite professional class who have the means of response to the media through newspapers, magazines, scholarly writings, and on television. Middle and lower classes have few institutional channels for response.³ China, ironically, is perhaps the only country where there exists a formal institution for the dissemination of public film criticisms and interpretations by ordinary film enthusiasts who are not professional critics. Thus, if the notion of a "public sphere" is to be applied to an aspect of Chinese media, it must go beyond the bourgeois public sphere to address a plebeian, as well as multiple public spheres (Eley 1992; Fraser 1992). However, the realm of mass film criticisms is not completely free or independent because it was created by the socialist state and continues, in some ways, to serve as a site of state discourse.

Films in China are distributed through a rigid centralized system of four bureaucratic levels modeled in the 1950s after the Soviet system. Local theater operators in each city or town, who have first-hand knowledge of audience demand, do not have any say over what films they show, when they show them, nor what they charge for them. The massive China Film Distribution and Release Corporation (*zhongguo dianying faxing fangying zong gongsi*) (CFDRC) in Beijing comprises the first level. It is the sole organization in charge of releasing domestic films and the purchase of foreign ones. It controls all 26 provinces and special cities in China.

In an interview with a manager of a large movie theater in Xi'an, he said that often they read about a foreign film in a Chinese film magazine, which arouses their curiosity and their desire to see it. However, each time they inquire about it from the city or provincial state distributors, they are told that it is unavailable.

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Indeed, the script of the film *Ju Dou* (1990), directed by Zhang Yimou, was published in a film magazine, but the film was banned from public release in China until late 1992 (Gu 1992b).

According to Luo Laishan, a film distributor I interviewed in China, the four films which sold the most prints in China in 1990-91 were:

1. *Jiao Yulu* : about a heroic & self-sacrificing cadre in a poor rural area in the early 1960s (sold a record 513 prints)
2. *Zhou Enlai* about the life of Premier Zhou Enlai, who was the voice of calmness in the Party during the Cultural Revolution⁴
3. *Mao Zedong & His Sons*: about the personal & family life of Chairman Mao
4. *Mama, Love Me Again*: about the heart-rending separation of a virtuous mother and her young son (a Taiwan film)

The first three films were all political films which extolled the Party and its history. For these films, the state sent "red letter-headed directives" (*hongtou wenjian*) down the administrative hierarchy for local governments, Party organizations, and labor unions to purchase tickets for their work unit members to go see these films. "This practice," said Luo, with a wry sense of humor, "is what political economy' really means: an economy which is *politicized* (*jingji de zhengzhihua*)."

Only the fourth film sold tickets without any encouragement by the state, and it would be interesting to ponder why this Taiwan film about mother-son separation made such a tremendous impact on Mainland Chinese film viewers.

II

Given that both film production and distribution in China are so much in the hands of the state, can one still find any tremor of life for a potential public sphere? This is the question which informs my ongoing research project on film discussion and film review-writing groups in Xi'an and Shanghai in the early 1990s. What makes this question difficult to answer is the fact that these groups serve as both a means for the state to re-enforce political education in the masses, as well as a space for alternative voices which artfully reverse the relationship of power between production and

distribution on the one hand, and consumption on the other. Below I will explore two features of film reception found in film discussion groups: the organizational dimension and the interpretive/discursive dimension.

THE ORGANIZATION OF FILM DISCUSSION GROUPS

Along with the political and social relaxation which accompanied the economic reforms beginning in the 1980s, film discussion groups sprang up in many cities of China. Unlike the 1950s, this time they were instigated not by the state, but through the spontaneous grass-roots initiative of film enthusiasts in local areas. However, they needed the permission of state offices, and in many cases had to formally register as a new social organization whose activities have been legally approved.

Film discussion groups in Xi'an and Shanghai form an organizational structure parallel to and linked with the formal divisions and administrative levels of state organization. The groups are attached to such state entities as: factories, workers' cultural palaces, movie theaters, film distribution corporations, municipal districts, high schools, universities, and even rural county bureaus of culture.

XI'AN DISCUSSION GROUPS

I interviewed workers whose two discussion groups ran out of two workers' cultural palaces (WCP) in Xi'an. The first WCP provides recreational facilities and services for several factories in the eastern part of the city. Besides the film and television discussion group, other activities organized here include a calligraphy society, youth social club, sports club, and reading society. Although it does get 1/3 (100,000 yuan) of its operating expenses paid for each year from an arm of the state, the Municipal Labor Union, the majority of its expenses comes from their own entrepreneurial activities. These include the movie theater, the dance hall, the video theater, and the renting out of building space to privately owned retail stores and restaurants.

The second WCP services workers in the western part of the city. It receives only 10 per cent of its income from the Municipal Labor Union, and derives the other 90 per cent from renting out building space, charging tuition for art classes, charging entrance fees for sports

competitions it organizes, and receiving donations from local factories. Therefore despite their position within a state organization such as the workers' cultural palaces, these two Xi'an discussion groups were almost financially independent of the state. Both WCPs publish their own newsletters in which are printed selections of film reviews and criticisms written by their members. Good articles are sent to national or local newspapers and magazines.

In Xi'an, there are also two other city-wide film discussion organizations. The first is a body which annually awards what is called the Hope Prize (*xiwang jiang*) for the best film criticism essay written. In 1981, a group of teachers, reporters, and cadres in different arms of the Municipal government were brought together by the Municipal Film Distribution Corporation and they laid out the plans for this city-wide annual film essay competition. The Hope Prize promoted the participation of high school and college students, factory and office workers, and even peasants in a suburban county, in film discussion groups and in writing film reviews.

The Xi'an Film & Television Criticism Society (XFTCS) was founded in April 1985. It has a membership of 120 people, mostly white-collar film enthusiasts who work in educational, cultural and media-related jobs: movie theater film advertisers; elementary, high school and college teachers; magazine and publishing industry employees; staff and cadres in the Bureaus of Education, Culture, and the Radio & Television Broadcasting Bureau. Like other film discussion groups, it is also attached to a larger state organization, in this case, the Municipal Government's "Cultural Federation" (*wenlian*). Members meet about 15 times per year to watch and discuss a new film. They write film reviews on their own and submit them to competitions or magazines and newspapers.

When the Hope Prize began, China had just emerged from the Cultural Revolution and its diet of didactic films. People waited in long lines at the cinemas because of their insatiable desires to see new movies, any pre-Cultural Revolution Chinese film, and especially foreign films from the West. My impression is that film discussion in Xi'an reached its peak of popular enthusiasm and creativity with the release of two Xi'an Film Studio films, *Old Well* (1987) and *Red Sorghum* (1988). After the Beijing tragedy of June 4th 1989, there was a government clampdown on innovative

films which address larger social issues and give vent to aesthetic expression.

As the content of most large-budget films after 1989 are infused with state discourse, so also are many kinds of written film reviews. In a period of political tightening, film reviews are affected, as people instinctively pull in the reigns of their imagination and their critical expression. The selection of film criticisms becomes more narrow than before, so that mainly those which are in line with the government are published or given a prize. Such activities as a 1989 state-sponsored essay competition on "mainstream films" (*zhuxuanlu yingpian*) or uplifting films of socialist heroism, and a 1991 state call for the best essay on "the screen image of Communist Party members" can be seen as attempts by the state to appropriate and recover the public space opened up in the 1980s.

The difference between pre- and post-June Fourth can also be seen in the difference between the first and second volumes of collected Hope Prize film criticisms. The 1989 volume starts out in the first two pages with calligraphy written by Zhong Dianfei, a prominent professional film critic and liberal thinker, and Bai Yang, a famous film actress. The 1991 volume, however, contains the calligraphy of a string of government officials: Chen Muhua, Chair of the Women's Federation⁵; Chen Huangmei, Ministry of Culture; Liu Bin, National Committee on Education; Xue Zhaojun, All-China Federation of Labor Unions; Teng Jinxian, Bureau of Film, Ministry of Broadcast, Film and Television; Liang Weiji, Education Bureau, Central Propaganda Ministry of the Party; and Mei Duo, member, Chinese Film Criticism Society. Only the last person was *not* an official.

In most cases it seems that after a few years, the state has, to varying degrees, re-incorporated these groups and activities back into the body of state operations. Therefore, these film discussion groups occupy a shifting and contested space between state propaganda on the one hand, and public debate on issues of social, cultural and aesthetic concern on the other.

SHANGHAI DISCUSSION GROUPS

Shanghai has some 100 film criticism associations connected to state organs at the municipal government bureau (*ju*) and municipal government district (*qu*)

levels. If one counts smaller film discussion groups, it is said that there are almost 2,000 groups.

I visited with the Shanghai Textile Bureau Film Criticism Association. Founded in March 1984 by nine film enthusiasts, it operates on funds paid by the Textile Bureau's Labor Union, as well as each factory's labor union. Out of a total of 570,000 workers and staff in this Textile Bureau of 500 factories, are 2,000 film discussion group members. They publish their own newsletter of film criticisms and organize group activities such as essay competitions, field trips to film studios, and visiting lectures by famous filmmakers or film stars.

The rest of this paper is based on my interviews with film group members, attendance at discussion meetings, and a preliminary survey of published film criticisms.

III.

In textual approaches to the study of reception, it is the filmic text which is supposed to reveal within itself the kind of spectatorship which it alone constructs. Ethnographic studies of reception, on the other hand, steer us away from taking the interpretations of those in the academy as the only way a film works. In an anthropology of media informed by fieldwork a film need not be treated as an integrated and cohesive textual unit whose meaning emerges only from its self-referential character and plot structure. Instead, a broader cultural approach to media studies can be taken (Ang 1990), which addresses the larger cultural and historical patterns of interpretation and reception produced in specific historical power contexts.

Similarly, French theorist de Certeau notes that reading has only been studied by literary intellectuals who give their own interpretations of the text. Unfortunately, historians, ethnologists, and sociologists have not sought to analyze the process of reading by a specific public, nor have they examined the "modalities" and "typologies" of reading and viewing in a given culture or period (1984:170). De Certeau implies the importance of ethnographic studies of reception when he challenges the view that sees writing and reading as separate activities, especially the view which privileges elite writing, which for our purposes includes the production of film and television. For de Certeau, "The text has a meaning only through its readers, it changes along with them; it is ordered in accord with codes of

perception that it does not control" (1984:170). These codes do not just reside in the text, but are outside the text, among the viewing and reading public. Therefore, it is through fieldwork rather than literary exegesis that we can get a sense of the social meanings and uses of mass media products.

HABITUAL MODES OF FILM INTERPRETATION

In pondering whether the Xi'an and Shanghai film discussion groups are aligned with, or run counter to state discourse, it is useful to outline some "habitual modes or tropes of reading" found through both fieldwork and textual analysis of film reviews written by members of these groups. Since this undertaking is in its beginning stage, it is not possible at this point to analyze the difference between verbal group discussions of film and written or published film criticisms. The working assumption is that since a person is more politically accountable for written works than fleeting and unrecorded verbal exchanges, discussion will be more lively and uncensored than writing. At the same time, public discussion with a group of people cannot compare with the often confidential nature of private one-on-one exchanges.

These modes show that film discussion and writing groups do at times re-appropriate state discourse in the media for other ends and meanings. It is possible for these film and television consumers in China to be active interpreters of meaning, becoming producers of culture in the act of writing and publishing their own works. However, a cautionary note must also be made. The critical reading practices that I found did not, for the most part, *directly* challenge the state ideological apparatus. Rather, they deflected or neutralized state discourse by reading past them, against the grain, or by taking off on tangents from them. These reading practices accord with de Certeau's (1984:170) description of reading:

the activity of reading [is comprised of] detours, drifts across the page, metamorphoses and anamorphoses of the text produced by the traveling eye, imaginary or meditative flights taking off from a few words, overlappings of spaces on the militarily organized surfaces of the text, and ephemeral dances.

It is important, however, to add that reading and viewing take place in certain historical and political contexts, and perhaps deflection rather than challenge figure more prominently because these discussions took place in public or in groups.

1. NATIONAL ALLEGORY

Perhaps the most significant approach to film interpretation I found in Xi'an and Shanghai was the reading of film narratives as national allegories of the Chinese historical condition. Here my finding lends support to Frederic Jameson's (1987) insight that in Third World literature the realm of the personal and the national/political are conflated and unified, unlike the West where they are alienated. "Third-world texts... necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*" (1986:69). Among those whom I talked with or read, I have indeed found that a common pattern was to read into the film their concerns for the nation and for the fate of the Chinese people and their culture.

Two readings of the film *Red Sorghum* look for an allegory of the national situation. This film was directed by Zhang Yimou and set in the 1930s in the remote Northwest. It revolves around a poor but strong-willed woman who manages a gang of working class men at a red sorghum wine distillery. It was perhaps the only "exploratory" (*tansuo*) art film of the "Fifth Generation"⁶ to win a wide popular audience in China in 1988-89, because it was the first Chinese film to win a prestigious international film prize in Berlin. It sold 205 prints and had an admission figure of 75,682,000, the highest of all films that year (Liu 1990).

In the first review author Xiao Yunru begins by writing that after watching the film he sat speechless and stunned by the redness, "a dark red which is profoundly suffused with the deep historical deposits of [Chinese] culture" (Xiao 1989:160). For him, the film was adept at:

using life stories to instill in the audience, a hot love and affirmation of the nation (*guojia*) and the people (*minzu*), of the native land and our native brethren... Through the images of a few free and unencumbered, strong and self-directing, tenacious

yet flexible lower class working people, [the film] makes you feel that China should really throw off its tightly enclosing "great overcoat" wrapped around our traditional thinking and habits. Instead, we should live more openly and freely, full of wild exuberance and heroic spirit. Once upon a time, our "grandpas and grandmas"⁷ lived like this, so there is no reason why we should live more beset by difficulties and more guardedly than they (161-162)

Indeed, one middle-aged worker in a film discussion group in Xi'an said that what made him so enthusiastic about this film was that it featured people who "dared to love and dared to hate" (*ganai ganheng*), people who followed their deepest emotions and convictions. Another man chimed in, "Yes, people should live in a carefree and unrestrained way (*huode hen zizai*). The Chinese people are always repressing their true feelings. Why should we have such a slave mentality (*nuli nuqi*)?"

In another review of the film, two writers assert that the film moves from the worship of woman in the first half, to the destruction of a female-centered cultural ideal by masculine Japanese forces in the second half. Quoting Zhang Yimou, they write:

The long period of China's [self-] closure from the rest of the world, and its oppressive conditions have resulted in a "distortion" (*niuqu*) and twistedness in people's bodies and spirits. People have become weak-willed, mediocre, guarded and overcautious, worrying about what's in front and what's behind, [obediently] accepting and assenting, neither yin nor yang. If we continue on like this, how can this culture ever be robust again? (Wang & Li 1989:166)

What they see in Zhang's film is the positing of alternatives to this kind of "alienated" (*yihua*) character. In Zhang's film, people are "forthright" and "full of heat and energy" What they wish to inject into the national character is a spirit which is:

pure and pristine, transcendent over limitations, and not restricted by morality or the Confucian ethical code (*lijiao*). [The film characters] exist by following the life patterns of nature, and their basic

essence is put together naturally without a cultural mantle covering them up (166-67).⁸

These two readings are informed by a Daoist sensibility which seeks to roll back the heavy layers of morality and official discourse produced by a corrupted and oppressive society. to recover for the Chinese people a lost original purity and simplicity which was closer to nature, the state of infancy, and the "uncarved block." Like Confucianism, Daoism has also been absorbed deeply into popular consciousness so that its traces can be found even in reading a national allegory, without explicit reference to the philosophical texts.

In Xi'an, I participated in a group discussion held by the Xi'an Film and Television Criticism Society (XFTCS). The subject of discussion was the new film *The Raft-Rowers* (*Fazi Ke*), set in the lawless period of the 1920s in the upper reaches of the Yellow River. A woman fleeing a local despot stumbles onto a band of male raft-rower coolie laborers. Two of them, who are best friends, fall in love with her, and one of them rapes her. The other gives her up for his best friend, thus sacrificing himself for the male bond of friendship. The pursuit of the local despot forces the all-male band to go against their age-old tradition and accept the woman into their group as a member, and they all flee altogether.

Two main interpretations emerged in the discussion. The first one revolved around the theme of loyalty and self-sacrifice for friendship. Some people praised Shitou, the one who sacrificed his love out of loyalty (*yiqi*) to his friend. However, one office-worker argued that by killing Shitou off in the film, the filmmakers show that they do not want the audience to identify with Shitou, the self-sacrificing, but with his friend Hei Niu, who "dares to love and dares to hate," who is closer to natural man.

One of the two women in the group of 14 men pointed out that the ancestors of the raft-rowers have laws, but these laws can be broken, and that is how we can have social change. A young peasant-turned-college-instructor named Qiao extended this observation into a national allegory:

We as the common people, which tradition will we follow? The old tradition at the beginning of the film? Or should we bravely stride into a new direction, the road to economic and social reform?

I think the film says that we must move from our ancient mother culture of the Yellow River to what Xin Hua [the female character] symbolizes.⁹

Another man, a high school teacher, continued in the national allegorical vein, and observed that the film is an example of "official repression forcing the people to rebel and change" (*guanbi minfan*). The local despot who wants the woman and punishes the raft-rowers for harboring her, is like a predatory official persecuting the people. His actions finally force the raft-rowers to go against their age-old traditions and admit a woman into their midst.

The national allegory mode of viewing is especially evident in this discussion because none of the participants mentioned any aspects of feminist allegory, even though there was a rape of a woman and an unprecedented entrance of a woman into a male preserve. It would seem that this discussion was consistent with the historical experience of Chinese modernity, where feminism develops along with nationalism, but ends up being swallowed by nationalism (Liu 1993). American audiences would be more likely to focus on the gender dimension.

This cultural difference of modes of reading leads me to stress the importance of ethnography in film reception studies, and to point out that Jameson's notion of Third World national allegory does not quite fit contemporary popular discourse in many parts of the Third World. Jameson correctly identifies national allegory as an important Third World genre, but he assumes that the content and substance of this genre always deals with the injustice of colonialism and the struggle for national independence. In what I have seen of national allegorical film readings in China, Western colonialism is no longer the cause nor the issue. Instead, the allegories revolve around such themes as: the depth of one's feelings for the Motherland and the Chinese people; the critique of Chinese culture in modernity; mourning for the loss of cultural simplicity, innocence, and exuberance; and the rejuvenation of the Chinese national spirit.

Indeed, far from wishing to protect and shield China from the Western world, these allegorical readings often convey a desire to open up to the wider world, especially the West.¹⁰ The concern expressed is usually that *internal* (and not external) cultural and political

forces threaten the life-force of the nation. In this respect, they counter-act official national allegories which construct the West as a threat to China in order to secure the obedience and unity of the population.

2. THE SEARCH FOR "HUMAN FEELINGS" (*RENQING*)

An interesting process that often occurs in film discussions is the frequent discovery of "human feelings" (*renqing*) (read "ren-ching"). *Renqing* is found in social relationships and interpersonal practices, which are taken to be naturally infused with affect or *qing*. "Human feelings" toward other human beings are of both an ethical and emotional nature which give relationships their warmth. The "network of human feelings" (*renqingwang*) is composed of a circle of people who are deemed dependable and trustworthy, and with whom one is emotionally attached, such as family, kin, and friends. *Renqing* between two people means some emotional attachment or the sense of obligation and indebtedness.

Film viewers I have talked with can find *renqing* even in the most explicitly political films, which celebrate *superhuman* political heroism, patriotism, and loyalty to the abstract universalistic concepts of nation and socialism, very impersonal and abstract values. The fact that *renqing* was often discovered in films where there was clear political instrumentalism in the characterization and plot, such as the recent big-budget films celebrating Party history, needs to be examined.

In Shanghai, a textile worker in his 20's named Chen spoke at a film gathering about director Xie Jin's film *Flower Wreaths Beneath the High Mountains* (*Gaoshanxia de huahuan*) (1984). The film is about an army platoon which fought in the Chinese War Against Vietnam in the early 1980s. Chen liked the film a great deal, said he:

When it first came out in 1984, it was a big breakthrough because up until then, soldiers were always presented as courageous and self-sacrificing for the glory of the Motherland. However, the lead soldier in this film is just an ordinary fellow who cusses and complains *fa laosao*, —not a heroic character.

Chen thought the ending, a death scene in which the soldier lies in his comrade's arms, was especially interesting:

Right before the soldier dies, instead of using his last breath to say something heroic about how he willingly gives up his life for his country, he tells his friend to be sure to return the money he owes to a friend for him. This last wish is something very personal, it reveals basic *renqing*. This film now wouldn't be considered anything, but at the time, it took a turning point towards realism. This is something people really think about before they die, their loved ones.

Embedded within the explicit state discourse in this film was an expression of the private and the personal, and this, I believe, is what caught Chen's fancy. Whereas the film's major effort was to show how, despite occupational and class differences, people's loyalties and feelings should all flow into a common channel centered around the nation, Huang's reading of the film consisted of carving out a de-politicized space to address the fact that people in real life have deep emotional attachments to friends and kin first.

A woman textile worker in Shanghai also echoed Chen's sentiments. Said she about the film *Mao Zedong and his Sons*: "This film shows Mao as an ordinary human, not a god. He has affection for his sons. And he only kneels with one leg for his father, but two for his beloved first wife." A high school boy in a Xi'an group commented on the political film *Jiao Yulu*, "It's interesting, even though [Jiao Yulu] is a Party cadre, he doesn't act like one. He shows a lot of *renqing* for the people around him."

In these examples, we can see that oppositional politics, in the context of a state apparatus which infuses cultural products with the political discourse of the state, will often take a very different form from that of oppositional politics in the West. Since most Chinese films adhere to the style of socialist realism or socialist romanticism, they are heavily saturated in state politics. Opposition then, will consist of a politics of anti-politics. In other words, viewers de-politicize the films they watch by substituting interpersonal ethics for the universalistic ethics of the state.

3. PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION WITH PAIN, LOSS AND TRAGEDY

This is a form of allegorical reading where personal pain and emotions are connected with and re-lived through a larger-scale national experience in the film. A film enthusiast and teacher in Xi'an said that Chinese tend to watch tragedies, unlike Americans who prefer happy endings: "We Chinese have a 'crying culture' (*ku wenhua*)."¹⁰ Indeed, crying seems to be a more common mode of watching film and television in China than elsewhere.

Yearning (*Ke Wang*) was an extremely successful and popular 1991 television series done in soap opera style. It traced the lives of a few ordinary Beijing people through their trials and tribulations, their loves and personal tragedies, from the Cultural Revolution to the present economic reform era. It riveted its home-viewing audience to their seats almost every night after dinner. At a film meeting, a Labor Union director of a large factory in Xi'an said:

One day at work, I found a worker slumped over on his desk and crying. I asked him what was the matter. He said he was thinking about the show [*Yearning*], and he was 'crying over himself' (*ku ziji*). I thought, he is absolutely right, that is why we cry, we're crying over ourselves.

The television series narrated the tragedies that so many viewers have personally experienced in their own lives, especially during the Cultural Revolution: failed dreams, lost friends, lost spouses, lost children and relatives, loss of opportunities for higher education, and political persecution, even imprisonment.

The Taiwan film *Mama, Love me Again* was a second-rank movie which did not elicit audience interest in Taiwan, but opened up a torrent of emotions on the Mainland in 1991. It seemed that everyone wanted to see it: both old and young, men, women, and children. Virtually everyone cried. Workers in a discussion group in Xi'an said that it was the first time that theaters sold tissue paper along with tickets at the box office. The audience was highly susceptible to the heartrending pain and emotions of mother-son separation. It might require a psychoanalytic examination to figure out how and why the film touched a raw nerve in the Mainland

audience, which I am not prepared to undertake here.

It is not clear that the crying mode of film viewing is necessarily oppositional to state discourse in the media. Crying could merely be a cathartic release of pain and frustration through a collective ritual of film viewing. In this sense, crying through films can actually serve the state in that it releases pent-up energies and frustrations among the people without addressing the historical causes for personal tragedies. At the same time, however, the historical sweep of many films may also lead viewers to confront their personal wounds and hurts in terms of larger national wounds which must also be healed. In this way, the audience may also be led to identify the state, with its mass mobilization campaigns and projects of radical social transformation, as the root cause of many personal sufferings.

4. DEMAND FOR REALISM

In a collection of Xi'an popular film criticisms, a film critic writes that he recently watched a friend throw into the garbage a pot of plastic roses. His friend had bought them 15 years ago during the Cultural Revolution because the "Gang of Four" did not permit people to raise flowers, so he had to be satisfied with artificial flowers. Now that the markets are full of real flowers to choose from, he can no longer accept fake flowers. Wrote this critic, "The fate of this pot of plastic flowers led me to ponder the inevitable fate of false and artificial films..." (Quan 1989:158-159).

The critic then goes on to write that as a result of the Cultural Revolution's tedious diet of eight revolutionary operas¹¹ and assorted politically didactic films, tens of millions of film-lovers across the country all became "film-hungry," and that is why in the late 1970s and early 80s people willingly lined up to watch those inferior and artificial films. Now that there is more to select from, people are no longer willing to put up with films which are contrived, implausible, and which do not portray the conflicts and difficulties of real life.

From the film discussions and criticisms I have heard and read so far, four kinds of demands for realism in film can be identified. First, many people I spoke with in film groups as well as individually were tired of the melodramatic and over-acting found in Chinese films. There is a sense that film acting should accord with the particular properties of film and move away from the genres of Chinese opera and drama. People

objected to the exaggerated style of acting common in Chinese films, such as overdrawn crying scenes. They called for a better utilization of the specific qualities of the film medium in which subtle expressions can be noticed quite easily.

Second, people also called for realism as a way of opposing the moral and political didacticism of films. They made fun of heroic stereotypical characters and idealized superhuman moral-political models. Upon seeing the movie *Smiles in the Candlelight*, about a dedicated and selfless elementary school teacher who dies in the end of overwork and heart trouble, a Shanghai Normal University student and film discussion member had this to say:

We future teachers *do* care about getting pay raises because teachers earn too little. There is no-one in the society I know of who is that virtuous. The teacher [in the film] is not realistic, we are all in real life very lacking in virtue (*quede*).

Similarly, a high school student in Xi'an complained that Chinese movies are too simple in presenting good and bad characters. They are like Chinese opera, he said, where each character has a painted face which tells the audience which one is the good guy and which one is the bad guy.

A third demand for realism was couched in terms of the need for films to expose, instead of covering over, the dark sides of contemporary life. Students at Shanghai Normal College, in discussing *Smiles in the Candlelight*, said that the only redeeming thing about the film is that it managed to show the real situation of the family-lives of many grade-school children – the crowded and sordid conditions they live in, and the pervasiveness of law-breaking, such as the transactions in smuggled pornography by the parents of a boy in the film.

Finally, a fourth appeal to realism was made as a way of objecting to the frequent tinkering with historical truth and accuracy in Chinese films. For example, Chen, the Shanghai textile factory worker, had this to say of the film *Kaitian Pidi*, about the first Chinese Communist Party (CCP) meeting held in Shanghai in 1921. "the breakthrough was that Chen Duxiu appeared in the film as one of the CCP meeting participants even though in real life, he later turned traitor."

Chen Duxiu was a Marxist intellectual founder of the Chinese Communist Party who later turned

Trotskyite and was cast out by the CCP, which was more Stalinist. For a long time in China, he was called "traitor" for going against the Party. Chen went on:

In past films, he would never even be shown because he later disgraced himself. This film is "truthful" (*zhenshi*)— if Chen Duxiu was present at that historical meeting, later people should record it as so, no matter what he became later.

A similar sentiment was expressed about the film *Da Juezhuan*, about a major battle between Communist and Guomindang armies in the 1940s. Said Chen, "this film also truthfully gives credit to Lin Biao, who was the commanding general of this major strategic victory for the Communists in the War of Liberation. Even though he later ran afoul of Mao, he was shown here as making a contribution to the country." A woman textile worker also chimed in, "Yes, yes, I was so surprised to see Lin Biao; for years he was never seen and no mention was made of him. There was a taboo about mentioning him."

A professional film critic in Shanghai put it this way, "Our films present themselves as real and call themselves reflections of real life, but that is only its outer shell. The film is basically an idealist stereotype. People are bothered by this, and they want to point out that the film is not real, it is only pretending to be real."

When film viewers call for realism in socialist realist films, they practice at demanding truth and honesty in the political discourse of the state. Unfortunately, this distrust of socialist realism also paves the way for a frequent unquestioning acceptance of Hollywood films as "real", such as *Pretty Woman*, where a prostitute falls in love and lives happily ever after with a rich man.

5. SOCIAL CRITICISM

Sometimes film discussions serve as occasions for direct social criticism. Viewers read past the official messages and come up with social critiques not intended in the making of the film. On a visit with a peasant film discussion group in the suburbs of Xi'an, I heard them discuss the film *Jiao Yulu*, based on a true story of a heroic self-sacrificing cadre in the early 1960s who dies because he worked himself too hard in service to the people of an impoverished village in Hubei. Instead of

taking Jiao Yulu as a symbol of the Party, one peasant man said, "Jiao Yulu provides a big contrast to some corrupt cadres today. We are nostalgic for past heroes and past Party cadres who were more virtuous." Similarly, a college-educated woman also said, "Jiao Yulu is a good film because, unlike most films, it's telling cadres, rather than the common people, to reform."

A dominant template for the popular discourse of Chinese self-critique can be called "Occidentalism," where things Western, including Western films, are used to criticize some aspect of Chinese life and culture. Chinese popular Occidentalist discourse constructs Western culture as a place which possesses a desired quality which is lacking in China. Occidentalism thus acts as a counter-discourse (Chen 1992) in which the West is used as a convenient foil to illustrate the ills of China. This Occidentalism stands in contrast to both Western Orientalist discourse, which portrays the Other as inferior, exotic, or inscrutable, as well as Chinese official Occidentalism, which portrays the West as evil and polluting.¹²

For Qiao, the peasant college teacher, seeing *Dances With Wolves* was an experience which revealed something about the West, "If the human-animal relation is so good there, think how good the human-human relationship must be." Here Qiao noted only the idyllic relationship between the hero and the wolf but looked past the massacre of buffalo by the Whites for their tongues and hides. Similarly, workers in a Xi'an discussion group talked about an American movie in which a heroic old man risks his life to save a group of tourists stranded in a snowstorm. According to them, this film launched a nationwide discussion in the newspapers about why there are naturally occurring Lei Feng's¹³ in the U.S., without the American government having to mount a Lei Feng propaganda effort.

These workers also observed that in American films and television shows like *Hunter* and *Moonlighting*, there is a great deal of information given about how the legal and justice system works, about adherence to the law, about policemen and judges, and so forth. However, these themes cannot be dealt with in Chinese films because people are not supposed to know too much about the Public Security system or police in China, where this is a state secret.

While the areas of media production and distribution are still tightly controlled by the state, there is an elusive realm of reception which will be an important site to watch for the development of the public sphere in China. However, I am not ready to say that film discussion is an example of the public sphere because after 1989, the state has moved in to re-appropriate it and guide it back to the discussion of themes deemed morally and politically educational and necessary. The space of film discussion, then, has seen alternating swings of political tightening and relaxation.

In this paper, I have tried to link the notion of civil society, which deals with social organization and institutional structures, with the notion of discursive structures of a public sphere. Although I do not believe that there is yet a public sphere in China, I am strangely optimistic that it might be possible to catch glimpses of it in my lifetime. As one screenplay writer and college teacher in Shanghai said to me, "Once the structure and institution of popular film discussion groups develop, it will be there, and will survive through the different fluctuations [of government policy]." Similarly, I would argue, once you have certain tropological structures of critical film interpretation in place, then they will be applied to the reading and viewing of a variety of film narratives, almost regardless of the explicit official contents and messages in the film. This is because the act of viewing is a process which does not simply issue from the structure of the filmic text itself, but is also a selective and creative appropriation of elements in accord with larger historical and cultural patterns of discourse. And one of the tasks of a new anthropology of mass media is to document how the larger social environment produces new and different modes of viewing.

NOTES

1. The question of whether or not 18th and 19th century China was developing a public sphere through local gentry before the dislocations of war, impoverishment and revolution in the 20th century, has been debated by China scholars, but is beyond the scope of this paper (see Rowe 1990; Wakeman 1993).
2. See Chris Berry (1990) for a discussion of how market forces impinge on the production of "Fifth Generation" art films in China.

3. Constance Penley has discovered one institution for response in the U.S.: women's Star Trek Kirk/Spock "fanzine" writing clubs (1991). These groups enable a hedge against the hegemony of a male-dominated commercial media.
4. The Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was a period of intensified and puritanical revolutionary discourse and the mass mobilization of statist as well as counter-statist violence.
5. The Women's Federation is an arm of the state found in all levels of government, which oversees such things as women's health, marriage and divorce, and child-birth and birth control.
6. The "Fifth Generation" refers to younger filmmakers who learned their art in the 1980s after China's opening to the outside world. Their films are generally artistic or satiric departures from the dominant mode of official socialist didacticism or melodrama (see Rayns 1991). In film circles outside China, often Chinese film becomes synonymous with Fifth Generation films, ignoring the fact that the films which the vast population watch are not those of the Fifth Generation, which appeals mainly to college students and intellectuals.
7. A reference to the two leading characters in the story.
8. See also two excellent articles in English on "Red Sorghum" as a Chinese national allegory of the social body revitalized by a new masculinization and sexualization, written by two Chinese intellectuals who have studied in the U.S. (Zhang 1990; Wang 1991).
9. This interpretation is reminiscent of the last scene of the popular television series "River Elegy" (*He Shang*), which shows an airborne view of the sluggish Yellow River pouring out of China and greeted by the wide and open blue ocean symbolizing the West.
10. Opening up to the outside world is a main theme of the controversial program "River Elegy" (*He Shang*) screened on national television in 1988. (see Chen 1992; Wakeman 1989).
11. The eight propaganda shows during the Cultural Revolution were the only theater productions permitted to be viewed in that period. Called "model operas" (*yangbanxi*), they featured revolutionary themes where good triumphs over the evil landlord, imperialist, capitalist or traitor.
12. The state mounted an "Anti-Spiritual Pollution" campaign in 1983-84 to counter the exposure of the Chinese people to Western decadence and "bourgeois individualism."

13. Lei Feng is a socialist hero who unselfishly helped others and loyally served the Party who saved him.

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