

Huang Jianxin's Films – China in Transition

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概要

本文意在探讨中国电影导演黄建新的作品对中国电影发展的贡献。文中试图说明，黄建新的作品以当代中国城市现状为题材，对改革开放过程中旧有的政治，文化模式与新的经济现实之间的磨合进行了出神入化的诠释。

Film in contemporary China is a medium that has undergone a considerable development in the last decades. This change has affected Chinese film in nearly every imaginable way, and has extended to include changes and development in plot lines and thematic exploration, cinematography and even to developments in Chinese critical film theory. The factors that have driven this change are complex and are not merely associated with one group, or one aspect of a film industry; however, having said this, one generation of film directors, the 'Fifth Generation', has been undoubtedly a major driving force behind these developments in Chinese film.[1]

Recently scholars have argued that Fifth Generation filmmakers became alienated from 'socialist realism' and sought to explore China's cultural roots in the revolutionary and pre-revolutionary past (Zhang, 1997; Berry, 1993; Lu, 1997). Their 'orientalised' images of China were very successful in the West but played to slender audiences in their own country. In this analysis I will focus rather on the films of Huang who is unique in his immediate adoption of a contemporary, urban context for his films, expressing what Paul Pickowitz has described as a 'post-socialist' position: a profoundly pessimistic critique of Chinese communist methodologies and the alienation they cause as they are retained in a market society and economy (Pickowicz, 1994: pp.114-118). By extension, this paper would beg the question of how consciously Huang 'interprets' transition or to what degree transitional forces are embedded in his work emanating as it does from Huang as a member of the society undergoing transition.

The Role of Huang Jianxin within the Fifth Generation

It is difficult to assess the contribution of Huang Jianxin, without first addressing the significance of the Fifth Generation film directors of which he forms a part. [2] As a member of this group of film directors, Huang Jianxin and his contemporaries began making film in the early 1980's when the nature and role of films or cinema in China was far different from what it is today. 'Under the four decades of Communist rule, Chinese cinema often seemed to be one long reel of propaganda.' (Ma, 1988-1989: pp. 21-27). Primarily, the fifth generation of filmmakers helped to change the perception that film was merely a medium through which the state could engage in self-promotion and propaganda. Being educated, however, in the post Cultural Revolution era, when there was growing sense of liberalisation, developing out of dissatisfaction with the moral bankruptcy of Mao type socialism, and an introduction of foreign ideas, technologies and cultural products, the Fifth Generation filmmakers were able to access Western films, facilitating a revolution against the established means of film making and a desire to reform and modernise Chinese cinema, both in terms of subject matter and style. However, it would be misleading to suggest that the Fifth Generation filmmakers were the first in China to make films that criticised China's past of resent history. [3] The difference is that the Fifth Generation filmmakers, actively sought to change Chinese cinema from being the mouthpiece of the State, to a means of social and political comment on the past, present and future of China.

The role of Huang Jianxin within the Fifth Generation of film directors is unique in itself. Unlike his peers, [4] Huang Jianxin has focused and continues to focus on issues in Chinese society that have by and large gone untouched by other directors such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. It is arguably

his different focus that has proven to be one of his greatest contributions to the development of contemporary Chinese cinema. Huang's films do not solely seek to create films that present a homogenised or orientalist version of China in the past. He seems to want to make films that will most importantly have meaning for Chinese audiences (Huang, 2002). Unlike his peers, Huang has sought to focus his films on China in the post Mao era, and in the time of the Deng's reforms. His films, *The Black Cannon Incident*, *Dislocation*, *Surveillance*, and *Back to Back, face to face*, provided a stark, yet humorous, satire on the stifling bureaucracy that has engulfed China in this supposed era of reform. Other films have also sought to portray the problems for the current generation in China today, who are struggling to find their place in a changing China. His decision to make films that engage with subject matter that is of current importance and relevance to modern Chinese society, and thus his distancing of himself from the focus of his contemporaries, is the main way in which Huang has made a significant and distinct contribution to the Fifth Generation filmmakers.

Huang Jianxin's View of Contemporary China

One of the main ways through which Huang Jianxin has made a contribution to Chinese contemporary cinema, is through his cinematic participation in the discourse on the state of modern Chinese society in the reform and post reform era. Through his films and his use of humorous satire, he has sought to question the value and ultimate effect, of these reforms on society.

His first trilogy of films, *The Black Cannon Incident*, *Dislocation* and *Samsara*, are perhaps his most poignant critique of the socialist system and purports to demonstrate

that socialist societies are riddled with many, deep-rooted problems.

His first film, *The Black Cannon Incident* is set on an innocuous construction site. It tells the story of the 'investigation' of hapless engineer Zhao Shuxin because of loss of a chess piece. Superficially, this is the story of a misunderstanding, but on a deeper level, it proves to be stark criticism of the fatuousness of the modern socialist Chinese bureaucracy. The bureaucracy sees itself as the embodiment of the perfection of socialism, or a socialist utopia, when in reality, it has become the exact opposite. It is an Orwellian nightmare of dictatorship, arbitrary justice and confusion (Pickowicz, 1994: 57, 64). This criticism of and profound disillusionment with the oppressive socialist bureaucracy continued in *Dislocation*, the sequel to *The Black Cannon Incident*. Here, we see the continuation of Zhao Shuxin's plight against bureaucracy, where he creates a robot in the image of himself as a means to escape the endless rounds of meetings and bureaucracy that he is bound to work within.

The meaning that we can extract from both of these films is that Huang uses cinema as a mean to show that China is becoming, or has become, as society trapped within an oppressive and paranoid bureaucracy, in which the notion of the 'reform' of society has become a meaningless contradiction in terms.

In *Samsara*, Huang explores a theme that is the plight of the 'directionless urban youth' of modern China (Pickowicz, *Ibid.*, p. 73). In this film, Huang explores the problems associated with a generation of youth who feel alienated by and disaffected with the socialist state. He presents youth as a

group who feel no connection with the socialist State other than seeing it as an embodiment of dictatorship and corruption. This theme has been explored by other modern writers, who feel that China faces something of a crisis of social identity. They query is: whilst socialism has given China a vast political system, what does it give modern Chinese people to believe in? They argue, and seemingly so does Huang Jianxin, that the modern Socialist State does not have any unifying 'Chinese' ideologies to offer to people today (Silbergeld, 1999).

An interesting issue, in relation to Huang Jianxin's contribution to Chinese cinema, is that he does not seem to see his films as a vehicle through which he can present reform solutions within the socialist framework. There is a sense of hopelessness that pervades not only his films dealing with the uselessness of socialist bureaucracy, but also his films dealing with the troubled plight of youth. It is almost as though he believes that there is no way, or means, for the current socialist system to 'fix' or repair the damage that it has done.

As Pickowicz and others note the purpose of these films is 'not to salvage socialism by advocating reform, but rather to demonstrate that traditional socialist societies are afflicted with various terminal infirmities.' (Pickowicz, *ibid.*, pp. 58) However Pickowicz also ascertains that Huang is not embracing capitalism instead. It may be theorised that Huang is advocating a more humane and liberating socialism; a 'real' socialism. If we accept this theory it can be applied to '*Stand up, Don't Bend Over*' as evidence of Huang's move to represent the system within itself.

For example, if the characters in *'Stand up, Don't Bend Over'* are seen as Huang's perception of particular types of systems, then what systems are they? The character of Zhang is vulgar; he says and thinks what he likes, when he likes. He is independent and self orientated. Most importantly he is an entrepreneur. However despite his obvious flaws he is still capable of genuine friendship and remarkable compassion. For example, it is Zhang who organises the group picture at the end of the film. This is a typical Huang Jiangxin strategy that turns the film on its head and spurs the audience to reflect on the meaning. Is Zhang a representation of Huang's perception of capitalism? He shows the system as individually focussed, yet also as one that does not necessarily preclude noble actions and feelings. In contrast, in pursuing this notion it is logical that Liu represents socialism. On the surface he is upstanding, honest, the perfect image of the model Party representative with the right background. He upholds the socialist image of the noble hero. Yet beneath the surface he is corrupt, lusting after power, money and success. He has no integrity, compassion or loyalty. For example, he willingly uses his daughter as a pawn in his squabble with Zhang. As a result his personal honour is questioned. As in his early films, Huang is extending his conclusion that those who know the socialist system the best are the least committed to its preservation and upholding its ideals. Therefore, Liu may be a representation of traditional socialism, a system that is fundamentally flawed, where surface actions hide inner motives.

If Huang is encouraging and examining the internalisation of the system then what is the character Gao? Is he the 'real' socialism? He is compassionate, intelligent, fair and understanding; a writer of integrity. However Huang also shows us his cowardice and passive submission to the

manipulations of Liu and Zhang. We see him run away from Zhang and Liu's fights and contact the authorities to break it up. This spinelessness is deliberately highlighted by Huang which indicates that perhaps Huang has created Gao as a mirror, to reflect the characteristics of Zhang and Liu. Gao is an ineffectual hub on which turn Huang's examinations of the merits of capitalism and socialism through Zhang and Liu. If this is the case, Gao may also be seen as a reincarnation of Zhao Shuxin in *Black Cannon Incident*. If this is the case Gao may be seen as a comment on Huang's belief that inaction is much worse.

What Huang Jianxin is questioning is who and what is good and evil, truth and lies. As Wang notes, 'in the Maoist era, the notion of self was a much more definite, if not regimented one.' (Wang, 1996: p. 39) In Huang's post socialist society alienation has become too great. Consequently the sense of self has taken over from the sense of society. Therefore the motives and actions of individuals are stem from themselves and are not imposed by the system. Individuals are creating their own personal systems of power. This correlates with the theory of post socialism analysing form the bottom of society up, not from the top down. This film shows a relationship in the themes and logical jump in the focus of the issues, which correlates with the wider social events of the period.

Corruption in organisations is another genre that Huang dealt with in his film *Back to Back, Face to Face*. With the exception of the robot built in *Dislocation*, work-place corruption is barely seen in his works before this film. Contrastingly, it is rife in the 1994 film. Fixing exam results so all prospective employees receive equal marks, employing people on account of the contacts they have who can aid in

paying for institution debt, employees being insubordinate in order to make a superior of theirs come across as unprofessional or underqualified. All of these occurrences are displayed by Huang, showing his disapproval of the modern socialist system which supposedly is more equitable for all, though it still sees workers act immorally to reach the top.

This film shows that corruption in the workplace is the immorality which the socialist system encourages in citizens. Rather than there being the ideal Maoist China where all comrades work diligently toward the equitable good for all, Shi Ba in *Samsara* contributes an absolute minimum to Chinese society. Surviving on inheritance from his parents and immoral black market work, Shi Ba can be viewed with contempt by the audience. The idea of building a duplicate robot of oneself to minimize one's workload exhibited in *Dislocation* is full of immorality, but remains an attack on the socialist system where Huang suggests that too much is asked of the individual. Further examples of an immoral and unjust system are seen in *Back to Back*, *Face to Face* where Luo's pay is docked by 8 yuan for the loss of four tea cups! Evidently Huang shows that the system is too stingy. When the old cobbler costs his son Wang 140 yuan for mistreating the Culture Centre Director's shoes, Huang Jianxin show us that the breaking of shoes and a son's wages should not affect one's pay packet, but the system and the higher-ups manipulating how the system works see to it that injustice prevails.

Another question raised in this film, as well as in Huang's other films, such as *The Black Cannon Incident*, *Dislocation* and *Samsara*, is that of how an individual should play the socialist system. Should one find a happy compromise

between being correctly moral and being somewhat corrupt? The characterisation of Wang Shuangli in *Back to back, Face to Face* is illustrated by the director as a suitable attitude to adopt in this socialist world. Though Wang does not meet with success at the film's end, he nonetheless is a character of principle and dignity. Wang, like Luo, has his pay docked, but never stoops down to pick it up, and acts as mediator when Li and Luo argue petulantly over Luo's pay cut. When his colleagues want to sabotage others, he opts not to participate. When it is necessary to fix exam results, however, Wang is at the centre of the planning. Huang depicts in Wang a character practical in the socialist world, one not totally with best intentions or highly corrupt, but compromise of the two.

In 1996, Huang produced *Surveillance*, which observes the daily life of an ordinary man, Ye Minzhu, who is made to serve the incompetent regime. The regime is portrayed as one full of absurdity and injustice but it does strike a balance between glorifying and criticizing the police. As the police investigate a homicide case, the accidental hero Ye is employed to keep a twenty-four hour watch in a tower to prevent the criminals from completing their mission. However, Huang successfully portrays the inhumanity of the regime as the police forget to tell Ye he is no longer needed and consequently Ye is left to endure continuous twenty-four hour surveillance. In the end the police successfully capture their criminal, however the system has failed to respect the people involved.

The focus on traditional human values is further explored with the working relationship between Ye and his partner Lao Tian. The difference in priorities and work ethic show a stark change between generations and indeed a greater generation

gap that has been spawned in modern China. Socialism is forced to take a back seat in both generations' desires for the future. The younger now rate love and friendship higher than revolutionary sentiments, whilst the older see the hope for the future not in socialism per se but by placing all their hope in the next generation of children who are the result of the 'one child' policy. The film does not however simply applaud the younger generation's new values and ways of doing things whilst simultaneously denouncing the older. What the film suggests is that in the transition towards the future (whether it be a socialist utopia or not) the new cannot entirely do away with the old, and the old has to rely on the stimulation inspired by the new. Again this film echoes the themes of earlier films: noticeably the profound disillusionment with what ordinary people in China perceive as the socialist system. It is here that Huang's films fill the void between mass public sentiment and artistic expression by providing a fresh way of approaching this type of cultural identity and consciousness crisis that prevails in urban China today. Thus we can say that Huang's films made during this exciting and turbulent time in China are symbolic as they provide a 'snap-shot in time' of the social and political change that is occurring in this transitional phase.

Conclusion

Whilst some other filmmakers of the Fifth Generation have been attacked for enthusiastically and uncritically embracing Western forms, in reality Huang Jianxin has not turned his back on Chinese themes and issues. On the contrary, it is precisely Huang's faith in a purely Chinese film aesthetic and his determination to deal with the immediate problem in Chinese society that he knows at first hand. For example, there is a clear chronological progression of thematic developments

in Huang's work. The *Black Cannon Incident* highlights the traditional socialist system and the need to awaken the Chinese people; *Dislocation* deals with the abortive attempt of one individual to rebel against conformity and slavish obedience; *Samsara* is about individual resignation and the identity of 'self' in China's post-socialist society, and so on. All of these films do not shy away from the political or social issue that are plaguing modern day china. What all of these films highlight are the burgeoning feeling of liberalism, capitalism and expressionism that are gripping post-socialist China. Their purpose is not to salvage socialism by advocating reform, but rather to demonstrate that traditional socialist societies are afflicted with various and deeply rooted terminal infirmities and how modern day society is trying to overcome them.

It is because of these that I would like to conclude that Huang Jianxin has undoubtedly made an incredibly significant contribution to Chinese cinema over the course of his career. Moreover, not only has he been important as a member of the Fifth Generation filmmakers, he has carved out a niche for himself within that generation as well. Huang Jianxin's greatest contribution perhaps lies in the fact that he is one of a few of his contemporaries who have sought to make films for a Chinese audience, which can provide much needed social commentary on the condition of, and problems within modern Chinese society.

Notes:

[1] Considerable developments in film and film theory in China after the Cultural Revolution are evident in some scholars' research. Semsel, G.S. Chen, X. and Xia, H. (1993), *Film in Contemporary China*, Westport, Conn: Praeger; Hu,

K. (1995), 'Contemporary Film Theory in China', *Dangdai dianying*, vol 2, 67-73; Chen, X. (1990), Shadowplay: 'Chinese Film Aesthetics and Their Philosophical and Cultural Fundamentals', In Semsel, G.S., Xia, H. and Hou, J. *Chinese Film Theory*, New York: Praeger.

[2] Strictly speaking, Huang should not be called a fifth generation director. Unlike others, he is not a graduate from Beijing Film Institute. People take him as one of the group mainly because he made films in a same period of time as Zhang Yimo and Chen Kaige did.

[3] The makers of Scar Films, such as *Troubled Laughter*, *The legend of Tianyun Mountain* and *On a Narrow Street*, were critical of the past depressed situation of China. Yet these films were not widely viewed and 'most of these films are long forgotten' as there was no retro distribution circuit within China. See Berry, C. (1995), 'Seeking Truth From fiction: feature films as Historiography in Deng's China', *Film History*, volume 7, pp. 87-99.

[4] Between 1980's and early 90's, Zhang and Chen's films expressed a desire to provide both political and social commentary on the events of China's past. These two directors have sought also to bring into Chinese film a new focus on aesthetics in film and the development of cinematography.

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