A Historiography of Historiographies: Cinema as China’s Search for Self-Identity in the Wider World

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History 1627: China in the Wider World, 1600-2000

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How did they become characters? How many beatings will I have to suffer, and when will I become a character?\(^1\)

—Xiao Laizi, *Farewell My Concubine*

Although Chinese cinema is often neglected in international discourse and research—certainly not because it is inferior to foreign cinema, but perhaps because of a general lack of understanding and a tendency to only explicate its political undertones, as suggested by Dissanayake\(^2\)—since its inception Chinese cinema has been the foremost manifestation of communication and art that has, along with international cinema, been absolutely instrumental in shaping the international image and perception of China, internally catalyzing the country’s revolutionary changes, and influencing the dynamics of interaction between China and the wider world. Moreover, since the 1930s Chinese cinema has epitomized China’s search for both national and international identity—that is, the domestic identity and authority of the central government and the international identity and role of China in the wider world—in a manner distinctly unique to China as a result of government control over the film industry, the particular emphasis on cinema as a means of pedagogy and moral instillation rather than a form of entertainment or expression, and the position of cinema as an aesthetic form bridging the mores and art of traditional culture to the technology and ideologies of the twentieth century.\(^3\) With the exception of the Soviet Union, nowhere else does cinema achieve this function, for the cinema of other countries has either not been vigorously controlled and manipulated into pedagogical and propagandist expression by the government or has not been subjected to the amalgamation of traditional and modern tensions that Chinese cinema has. In particular, themes revolving around class struggle, the portrayal of marginalized classes as subaltern groups, and the general advocacy of Maoist thought from the 1930s to the 1970s constitute the core ideologies that China sought to propagate in its search for national identity. Films such as *The White-Haired Girl (_REPLY*
毛 (1950), which advocate such fundamental tenets of the CCP, serve as quintessential embodiments of the revolutionary zeitgeist. On the other hand, Chinese cinema represents China’s search for international identity in mainly three ways: first, by affirming China’s national identity, revolutionary Chinese cinema also affirms the legitimacy of the CCP government; second, the globalization of the production, marketing, and consumption of Chinese films both in its early stage of development and in the current age of transnational capitalism, along with the influx of foreign investment and capital in the domestic film industry, has made both pre-revolutionary and contemporary Chinese film a transnational art; third, the “contemporary presentation and questioning of ‘China’ and ‘Chineseness’ in filmic discourse” —namely, the scrutinization of social and national identities of China and the Chinese diaspora in more modern films, especially those of the Fifth and Sixth Generations—while apparently contradicting China’s foundation of a national identity, also exemplifies the influence of China and its cinema on the international community, thereby developing China’s transnational identity. Foreign films about China made after the Cultural Revolution and the establishment of bilateral cooperation between China and the United States in 1972, however, generally portrayed China in a negative light, and as a result stimulated China to reassert its self-identity and emphasize its nationalistic fervor on the world stage. Although the content and themes of the aforementioned Chinese films have varied immensely over time, the desire to form and strengthen China’s identity both on the local and relative levels is common among them. Thus, from its advent to the contemporary era, Chinese cinema serves as a paragon of China’s search for self-identity.

Chinese cinema holds a unique position in the Eastern aesthetic canon, as it is perhaps the form of communication and art that has impacted the Chinese identity most dramatically. It
would, indeed, be difficult to exaggerate the extent to which Chinese cinema has not only penetrated the government’s ideology as a tool, but also fascinated and captured the imaginations of commoners. As an artistic medium, film is unparalleled in its stylistic variety, while as a social and political apparatus, film is unparalleled in its ability to convey sets of beliefs and sequences of images through real time. The impact of the introduction and development of cinema in China, and its concomitant effects on the wider world, is therefore of tantamount importance in analyzing the myriad socioeconomic forces propelling the change and development of both China as a nation and its relationship with the international community. As a channel for international collaboration, Chinese film in both the pre-revolutionary and contemporary eras is transnational because it involves the active participation of foreigners or Chinese filmmakers with considerable exposure to foreign countries and cinema, while it is translocal in that its typical themes consist of determining the national identity or addressing such domestic concerns as income disparity, class struggle, and gender disequilibrium. It is for this reason that the informed researcher must not only analyze the entire history of Chinese cinema in order to observe its changes and developments, but also contemplate how such changes and developments have become reflected in national history and the search for national identity.

Contrary to intuition, the history of Chinese cinema has not always dealt with cinematic manifestations of national doctrine on a national level, or to such an extent the aforementioned question of self-determinism and identity searching. In fact, the production, distribution, and exhibition of early Chinese cinema since the first Chinese film, *The Battle of Dingjunshan* (定军山) (1905), were markedly stratified on both regional and transnational levels, with Chinese cinema predominantly regional in the 1900s and 1910s and transnational in the 1920s.
term “Chinese cinema” will, therefore, refer mainly to Shanghainese cinema in the context of the 1900s and 1910s.) Early Chinese cinema involved foreigners both in funding and production, and eventually developed to exert a definite influence on the international community, most notably in Southeast Asia. Immediately following Edison’s invention of the kinetoscope, French, American, and Spanish showmen introduced the first films to China in the late 1890s, and thereafter exhibited short films in teahouses, restaurants, and theaters. In 1908, a Spaniard by the name of Antonio Ramos constructed the first of a successive chain of film theaters in Shanghai, and in the late 1910s Italian expatriate A.E. Lourous and the French company Pathé created full-length documentaries on China. The overarching theme of this time was, indeed, the strong influence of foreigners and Western innovation. As Yingjin Zhang remarks, the Yaxiya Film Company was founded by Benjamin Brodsky, a Jewish American, in Shanghai in 1909 and “produced shorts in both domestic Shanghai and British-controlled Hong Kong”; Li Minwei, the “Father of Hong Kong cinema,” collaborated with Brodsky to produce the first Hong Kong film Zhuangzi Tests His Wife (1913), which was also the first Chinese film to be shown abroad in Los Angeles and San Francisco; the Changcheng Film Company was established in Shanghai in 1924 by a group of patriotic Chinese who had also established a company of the same name in Brooklyn, New York three years earlier; Shao Zuiweng (better known as Runje Shaw), the oldest of the Shaw brothers, founded the Tianyi Film Company in Shanghai in 1925, and in 1926 sent two brothers to develop their distribution and exhibition network in Southeast Asia. The Shaw brothers quickly distinguished themselves in Southeast Asia by investing in their own theater chain, which yielded substantial returns when their film White Snake (白蛇传) (1926) broke all Chinese film records there. Such a sequence of investment and influence, namely the Western investment and influence on Chinese cinema and the Chinese investment and influence on the
cinema of the Chinese diaspora and Southeast Asia, therefore suggests that early Chinese cinema was an artifact of globalization linking China to the wider world.

The overall success of investing in early Chinese cinema manifests itself in the rapid growth of the industry in the 1920s. In the early 1920s, the film industry was met with a wave of speculation and volatility: during the five-year period from 1922-1926, 175 movie studios were established nationally, with more than 140 in Shanghai, but most in reality were “filmmakers” by title. As a result, although China’s studios collectively produced a total of 192 films during the same five-year period, the majority was from a handful of well-established Shanghai studios. Such a trend of speculation had, however, the upside of raising capital for the establishment of some important, later film companies, such as the Mingxing Film Company in 1922. The film industry eventually stabilized in the late 1920s, and its breakneck speed of expansion during this time remains uncontested: for example, the Mingxing Film Company’s income increased threefold from 212,396 yuan in 1926 to 829,149 yuan in 1933 (while during the same period its expenses also sextupled). Such an emphasis on economic and market-driven expansion was possible in the 1920s only when regional warlords divided the country and Chinese cinema was relatively free from centralized government control.

The lack of a central government and the accentuation of economic profit do not, however, imply that early Chinese cinema failed to contain translocal or national elements, or that it failed to contribute to China’s self-determinism at this time. Early Chinese cinema was certainly an artifact of globalization and economic success, but it also served the essential role of starting the filmic development of a local, national identity. Instances of such a national identity are exemplified in the founding of film companies especially catered to Chinese audiences and the production of films with distinctly “Chinese” elements. As previously noted, Zhang
Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu, Chinese directors who in 1913 had cooperated with the Americans in charge of Brodsky’s Yaxiya Film Company to produce the comedic film *The Difficult Couple*, collaborated in 1922 to found the Mingxing Film Company using revenue raised from speculation of the Chinese film market. The Mingxing Film Company specialized in the “family drama” genre—which consisted namely of narratives detailing life in a changing society that glorified Confucian virtues such as filial piety—and therefore portrayed an identity relevant to translocal Chinese populations. Such domestic companies foreshadowed the subsequent formation of a national identity by way of their fundamentally “Chinese” productions.

On the international level, the aforesaid link of investment and influence between China and the global community also alludes to China’s development of an international and global identity. The Shaw brothers’ overseas success was vital to the Chinese film industry in Shanghai, for the majority of movie theaters in China were owned by foreigners and showed mostly foreign films. The rapid development of Chinese films in Southeast Asia allowed Chinese cinema to confirm China’s international influence and consolidate its transnational image. Furthermore, early Chinese film was a transnational art, and although China was often a passive recipient of the cinematic innovation introduced by the West, since the introduction of the first Chinese films Chinese cinema has been unique to the extent that it can be identified as “Chinese,” as in the example of the Mingxing Film Company above. There is, however, a subtlety to be discerned: the first Chinese films function only as *prototypes* of the ensuing search for national identity. They are merely “prototypes” in that the nationalistic fervor and cultural self-identity they propagate is only translocal at best, for like the earliest film companies they are based predominantly in Shanghai. Being intrinsically linked to regional culture, the notion of an all-encompassing “national identity” at this time could not meaningfully generalize to include the
entire nation, and such a problem would only be resolved with the establishment of centralized politics and the transmutation of regional translocalism to political nationalism during the left-wing cinema movement of the 1930s. In other words, although the start of a domestic, national identity can be found in the 1920s—namely through the establishment of distinctly Chinese elements in films produced by such companies as Mingxing—it would not be until the 1930s that the precise notion of developing a truly national identity through a truly national form of cinema solidified under the left-wing movement.

An example of early Chinese film as a prototype of the search for national identity is Li Minwei’s Hong Kong film *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (庄子试妻) (1913). *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* features the Taoist figure Zhuangzi faking his death in order to test his wife’s loyalty, and ends with Zhuangzi’s wife committing suicide for being disloyal. Before its film adaptation, *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* was originally a Peking opera, a mode of traditional Chinese performance with costumes and decorations distinctly Chinese (or rather “Beijingnese”), while the figure of Zhuangzi and the notion of female chastity and Taoism are rooted deeply in traditional Han Chinese thought. By virtue of its exposition of Zhuangzi and his Taoist beliefs, *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* promotes China’s association to its intellectual past, while concomitantly spreading elements of the local Beijing and Hong Kong cultures to form an archetypal translocal identity. Indeed, the strength of such “Chinese” elements in the first Chinese films, and their ability to form the grassroots of a purely national cinema, precipitated the cultural convergence and assimilation to “Chinese” culture in the Chinese diaspora: as historian Wen-hsin Yeh writes, “Chinese cinema in its formative period was…not a national enterprise self-contained within the boundaries of the nation-state but a diasporic venture connecting the Chinese populations in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Southeast Asia,
Australia, and North America.” Yet, the notion of China and “Chineseness” portrayed in this film is merely a reflection of the local Beijing or Hong Kong cultures, and does not reflect the plight of the entire nation. A Sichuanese or Tibetan, for example, would certainly have found it difficult to relate to *Zhuangzi* on a local cultural level, and could thus only relate on the most generalized levels of Taoist ideology and Chinese physiques. Thus, such early Chinese films as *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* contributed greatly to the formation of national identity by portraying only a generalized form of Chinese culture.

A short excursion on a popular story may also illustrate the role of *international* cinema on the Chinese identity during this era. Almost a decade before *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife*, the “father of modern Chinese literature,” Lu Xun, experienced a revelation in his own search for identity while watching a film. Lu Xun was a student of medicine at the Sendai Medical School in Tokyo from 1904 to 1906, and he had wished to return home upon graduation to contribute to the task of national reform. One day, however, Lu Xun experienced a singularity that drastically altered his future:

I do not know what advanced methods are now used to teach microbiology, but at that time lantern slides were used to show the microbes; and if the lecture ended early, the instructor might show slides of natural scenery or news to fill up the time. This was during the Russo-Japanese War, so there were many war films, and I had to join in the clapping and cheering in the lecture hall along with the other students. It was a long time since I had seen any compatriots, but one day I saw a film showing some Chinese, one of whom was bound, while many others stood around him. They were all strong fellows but appeared completely apathetic. According to the commentary, the one with his hands bound was a spy working for the Russians, who was to have his head cut off by the Japanese military as a public demonstration, while the Chinese beside him had come to appreciate this spectacular event.

Before the term was over I had left for Tokyo, because after this film I felt that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made materials or onlookers of such meaningless public exposures; and it doesn’t really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement...  

It is such an invocation of Chinese identity and the feeling of “being Chinese” that inspired Lu Xun to rescue the “backwardness” of his nation. Indeed, Lu Xun’s later works, especially *The
Story of Ah Q (1922), would heavily criticize the traditional, dysfunctional Chinese mentality that came to be dubbed “the spirit of Ah Q.” As illustrated by Lu Xun’s encounter with film, the general, global development of cinema had profound consequences on the formation of a national, Chinese identity even before the first domestic Chinese films were produced.

It was only after the establishment of a centralized government—which essentially unified most of the entire nation under the same political ideology—that the subsequent transformation of cinematic translocal identity into a form of national, political unity allowed Chinese film to directly develop and epitomize China’s search for a national identity. The importance of Chinese cinema as a national and political artifact began in the 1930s, during the rise of the left-wing cinema movement, which was itself a direct corollary to the crises of Japanese attack and invasion faced by the KMT in the 1930s. The notion of filmmaking as a tool for social analysis, however, began as early as 1926, when director Hou Yao wrote that “[f]ilm is a tool for education.”

Furthermore, the desire to develop cinema into a political and analytic art resulted in the formation of numerous critical theories and critic groups. The Film Critics Group (影评人小组) and the Film Group (电影小组), the latter of which was established by the CCP’s Cultural Committee, introduced Soviet progressive cinema and the translation of Soviet film theories into Chinese. In 1933, the renowned director and film critic Xia Yan recounted that in Morning Daily alone there were more than fifty-five articles discussing the Soviet film industry, and such writings helped to elevate the cultural status of filmmaking in Chinese society. In order to foster a new image of modern China, the government also banned martial arts films and collaborated with large film companies such as Lianhua (联华) to produce vernacular, widely accessible films in the spirit of the May Fourth Movement. Leftist fervor immensely escalated in the late 1930s, when China began to face the national crises of the
Japanese invasion and bombing of Shanghai. Groups of film critics and leftist intellectuals concomitantly spurred the development of the left-wing movement and advocated cinema as a means to induce progressive reform and unification against the Japanese when Jiang Jieshi abstained from resistance. As a result, many left-wing films made in 1936 and 1937 were “national defense films” (国防电影), highly spirited films advocating the development of a united front against the Japanese.24

To elaborate on how transformations during the left-wing cinema movement relate to the theme of China’s search for national identity, consider how the changes at this time altered and consolidated the notion of a unified “nation.” In this regard, it would be beneficial to consider some abstract film theories underlying the left-wing movement, for they motivate the transition of cinema from a translocal form of entertainment to its use as a political, proletarian form of communication that mobilizes the masses. Perhaps the most important aspect of Chinese cinema in this age is that leftist films exploit political themes of national scope, and although leftist directors were based mostly in Shanghai like their predecessors, Laikwan Pang notes that their “self-avowed national profile was obvious.”25 No longer was the relevance of Chinese cinema to the national identity bounded by local geography and culture, for through political channels the leftist cinema could resonate through entire regions, and indeed “leftist films were deeply implicated in a multilayered articulation between the city and the nation.”26 Both the CCP and the KMT agendas converged in regards to the usage of films as a political artifact, namely to portray the wealth disparity between social classes (贫富差距), the disparity between gender norms, and the disparity between Eastern and Western cultures. In a similar vein, there were three main types of ideologies portrayed in leftist films: anti-feudalist, anti-capitalist, and anti-imperialist.
The development of leftist cinema was not without obstruction, but nevertheless the movement resonated strongly with the masses throughout the entire nation. Although the KMT eventually censored leftist film activities, Cantonese dialect filmmaking, and international films that portrayed China negatively, the success of the left-wing movement lied in its ability to represent not only intellectuals as did May Fourth literature, but also commoners, workers, and peasants. Many film directors, in order to better understand the trials and tribulations faced by peasants and workers, experimented with the lower-class lifestyle, and as a result the films they produced were particularly relevant to both intellectuals and peasants alike. Furthermore, because the leftist tendency to portray realism and the need for social reform was naturally at odds with the KMT tendency to glorify China and neglect its shortcomings, a series of heated debates now known as the “hard-soft cinema debate” surfaced. Allies of the left-wing movement advocated hard cinema, a forcefully realist style focused on social criticism, while conservative allies and the KMT supported soft cinema, an aesthetic style focused predominantly on entertainment and embellishment. Ultimately, hard cinema outdid soft cinema by virtue of its appeal to the masses and its harnessing of a proletarian force that would eventually shape the nature of revolutionary cinema. As the film director Ye Chen notes at this time,

A new age will necessarily come with the development of a new form of art, so of course drama will have new styles of both form and content. This new form and content will necessarily be influenced by the ideology of the proletarian masses... We have reached the time when drama is a necessity! Its path will lead straight from the intellectuals to the proletarian masses.²⁹

A particularly relevant example of the leftist influence on Chinese cinema is the Lianhua Film Company, a film company founded in 1930 by Li Minwei and Hong Kong businessman Luo Mingyou. Along with Mingxing and Tianyi, Lianhua formed the three largest and most prolific film companies from 1930 to 1937, and like its competitors produced mostly leftist films.³⁰ (Lianhua also had strong ties to the KMT government, but only produced a few soft
films after the appointment of politically moderate directors some years later.) Lianhua employed many of the most renowned directors and produced many of the most important left-wing films, including *Night in the City* (城市之夜) (1933), *New Women* (新女性) (1934), and *Lianhua Symphony* (联华交响曲) (1937). Like many film companies, however, Lianhua was hard-hit by the 1937 Japanese invasion and bombing of Shanghai, and as a result incurred large financial losses leading to its closure.\(^{31}\)

Albeit its short existence, Lianhua left many examples of leftist cinema developing China’s national identity. The quintessence of Lianhua’s filmmaking, the *Lianhua Symphony*, is a compilation of eight shorts by eight directors made during the apex of Chinese film history.\(^{32}\) A particularly interesting short—ripe for filmic analysis—is *Nightmare* (春闺断梦), a ten-minute medley of light and dark heightened by dramatic visual effects and the actors’ lack of voices. The plot involves two women trapped in their own nightmare, in a hellish room complete with a devil figure that abuses them, while sleeping together in bed. After a series of struggles with the powerful devil figure, the two women fight with a gun and a dagger, but the climax of the short is quickly interrupted by a crosscut: a diversion from the main sequence of events occurs, and the audience sees an army marching into the foreground. The crosscutting refers to the Japanese invasion, and indeed the director seems to ascertain that the Japanese invasion of China is comparable to the protagonists’ situation—that is, living in hell. Snapping back to the original sequence, the audience sees the two women murder the devil. The action has concluded, and the audience is left at a medium-long shot, glancing at an illuminated window, which summarizes the director’s invocation of the audience: like the female protagonists, the Chinese people must find strength to unite and struggle against the Japanese, for only after triumph is
there solace to be found. Finally, the last shot, which consists of a long take on soldiers playing brass, signifies a call for arms much like the entire *Lianhua Symphony*.

The Golden Age of Chinese film, as epitomized by such masterpieces as *Lianhua Symphony*, would not endure. After the high point of 1936 and 1937, the entire Chinese film industry started to decline in the wake of Japanese invasion, and like Lianhua eventually collapsed after the Nationalists retreated from Shanghai in 1937.\(^\text{33}\) The national economy had, moreover, experienced turbulence and recession even before the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. In 1935, a year dubbed as the “Domestic Product Year” (国内市场年) in China, the film industry was ironically met with recession. The dismal economic situation prompted Ye Chen to write, “At present in 1935, the Chinese film industry is facing a catastrophic depression…. Internally, the film companies are busy in layoff, salary reduction, and requesting loans. The situation is chaotic. The entire industry is on the verge of complete collapse.”\(^\text{34}\) Although the film companies produced outputs of remarkable quality, they were unable to escape their financial burdens and the threat of a Japanese occupation. Furthermore, earlier conflicts with the Japanese had already adversely affected the film industry: many theaters of Luo Mingyou’s were located in parts of northern China occupied by the Japanese after 1931, and Lianhua’s Studio 4 was destroyed during a dispute in 1932.\(^\text{35}\) When war broke out in 1937, Shanghai became occupied as an “isolated island,” and Nanjing, the relocated center of the KMT, was quickly captured. Many left-wing films continued to be exhibited throughout the country, but a majority of the Shanghai film industry, along with the left-wing cinema movement, was dissolved by the end of the year.\(^\text{36}\) Chinese cinema would not flourish again until after World War II, and it would not be until the reign of the CCP and the second Golden Age of Chinese
film in the late 1940s that Chinese cinema would once again serve as an artifact of Chinese national and international identity.

The films produced from the 1940s to 1960s are, perhaps, the paragons of cinema as a channel through which China established its national identity and authority of the CCP government. The minute amount of international influence at this time resulted in domestic cinema’s maturation into a nationally focused form of communication, one that played a fundamental role in propagating the Socialist ideology of the CCP. After driving the KMT to Taiwan in 1949, the CCP desired to consolidate its power, and as a result managed three state-owned studios responsible for the production of socialist cinema under the supervision and censorship of the newly established Central Film Bureau. Socialist cinema was perceived as an “effective propaganda weapon of class struggle,” and its consumption was devoted to peasants, workers, soldiers, and intellectuals, who were to emulate the behavioral models set forth by actors. In his 1942 *Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art* (延安文艺座谈会上的讲话), Mao closely evaluates the use of art in advancing revolutionary ideology:

> Art must be a popular movement, accessible not only to the rich but also for the masses (人民大众). There are four social classes to which we must appeal: the first is the workers, the social class that will lead the [Communist] revolution; the second is the peasants, the most stable allies of the revolution; the third is the soldiers, workers and peasants who have risen to serve their country; the fourth is the urban, working lower-income classes and intellectuals, allies of the revolution who will cooperate with us in the long run.

As is readily apparent from *Yan’an Talks*, the notion of art as a tool for political manipulation and ideological instillation became most developed under the reign of Mao. As the most far-reaching and vernacular form of art, cinema modernized commoners’ thoughts, eliminated traditional superstition, and inspired the masses to unite under the Party (团结), and struggle for class reform (奋斗). Mao’s overall objective was to “pragmatically implement theoretical Marxism-Leninism in everyday life,” which manifested itself through a form of proletarian
realism. In general, films that advocated Maoism epitomized the CCP’s search for authority and power in China—and, as a result, the entire nation’s search for a firm basis of self-identity—by postulating the ideological foundations of China’s government and clarifying the relationships between the government and the people and the people and their traditional past. It is of little wonder, then, that later film analysts like Yomi Braester viewed the political campaign as its own genre from 1949 to 1966.41

Relevant examples of revolutionary film as embodiments of China’s search for national identity abound, and two especially outstanding examples are The White-Haired Girl (白毛女) (1950), a film illustrating the socioeconomic foundations of the CCP, and The Little Heroic Sisters on the Grassland (草原英雄小姐妹) (1964), a film addressing the unification of ethnic identities under the same political doctrine and national identity. Because these films contain ample symbols and themes of national unification under Communism, their filmic analysis is particularly enlightening.

The White-Haired Girl recounts the story of a peasant girl, Xi’er, and her life of abuse as a concubine of the despotic landlord, Huang Shiren. After being forcefully taken from her family and fiancé Wang Dachun (who subsequently joins the Communist Eighth Route Army), Xi’er enters the Huang household as a concubine, and is immediately raped by the landlord and abused by his mother. Another female servant, Zhang Ershen, sympathizes with Xi’er and helps her flee. Huang Shiren and his men chase in pursuit, but are convinced that Xi’er has drowned after finding her shoe in a pond. The audience learns that Xi’er survived, and in order to avoid persecution Xi’er absconds from her village and settles in a cave, attaining sustenance only by fending off wolves and stealing food from a temple. It is also at this time that her hair turns white, and as a human Xi’er is desexualized in that her feminine body has withered down to a
bare skeleton. After returning as a high-ranking official from the Communist army, Dachun institutes Communist reforms in the village, and succeeds in finding Xi’er with the aide of Zhang Ershen. Justice is ultimately dealt when Xi’er implicates Huang Shiren at a Communist tribunal, and thereafter the villagers punish the landlord and divide his land. As a film, *The White-Haired Girl* is an example of class struggle, and advocates such CCP doctrines as land reform, class equality, the rejection of traditional feudal systems, and the unification of the masses.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of *The White-Haired Girl* is its ability to solidify the national identity. *The White-Haired Girl* accomplishes this feat not only by propagating the aforementioned ideologies to the entire nation, but also by acting as a narrative of the CCP’s history. In other words, while *The White-Haired Girl* is indeed one of many manifestations of Mao’s drive towards pragmatic Marxism-Leninism, class struggle, desexualization and “revolutionary realism,” the film serves most importantly as a manifesto of the Communist Party and a symbol of its history. Xi’er is directly symbolic of the Communist party, and moreover their correspondence exists on numerous levels, from the most physical level in which Xi’er’s actions of escaping persecution and taking shelter in a cave correspond to those of the CCP’s, to the most symbolic level in which the feudalist forces acting upon Xi’er represent the outdated social system that the CCP endeavored to eliminate. The evidence for such a claim is straightforward: at the beginning of the film, Xi’er is young and lively—which represents the vitality of the CCP before the Long March—but eventually faces the conundrum of entering the Huang household and suffering abuse and rape, which may loosely refer to the KMT’s pursuit and crackdown of CCP personnel in 1934. The filmic sequence that establishes the correspondence beyond doubt is when Xi’er escapes the Huang household and climbs a mountain to evade capture, a sequence that bears a striking resemblance to the Communist
retreat to Yan’an after the Long March in 1935, which also included such trials as climbing mountains through snowstorms. Furthermore, both Xi’er and the CCP resided in caves: just as Xi’er lingered in a remote cave for three years without living necessities, so did the CCP settle in yaodongs (窑洞) for a few years to evade capture and structurally develop, the process of which represents the Communist party’s development into a mature form during their occupation of Yan’an.

The aforesaid isomorphism reveals a subtlety in the symbolic value of *The White-Haired Girl*: while the Communist party initially sought to indoctrinate the masses with notions of revolution and Marxism-Leninism by illustrating the relinquishing and sacrifice of individual identity and emphasizing class struggle as the foundation of nation-building, it itself was undergoing a fundamental transitional era when, after the Long March, it arrived at Yan’an to further develop its identities and doctrines. Again, the question of how national identity is developed resurfaces, and the link between Xi’er and the CCP in *The White-Haired Girl* suggests that, as the bottom tier of the social hierarchy, the CCP has traditionally been represented as working-class revolutionaries and peasants, a composition verified by Mao in his *Yan’an Talks*. Moreover, the adverse forces of rape, poverty, and struggle for survival translates directly from Xi’er character to the CCP: the CCP has been “raped” by both the Japanese and the KMT as a result of suffering gross injustices and a nationwide crackdown; like Xi’er, the CCP has also been traditionally poor, and in Yan’an were struggling to survive. Further examples abound, but the overarching theme is that *The White-Haired Girl* directly represents the Communist Party. It is, therefore, an outstanding example demonstrating the role of revolutionary film in the search for national identity, representing both the CCP and its ideology in praising the revolutionary spirit.
Another revolutionary film that addresses issues of ethnicity in nation building is *The Little Heroic Sisters on the Grassland*, a cartoon film of length 39 minutes that was created by the Shanghai Film Company during the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1965. The film begins with a propagandist song, which alludes to the political theme of the movie. The protagonists, Long Mei and Wang Rong, are two nomadic sisters—both around 10 years old—living in a vast desert in Mongolia. Because their father has been urgently summoned, he leaves a flock of 384 sheep for the sisters to care for, and he warns the girls not to lose any of the sheep else the entire community become devastated. The film then transitions into a musical number, as the girls start singing odes to Chairman Mao and the CCP. Determined to not only care for the goats but also to keep them healthy, the sisters bring the herd to a distant place for grazing, where they read the *Little Red Book* and sing “The Communist Society is Our Family” (共产社會是我們的家). The utopian setting is, however, disrupted when a violent storm approaches, and the sisters persevere to return home without losing any sheep. The sisters struggle to return home during a perilous blizzard, while their father, after arriving home and noticing their absence, organizes a search. Throughout the course of the journey, the protagonists are constantly depicted performing heroic actions to save all the sheep. Wang Rong, for example, carries a sheep on her back, sacrifices her feet to frostbite, and frequently chants a slogan, “Like the [Cultural] Revolution, we are not scared. Little sister is not tired, and the goats are not tired as well, so we should learn from the thunder and the wind [in propelling the Revolution],” a slogan that strongly resonates with the audience. Eventually, the sisters are found by the rescue crew and brought—via ambulance—to a hospital, where they recover and are proclaimed to be “Mao’s good children.”

It is quite obvious that revolutionary themes pervade *Little Heroic Sisters*. The audience hears revolutionary music throughout the film, and the sisters act as embodiments of the
revolutionary spirit. Not only do they read religiously from the *Little Red Book* and praise Mao and the CCP, but also do they exhibit an impenetrable adamancy towards achieving their goals, much like the ideal revolutionary of this time. Wang Rong seems to epitomize the CCP in general, chanting and shouting slogans meant to identify with the Cultural Revolution. The main intent of the film is, therefore, to convey and consolidate communist ideology among the masses by having the sisters inspire and influence the audience. Furthermore, because the sisters were Mongolian, the film suggests that any ethnicity within China was unified under the Cultural Revolution: just as ideologies of class struggle and land reform were pertinent to marginalized peasants as demonstrated in *The White-Haired Girl*, they were also pertinent to ethnic minorities within China as evidenced in *Little Heroic Sisters*. *Little Heroic Sisters* is thus another epitome of China’s search for national identity and its attempt to develop a national front uniting previously disjoint groups.

After the high point of the 1950s and 60s, the notion of national identity and nation building would not be as strongly conveyed in Chinese cinema until contemporary times, predominantly because the domestic films produced in the 1970s were strictly regulated forms of propaganda commissioned by the Gang of Four. At the same time, however, the growing effects of globalization and the international fascination with China’s development as a nation resulted in the production of foreign documentaries on China. These documentaries provided a different lens—namely, a foreign lens—to assess the national Chinese identity developed by the CCP in previous decades, and thereafter contributed greatly to shape the international, Western perception of China. More concisely, foreign documentaries of the 1970s played a fundamental role in China’s search for international self-identity (but, as will become evident, these documentaries oftentimes adversely impacted China’s search by portraying China in a negative
light). Two examples of such influential films are David Wolper’s *China: The Roots of Madness* (1967) and Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Chung Kuo* (1972); brief analyses of both films will clearly illustrate their link to the development of China’s transnational identity.

Wolper’s *China: The Roots of Madness* is a documentary produced in the United States that depicts China in a markedly negative manner. It accomplishes its negative portrayal by condescendingly examining and casually denigrating China, while at the same time omitting much relevant historical and contextual information. In his documentary, Wolper suggests that China had no history prior to the Opium War, claims that Confucius was a tyrant, questions whether or not ancient China was “really a nation or only a geographical experience,” and dismisses China as a country “looking for some entry into the modern world, and nothing in their ancient culture could give them any guide.” Moreover, Wolper labels the Empress Dowager Cixi as an “ignorant” woman, “China’s evil spirit,” and peasants and workers as driven by “animal energy.” He concludes that “There are 700 millions Chinese, one quarter of humankind, who are taught to hate, their growing power is the world’s greatest threat to peace enlightenment. 50 years of torment, bred madness…. Concomitantly, the Chinese people become a subaltern group in Wolper’s film, for they are not voiced and are only examined through secondary sources as distant objects of curiosity. Wolper’s film was broadcast over American public television over a one-week period, and such charged, critical illustrations of China could only bias the public perception and contribute to China’s international identity as an oppressed, desolate nation. Wolper’s film thus exemplifies an adverse and foreign cinematic influence on China’s search for international identity.

In contrast to Wolper’s *China: The Roots of Madness*, Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Chung Kuo* is a more subtle, less directed exposition of China through the lenses of an Italian director.
Antonioni’s film stirred much commotion with the Beijing government, who had permitted Antonioni to shoot in China but were deterred by his final production to the extent that they protested its exhibition in Venice.\textsuperscript{48} The controversy involving \textit{Chung Kuo} may perhaps best be summarized as a cultural conflict, as many of Antonioni’s shots, claimed to be aesthetically pleasing to Western audiences, screamed criticisms of social instability and government despotism to patriotic Chinese. A long take from the base of the Nanking Bridge seems to suggest the bridge’s instability; Antonioni repeatedly snaps his camera as to film a scene of utter chaos in Tiananmen Square; and, as a last example, the Chinese were generally portrayed in drab, lifeless outfits.\textsuperscript{49} In an article entitled “A Vicious Motive, Despicable Tricks” published in the 1974 \textit{Peking Review}, the commentator argues that the Nanking Bridge was intentionally filmed to look unsteady, which along with a host of other poorly angled shots implied China’s own instability as a nation:

\begin{quote}
Antonioni came to China as our guest in the spring of 1972. With his camera, he visited Peking, Shanghai, Nanking, Soochow and Linhsien County. However, his purpose in making the visit was not to increase his understanding of China, still less promote the friendship between the people of China and Italy. Hostile towards the Chinese people, he used the opportunity of his visit for ulterior purposes; by underhand and utterly despicable means he hunted specifically for material that could be used to slander and attack China. His three-and-half-hour-long film does not at all reflect the new things, new spirit and new face of our great motherland, but puts together many viciously distorted scenes and shots to attack Chinese leaders, smear socialist New China, slander China’s Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and insult the Chinese people. Any Chinese with a modicum of national pride cannot but be greatly angered on seeing this film.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Furthermore, although Antonioni declares at the start of his documentary that “we have just wanted to get a picture of China, we can’t offer more,”\textsuperscript{51} it often seems that his shots were not only unmotivated, but also biased or unnatural. Antonioni had a singular way of shooting his films, and he commonly shot close-ups of common inconveniences such as people blowing their nose or entering the bathroom. While filming such shots, Antonioni frequently barged into prohibited locations, or otherwise disrespected the privacy of his subjects. Such an intrusive manner of filming created a synthetic environment, a contrived awkwardness that distorted the
natural representation of Chinese life, and is evidenced by the return stares of Antonioni’s subjects. Some of Antonioni’s statements were also controversial with the CCP government: statements such as “the inhabitants of Beijing look poor, but not miserable” may have been a positive remark for Western audiences, who regarded being miserable as worse than being poor, but directly contradicted the CCP’s image of a prosperous China and seemed to imply that nothing had changed since the Republican regime of the 1920s. A subsequent statement, that the Cultural Revolution had “thrown the system of [domestic] production into confusion,” was more scathing and condemning to the Communist government. The different forms of interpretation and misinterpretation thus created distinct experiences for both China and the rest of the world: while Westerners thought that Chung Kuo was readily accessible and opened up China, the Chinese denounced it as a casus belli for anti-Confucianism and a call for imperialism. Regardless of interpretation, however, Chung Kuo succeeded in one area: it made China accessible to a Western audience, and therefore contributed in creating an international identity for China at a time when the wider world was coming to grasps with China’s globalization.

In contrast to the foreign determination of Chinese transnational identity during the 1970s through such films as Chung Kuo and China: The Roots of Madness, in the 1980s and 1990s exactly the opposite occurred: that is, the rapid expansion of Chinese cinema into the international market, led by the Fifth Generation of Chinese film directors, transformed the international Chinese identity and allowed these Fifth Generation directors to shape popular Western perception of China. Influenced by the scar literature of the 1970s—literature in response to the Cultural Revolution that expressed the traumatic experiences of revolutionary excess—the Fifth Generation shared a common disdain for the socialist-realist mode of
filmmaking established in the 1950s, while pursuing their own ideals in producing such universally recognized works as *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王别姬) (1993) and *To Live* (活着) (1994). The Fifth Generation directors all had the common history of graduating from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, and in opposing the ideals of the Revolution became obsessed with modernist aesthetics at the expense of the box office, thereby directing mainly to satisfy the international demand for “ethnic cultural elements, glossy visuals, and polished narrative.” By turning against the established, revolutionary form of filmmaking that centered on nation building and instead catering to the international population, the Fifth Generation initiated the contemporary tendency to contest the national identity through transnational means, a trend that would also define the films of the Sixth Generation. The Fifth Generation ended in the years following 1989, as following the Tiananmen Square Incident the CCP government enforced stricter measures of content control and effectively banned films impartial to CCP ideology.

Many examples of Fifth Generation films both contribute to China’s search for transnational identity and renew China’s search for national identity. The most appropriate example is, perhaps, Zhang Yimou’s international blockbuster *To Live*, a paragon of Fifth Generation film. *To Live* is a narrative detailing the life of landowner Xu Fugui and how the Cultural Revolution dramatically changed it. Fugui begins as an addicted gambler, and loses his estate by gambling with another man called Long’er, which also forces his wife, Jiazhen, to leave with Feng Xia, his daughter. To provide sustenance for himself, Fugui tours and performs shadow puppets with a friend named Chunsheng, but is frantically captured by KMT and conscripted to war. After a battle, Fugui is captured and returned home by the Communist Party, where he learns of his mother’s death, his wife’s occupation as a water fetcher, and Feng Xia’s muteness after contracting a cold. The provincial governor, Niu Zhenzhang, takes a liking to
Fugui for being associated with the Communists, and as a result befriends him; at the same time, a CCP takeover occurs and Long’er, being designated as a landlord by virtue of owning Fugui’s expansive home, is executed. The plot then disintegrates into numerous conflicts: Fugui’s young son, Youqing, dies after being hit by a falling wall, and it happens that Chunsheng, who became a city governor, was responsible for Youqing’s death; Chunsheng and Niu Zhenzhang are both labeled as capitalist roaders and executed; and finally, Fengxia marries a man and dies of bleeding in childbirth. The film ends with Fugui and Jiazhen still surviving, hence the Chinese title *Huo Zhe* (活著).

As suggested by the title, the central theme of *To Live* is Fugui and Jiazhen’s ability to persevere albeit the deaths of everyone around them. The common element of individual suffering criticizes the revolutionary notion of group mentality, and exploits the turbulence experienced by commoners during the Cultural Revolution. Like many Fifth Generation films, *To Live* departs from glorified socialist-realist depictions of the 1950s, and instead questions the necessity of the Cultural Revolution and the ideological foundations of the CCP government. Such themes not only resonated strongly with Western audiences and exemplified the role of an increasingly powerful Chinese cinema in international spheres, but also questioned the validity of CCP authority and the political and ideological foundations of national self-identity, foundations that were established by revolutionary films several decades before.

Such an inquisition of the national identity found its way into contemporary times. The early 1990s marked the dissolution of the Fifth Generation and the rise of the Sixth Generation, whose filmmaking departed from the aesthetic and ideological ideals of both revolutionary and Fifth Generation cinema. The Sixth Generation “prefers images and motifs expressive of their personal feelings of alienation, anguish, and anger at the status quo, such as abortion, alcoholism,
drug, sex, violence, as well as rock music, their favored genre," and are still active in the 21st century. Their link to the search for national identity is embodied in their cinematic technique and subject. Although Sixth Generation films are contextually different from the first revolutionary films of the left-wing cinema movement in the 1930s, both exhibit a marked similarity in their desire to search for self-identity. By focusing on marginalized, subaltern groups and appealing to a transnational audience, the Sixth Generation distinguishes itself from the filmmaking of previous eras, and have constantly sought ways to affirm the national Chinese identity, which after the Fifth Generation and the 1989 Tiananmen Incident had been severely questioned and crippled. Furthermore, because of their oftentimes-negative depiction of the CCP, many Sixth Generation films became banned by the Chinese government, and as a result Sixth Generation directors are characterized by their international outsourcing of production and low production budgets (they frequently shoot with 16mm film and digital camcorders). The Sixth Generation’s pursuit of a national identity continues the overarching theme of cinema as both an apparatus for nation building and the embodiment of China’s quest for national and international self-determination.

As a final cinematic example, Jiang Wen’s In the Heat of the Sun (阳光灿烂的日子) (1994) illustrates clearly the relationship between Sixth Generation films, their assessment and interpretation of the Cultural Revolution, and their assessment’s influence on China’s modern identity. In the Heat of the Sun features an older man, Xiaojun, recounting his memories of the Cultural Revolution, and taking the audience on his various escapades as a youngsters. But perhaps the most distinguishing and rich filmic element is the film’s dreamlike atmosphere, dreamlike in the sense that the narrator, Xiaojun, cannot completely remember the past and fabricates (or, rather, romanticizes) the portrayal of his youth. Jiang Wen’s unique narrative
style induces an element of uncertainty: the protagonist cannot accurately recall the events as they transpired, which compromises the integrity of the exposition and in turn topples the audience’s trust. This form of “myth-making” effectively questions the experience of the Cultural Revolution, and in particular blurs the contrast between historical memory and cinematic narration, suggesting that the Cultural Revolution—and thus how the CCP assumed authority over the Chinese people—was only a dreamy memory like Xiaojun’s past.

_In the Heat of the Sun_ also abounds with various “tongue-in-cheek” Maoist references, which perhaps undermine the contemporary power of the CCP and put into question the Chinese national identity: namely, such references ask the question, “is the historical portrayal of China’s national identity as being unified and consolidated under the CCP regime a mere fabrication of earlier forms of propaganda, or does is such a national identity well-established and relevant to the contemporary era?” Immediately at the beginning of the film, the audience observes a low-angle shot of Mao’s statue, and the manner in which the shot moves alludes to the power of Mao that goes largely unnoticed throughout the rest of the film. A later scene in which Xiaojun opens his parent’s drawers and plays with their military uniforms displays his patriotic fervor, but the nationalistic tone of this scene is quickly undermined when Xiaojun plays with a condom thinking that it is a balloon. The last scene, which portrays the protagonist driving in 1990s Beijing, cuts to a close-up of a car ornament depicting Mao, suggesting that the cult of Mao still constitutes a part of contemporary life. Yet, as suggested by his incomplete memory, the Mao that Xiaojun remembers is most likely a face, a shell of a political leader: just like how he forgets many details of his dreamy childhood, so does he forget many details of his dreamy Cultural Revolution.
The dreamlike atmosphere and the constant Maoist tongue-in-cheek references in *In the Heat of the Sun* combine to address the question, “was the Cultural Revolution as realistic to Xiaojun as it was to everyone else, or did the era pass like a dream without much pertinence to the contemporary era?” Jiang Wen’s narrative style and storyline seem to imply the latter, as Xiaojun passes his dreamlike days without much reference to or remembrance of the Revolution. Such an interpretation would contradict the popular and nationalist view that the Cultural Revolution was a massive proletarian movement deeply affecting all members of society, and as a result would question the validity of the current Chinese national identity. As an outstanding example of Sixth Generation cinema, *In the Heat of the Sun* shows that contemporary films continue to question the CCP identity and influence over the Chinese people. It would not be remiss to claim that the Sixth Generation is, in fact, the modern torchbearer of China’s ultimate search for national and international identity.

Throughout the course of Chinese cinematic history, a central theme of identity searching manifests itself through the numerous trials, tribulations, and changes faced by the Chinese people from the beginning of the twentieth century. The earliest Chinese films foreshadowed the usage of cinema as a means of identity formation and nation building that was pursued in the 1920s on an international scale, and again from the 1930s to the 1960s on a revolutionary, national scale. During the contemporary age, the Fifth Generation of Chinese film directors initiated a backwards trend towards questioning, and not establishing, the national identity, and since their unheralded breakthrough Chinese film has continued in the vein of critically examining the notion of “China” as a nation, both in regards to its revolutionary history and to its identity in the wider world. The contemporary Sixth Generation pursues this inquisition further, not only by depicting the elaborate details of the Revolution (as did the Fifth Generation), but
also by utilizing innovative cinematic techniques and examining the unadorned lives of the Chinese people. Cinema is, therefore, a fundamental channel through which individuals today may address the question, “What is the Chinese identity, and how does it pertain to the wider world?”

Recall at the beginning of this narrative a quote from *Farewell My Concubine*:

> How did they become characters? How many beatings will I have to suffer, and when will I become a character?\(^{50}\)

Xiao Laizi’s phrase is invocative of China’s own “becoming a character” on both the national and transnational stage. How many more “beatings,” or trials that China will face before endowing itself with a time-tested national and international identity remains in the future. But for now, historians and film analysts may rejoice in the continuity of China’s hundred-year search for itself through cinema.
Notes

7. Ibid, 137.
12. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
18. Wen-hsin Yeh quoted in ibid, 137.
23. Ibid, 41.
25. Ibid, 166.
28. Ibid.


31. Ibid, 234.


34. Ibid, 58.

35. Ibid, 27.

36. Ibid, 64.


38. Ibid.


40. Ibid.


42. Meng Yue, “Female Images and National Myth,” *Gender and Politics in Modern China*, 118.


46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.


49. Ibid, 8.


53. Ibid.


60. Chen Kaige and Hsu Feng, *Farewell My Concubine* (Miramax Classics, 1993).
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*Lianhua Symphony*. Dir. Fei Mu. Lianhua Film Company, 1937. DVD.


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