Deviation and Restoration of Mundaneness and Mythological Nature in Chinese Cinema—Evolution of Chinese Directors of Different Generations over the Past Forty Years after the Reform and Opening-up Policy

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ABSTRACT

Film is mundane both as an art form and as a myth. It is even considered a mundane art with a mythological nature; however, its mundaneness overshadows the mythological aspect. Over forty years after the reform and opening-up policy, the film industry in China has gone through a series of changes from obedience to reflection, inheritance to criticism, as well as rebellion to restoration. In the cycle of cultural representations from gradual recovery to restoration and transformation, and to international fame and diversification, directors of different generations (i.e., the Third, the Fourth, the Fifth, the New) have been hovering in confusion between mundane life and mythology. They have been moving back and forth from explaining and glorifying mythologies to weakening and challenging them, thus they have been marked with different shades and colors by the transitional age in their repetitive explorations and attempts. The latest generation of directors in mainland China, i.e., the aggressive generation, have ultimately returned to the reality of the coexistence of the mundane and mythical natures, and are trying to break through boundaries and combine various genres. The aggressive generation is likely to indicate the right direction and the inevitable course of future film creation in mainland China.

KEYWORDS

Reform and Opening-up Policy; Chinese Film Industry; Directors of Different Generations; Mundaneness; Mythology

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Yvette Biro held that film is mundane but has a mythological nature, and it has been in ambitious pursuit of mythology. Mythology, however, “just as anti-mythology strives to explain or challenge mythology, is the offspring of an age. While going after unity, mythology is also tainted with markings of the age” (5). With a comprehensive survey into the development of the Chinese film industry (excluding films produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan) over the forty years since the reform, the survey found that the industry, under particularly complex social and cultural backgrounds, has experienced multiple changes from obedience to reflection, inheritance to criticism, as well as from rebellion to submission. The internal mechanism, narrative methods, and object representations have also subsequently changed. The film industry in mainland China presents a winding yet colorful journey during which multiple elements of art and culture coexist in harmony. During the journey, directors of different generations have been confused between mundane life and mythology, as well as moving back and forth between explaining and glorifying mythologies as well as weakening and challenging them. As a result, they are marked with different shades and colors by the changing age in their repeated attempts and discoveries.

Retrospection is very necessary at times. Through analyzing different generations of directors, the author of this paper investigates the development and the escape from misery and the fixed patterns of Chinese films from the late 1970s. In addition, this paper further discusses different generations’ reflections on politics and traditions, expressions of the national culture and history, and pursuits of self-artistic ideals. This article is certain to benefit the future practices and the theoretical construction of the film industry in mainland China by summarizing gains and losses as well as finding out causes and effects.

1. “The third and the fourth generation’s” collective consciousness and care for the underclass

The disintegration of the Gang of Four and the end of the Cultural Revolution marked a fresh start for the film industry in mainland China which fell silent for over twenty years. In his address to the Fourth Congress for Chinese Literary and Art workers in 1979, Deng Xiaoping did not state that literature and art are subject to politics. Instead, he advocated the idea put forward by Mao Zedong in the Address in the Literary and Art symposium at Yan’an, “literature and art are to serve people.” Deng clearly declared, “we must stick to the aim advanced by Mao Zedong that literature and art are to serve the greatest majority of its people, primarily, workers, peasants, and soldiers. We must adhere to the guideline of all flowers blooming together, bringing new from the old, adapting foreign things to Chinese needs, and ancient forms for present-day use. We must promote free development of different forms and styles on art creation, and recommend free discussion of different opinions and schools on art theory” (210). Hence, the film industry in mainland China abandoned its identity as a political vassal and indoctrination tool, and strove to exploit its national features and art characteristics.

Seventeen years before the Cultural Revolution, the political enthusiasm and the national confidence at the birth of the People’s Republic of China helped “the third generation” directors establish their identity as Chinese film pioneers as well as
followers of national and historical mythologies. In this period, the whole country “is all but a great cinema; the audience that confronted Chinese films in the whole process were pure and passionate [...]” Besides their aesthetic value, films produced in this period presented a way to increase the authoritative ideology. Under the eager anticipation of the national audience, directors created a system of film language” (Huang Huilin 43). Due to the specific social and cultural environment as well as clear political and cultural needs, films with mythological expressions directed by “the third generation” directors were filled with either melancholy or passion. Moreover, the single art form also brought about a short period of success to Chinese films in new China under the same mythological worship. However, the catastrophic Cultural Revolution seized the success growing out of the harmonious coexistence of politics, art and solidarity of the masses. Therefore, with the advent of the reform and opening-up policy, “the third generation” directors started to gain popularity using the style of retrospection after experiencing complicated historical events and seeing all tastes of life. They then became the generation which experienced the most drastic ups and downs in the mainland Chinese film industry.

Xie Jin, as the vanguard of “the third generation” directors, presented the iconic film in 1980: Legend of Tianyun Mountain. With the memory of past tribulations and calamities, he reflected on the historical event, “the Anti-Right Movement,” in the Cultural Revolution. This film showed high artistic values due to its exquisite narrative and representative methods, well-rounded portrayal of characters, wise choice of themes, thematic representation of sentiment and philosophical depth. For this reason, it won four awards in the first China Golden Rooster Awards, including the Best Feature Film Award and the Best Director Award. The event demonstrated the return of Chinese films to individual expression and realism. Xie Jin continued the retrospection theme in his later films such as The Herdsman (1982), Hibiscus Town (1986), etc. Likewise, other third generation directors also followed Xie Jin’s lead. Xie Tieli’s Bao and His Son (1983) reflected on ethics, morality, and national culture; Cheng Yin directed The Xi’an Incident (1981) to reexamine historical events; Regret for the Past (1981) by Shui Hua was adapted from a literature classic, and Ling Zi directed Rickshaw Boy (1982) which uncovered social reality. Possessing unique features and diverse styles, these films undoubtedly revealed the enthusiasm and the vigorous vitality of “the third generation” directors of art in the new age.

The second rising tide of “the third generation” directors at the beginning of the reform and opening up is not only a result of their transformation of narrative methods and points of view, but also their accordance with mainstream ideology and the taste of the audience. Political backgrounds and historical pains were either weakened as insignificant settings or concealed consciously or unconsciously behind the scenes. What was presented on the screen was the beauty of human nature, the contemplation upon ethical and moral matters, and justice prevailing in the end. On account of their efforts to reduce the head-on confrontation with political ideology, “the third generation” directors repeatedly won awards at the time. (The Xi’an Incident, won three awards in the second Golden Rooster Awards including the Best Director Award; Rickshaw Boy, won two awards in the third Golden Rooster Awards, among which was the Best Feature Film Award; Hibiscus Town, won four awards in the seventh Golden Rooster Awards, among which was the Best Feature Film Award). These films
also corresponded to the taste of the audience. At the time, the audience was already tired of the illusion in films, which tended to moralize universal love for the country and the people, and the monotony in the Model Theater which scrupulously abided by the rigid principle of “tall, big and complete.” The audience began to focus on ordinary people’s ups and downs as well as sorrows and happiness in social history. “Third generation” directors set a new direction for “fourth generation” directors by individual exploration of art creation, marginalization of political critics, and accordance with mass cultural psyche. Undoubtedly, they are more or less impacted by the disadvantages of humanization and moralizing in political criticism and historic enlightenment.

Representing the first academism in Chinese film history, “fourth generation” directors gradually became the main force within the industry in mainland China while the “third generation” was still in its prime. Although most of the new generation directors also followed the path of retrospection, they showed it in a completely different way. Attributable to professional education at film schools, these passionate directors had a systematic knowledge of film theories and practices as well as broad cultural visions of films. These enabled them to break through the chains of USSR film models and Chinese film theories, and returned to the film art itself. The article “About the Modernization of Film Language” (Film Art, the third issue in 1979), written by Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo in 1979, explained this return. They disagreed with the opinion that “film is in service of politics,” and believed that films should “greatly represent artistry, expression techniques, cinema aesthetics, and film langue in a clear and vigorous manner” (79–80). Therefore, “fourth generation” directors accorded with Andre Bazin on his theories on “ontology of image” and “realistic esthetics.” Some even employed means of artistic expressions from films under the influence of Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave Movement. In addition, new techniques such as sequence shots, time and space crisscrossing, and the counterpoint of sound and picture began to appear in their films. Auteur and poetic films followed one after another, for instance, Little Flower (by Zhang Zheng and Huang Jianzhong, 1979), Evening Rain (by Wu Yigong, 1980), Sha Où (by Zhang Nuanxin, 1981), My Memories of Old Beijing (by Wu Yigong, 1982), At Middle Age (by Sun Yu, 1982), Country Couple (by Hu Bingliu, 1983), Wild Mountains (by Yan Xuesu, 1985), Married to a Child (by Xie Fei, 1986), Old Well (by Wu Tianming, 1987), and The King of Chess (by Teng Wenji, 1988). They reexamined and explored history either by weakening political mythologies through realistic recordings or by replacing political mythologies with poetic scenes about life. To a large extent, “short warm stories set in a great age” superseded the great revolution and intense class-consciousness. Explorations of the personal difficulties of life and the emphasis of overcoming such difficulties were presented on the screen. In short, grand narratives of variable forms gave place to individual expressions. Mundane reality had weakened mythological divinity, and directors started to explore humanity.

“Realists prefer loose, discursive plots, with no clearly defined beginning, middle, or end. We dip into the story at an arbitrary point. Usually we aren’t presented with a clear-cut conflict, as in classical narratives. Rather, the conflict emerges unobtrusively from the unforced events of the exposition. The story itself is presented as a ‘slice of life’, as a poetic fragment, not a neatly structured tale” (Giannetti 333). “Short stories set during a great period” exhibited by “the fourth generation” directors conquered vast
audiences who had just managed to free themselves from the cage of the ideology and culture of that time. The “nobody” in these “short stories,” who resonated with the masses and implied their yearning for truth, virtue, and beauty, allowed the audience to immerse themselves in the “poetic narration of history” in films. “Fourth generation” directors’ poetical expression of history was not only a result of the realistic creation method but also their inner helplessness. The seemingly intense retrospection and criticism contained clear temperance and weakness. As Xie Fei noted, “although we are no longer young, the wonderful dreams and ideals we used to have in our youth and even in our childhood are precious after all and should not be forgotten […] When we were in school, the whole country was filled with passion, and the whole society upheld morality; values, such as obedience to the Party, to be upright, believing in truth, virtue and beauty, were deeply rooted in our hearts. At the same time, we cherished a romantic view on society and life […]” (17–29). Thus, their contemplation and criticism upon history were always tainted with genteel, romantic and ideal elements. Our Farm (by Xie Fei, 1983) showed idealism when the major character Chen Xinan (played by Zhou Lijing) returned to the Great Northern Wilderness; in My Memories of Old Beijing, Ying Zi (played by Shen Jie) could not forget her childhood memories even after she left Beijing; in Young at Heart (by Huang Shuqin, 1983), young characters represented by Yang Qiangyun (starred by Ren Yexiang) naturally revealed their love for the country and the Party when they read poetry; in Black Snow (by Xie Fei, 1989), Li Huiquan’s (played by Jiang Wen) Oedipus complex was shown when he stared into the portrait of his deceased mother after being discharged from prison. These directors are deeply attached to the motherland and desire success and prosperity for national politics; therefore, they dared not confront historical cruelty, but turned to supersede the deep sorrow brought on by history with poetic illusions. They devoted their ardent anticipation for a better future into subtle and genteel criticism.

Due to abundant academic knowledge and life experiences, “fourth generation” directors are especially striking in the history of Chinese films. Despite all the misfortune during the age, these film-makers ushered in a new age as soon as they stepped on the stage, and their transitional practices in the film industry laid the foundation for the mainland Chinese films acting on international conventions. Furthermore, they also declared the coming of a glorious age after the 1980s when directors of three generations (third, fourth, and fifth generations) coexisted in harmony and made new accomplishments.

2. The “fifth generation’s” subversion and return to narratives

“Fourth generation” directors, who focused on the destiny of an individual during a great era, weakened the importance of political mythologies, but they were never betrayers. At the climax of this generation, the real betrayer of political mythology suddenly appeared. “Fifth generation” directors waved goodbye to the nasty-nice criticism of “root seeking,” “scar,” and “contemplation,” as well as the generalized description of the goodness of human nature. They no longer focused upon personal emotions and started to concentrate on extensive national images, striving to reconstruct new national mythologies and historical allegories. In the mid-1980s, “the whole world was faced with a new cultural transformation or a cultural combination. In the clash and
fusion of the eastern and the western cultures, ‘the fifth generation’ directors led the trend. They firmly and magnanimously established their own cultural position in the overall dialogue with world cultures and world films when they tried to reconstruct their own cultural traditions and poetic film languages” (Huang, Shixian 77–85). Combining Chinese history and embracing the world, they refined the modernity and internationalization of the long-standing mainland Chinese films which thus experienced a short but magnificent advancement.

In 1983, Zhang Junzhao became the pioneer among “fifth generation” directors with his movie One and Eight. He abandoned the artificial styles of shooting, character modeling, and action scenes, and strived to restore the true history as well as put forward an acute inquiry into history by realistic representations. As the Japanese scholar Sato noted, “the film revealed a strong will to carefully deliberate on images as plastic arts, while previous Chinese films were under the control of thematic determinism. In contrast, an epoch-making discrepancy is clearly shown” (Zuo Teng Zhong Nan 145). Soon after a series of films that represented “fifth generation” directors were created, including Chen Kaige’s Yellow Earth (1984), The Big Parade (1986), King of the Children (1987), Life On A String (1991), Tian Zhuangzhuang’s On the Hunting Ground (1984), The Horse Thief (1986), Huang Jianxin’s The Black Cannon Incident (1985), Wu Ziniu’s Evening Bell (1988), Zhang Yimou’s Red Sorghum (1987), Ju Dou (1990), and Raise The Red Lantern (1991). They revealed human nature, reexamined Chinese history, as well as enhanced cultural reflection and philosophical thinking by means of images in the weakened narrative threads. They had completely cast away the sentimental grief among directors of the “fourth generation.” As it were, by reconstructing national mythologies and historical allegories, these new directors marked the beginning of the modernism film movement (to win world fame) in the film history of mainland China in the 1980s. For instance, the film Yellow Earth won the Silver Leopard Award of the 38th Locarno International Film Festival and the Best Director Award of the 29th London International Film Festival. Political mythology was completely deconstructed by the director in this film. The typical hero brought spiritual shock and future visions to the young people on the yellow land (Loess Plateau of China), but still he could not truly change their destiny; thus, traditional mythology about heroes was subverted unprecedentedly. Another film, Red Sorghum, was the winner of the Golden Bear Award of the 38th Berlin International Film Festival. In the film, the folk-custom ceremony (including carrying the people in the litter, illicit sexual relations, and offering sacrifices to the Wine God) respectfully praised the freedom of life and universal love, and solo vocals, and choruses without accompaniment and displayed original vitality; however, they were tainted with subjectivity. Taken together, they constitute a metaphor for the director’s passionate sense of life and forbidding cultural criticism in a way of revelry.

In virtue of the world recognition of Yellow Earth and Red Sorghum, films themed on historical fables by means of narrative and images became the framework and the dominant style used by “fifth generation” directors before the 1990s. It echoed the social reality of the day: the reform and opening-up policy allowed mainland China to broaden its world influence, and thus the mainland Chinese film industry was also eager to go international and win the world’s attention. In fact, these directors won various awards in international film festivals by playing the “national cultural card”
to promote the idea of “more national, more global.” Regarding the relationship between “self” and “the other,” Daniel-Henri Pageaux, the French comparative visualist, once noted that, “While ‘I’ am watching ‘the other,’ the image of ‘the other’ also delivers some images of ‘I’ as an observer, speaker, and writer.” With overall consideration to individuality (one writer), community (a society or country), and semicommunity (one school of thought, one kind of opinion or literature), images of “the other” showed overall opposition to the other, and displayed supplement and extension to “I” and space. While “I,” as the speaker (mostly because of imminent and complicated reasons), is talking about “the other,” “I” tend to negate “the other” to speak for myself (157). Any subject, in its discourse practice with “the other,” tends to invent and transform its styles in different degrees to establish and prove itself all the time. Utopia (idealized as an angel) and untamed wilderness (demonized) presented in the east are two completely different forms in the western view, and both originated from western needs for retrospection and to encourage transformation, or to enhance confidence and superiority. In fact, films produced by “fifth generation” directors in the late 1980s also satisfied the west’s imagination of “the other” (the east). The exaggerated folk-custom ceremonies (such as wedding ceremony, rain dance, carrying litters, offering sacrifices to the Wine God, and lamp lighting), and colorful ethnic customs (such as thousands of miles of the yellow earth, grand courtyards, and the wild prairie), became the Achilles heel for new directors while balancing the west’s imagination of eastern culture.

However, recognition from the competitive film festivals accredited by the FIAPF (Fédération Internationale des Associations de Producteurs de Films) provides no shortcut for bridging the communication between “fifth generation” directors and the native audience. Films such as Ju Dou, Raise the Red Lantern, and Life on a String, are popular abroad but cannot enter the mainland film market. Those films that managed to be shown in theaters, such as The Big Parade, King of the Children, Evening Bell, cannot be interpreted by the average audience because of their obscure cultural metaphors. The reason is the five generations of directors (i.e., all the previous five generations) disregarded the characteristics of film media (motion pictures), and preferred modeling representations over narrative styles. Films produced by these directors basically “do not pay attention to constructing the well-conceived narrative line, but to expressing ideas by means of images under a thematic control. That is to say, the subject (such as an idea, a thought and a philosophy beyond the scene) is attached to an intensified and heightened specific element (such as sound, light, color, specific image, etc.). Compared to expressing ideas by means of images, the narrative was weakened in these films which are in accord with subjective emotions or psychological clues instead of realistic logic or casual relationships” (Jun Bing, “Expression of Narration and Plasticity of Expression” 102–109). However, “films take motion frames as narrative media. They must depend upon cameras to load materialistic reality onto sensitive films so as to form motion pictures and complete the narrative” (indicating traditional movies prior to digitalization) (Jun Bing, Comment on Films 115). This contradiction broadened the distance between films and the mass audience, and was undoubtedly regrettable and worthy of retrospection. Fortunately, the “fifth generation” reined this in when it was on the brink of the precipice and returned to narrative styles in the
1990s. Expressing ideas by means of images under the premise of the narrative, directors then regained the favor of the audience and the market.

The Story of Qiu Ju, produced by Zhang Yimou in 1992, can be considered as a symbol of the return to narrative styles among “fifth generation” directors. This film showed the director’s transformation from focusing on modeling representation to simple and humorous narrative of the paradox between law and human sympathy. It thus regained the audience’s favor and won the Gold Lion Award of the 49th Venice Film Festival. Similarly, Chen Kaige retreated to a narrative style but in a grander way. Farewell My Concubine, which he directed in 1992, stretched across over half a century from the Northern Warlords period to the end of the Cultural Revolution. The film, set in such a historical background, demonstrated the ups and downs of Peking opera art and culture during the century by using strict narratives. The film focuses on deep humanism, and displays the director’s contemplation upon moralities and the principle “life is a theater.” This film also gained the recognition of most audiences, having won the Golden Palm Award of the 46th Cannes International Film Festival. In fact, when the previous five generations of directors planned to make a transformation, the later five generations of directors had already faced this reality and focused on direct narratives. Such examples are the films With Sugar (1987) and Writing Prime (1991) by Sun Zhou, Transmigration (1988) by Huang Jinxin, Half Flame, Half Brine (1989) by Xia Gang, and Bloody Morning (1991) by Li Shaohong. With their serious and even cruel narratives, these directors and the previous five generations who returned to the narrative style announced the end of the fifth generation. Subsequently, Zhang Yimou directed Shanghai Triad (1994) which revealed gangland from a country boy’s point of view; Keep Cool (1996), which was an experimental metro film with black humor, as well as the trilogy of commoners including Not One Less (1998); The Road Home (1999); and Happy Times (2000). Chen Kaige also directed Temptress Moon (1994), an urban ethical film; The Emperor and the Assassin (1998), a serious history drama; and Together (2003), a modern family drama. All these films demonstrated the ontology of film narrative and its general control over modeling representation.

In the 21st century, the marketization of films that began at the start of the 1990s and the later industrialization of the film market in more recent years brought about changes and transformations to the mainland Chinese film industry. Owing to various reasons, excellent films were in short supply during this period and the audience decreased drastically. Homemade films in mainland China were confronted with unprecedented market challenges. “Big-budget films,” which were modeled on Hollywood and Hong Kong films, infused some vitality into the weak film market. This trend also captured the attention of the “fifth generation.” Hero (2002), directed by Zhang Yimou became the top-selling film (box office was 250 million RMB) due to its pure business operation, all-star lineup, and magnificent landscapes since the industrialization reform of the film market in mainland China. Zhang Yimou continued this trend and directed House of Flying Daggers (2004), Curse of the Golden Flower (2006) and The Great Wall (2016). Chen Kaige followed Zhang and directed The Promise (2005) and Legend of the Demon Cat (2017). Except the movie Hero, which received both favorable and unfavorable criticism, substantive investment and generous profits of these so-called “big-budget films” did not escape the destiny of becoming ordinary works. These fictitious mythologies produced with a large amount of money and effort,
won the recognition of the market, but they also indicated the collapse of directors’ public images: “The unique imagination and creativity of film producers are reflected in specific picture constructs, instead of many hilarious scenes” (Balázs 69). These big-budget films, which tell loose and even absurd stories by using hilarious visual wonders, were destined to pay too much for something that was disappointing because “wonders are basically unnecessary repetitions. The reason simply lies in the unity of its means and purposes” (Debord 62). Nevertheless, the previous five generations, who once retreated to narrative and later produced these big-budget films, should return to narrative itself once again. They need to tell full and interesting stories (about life, human nature, or humanism) patiently with vivid and intuitive scenes.

3. The “new generation’s” marginal narration and mainstream preference

In the mid-1990s, the “new generation” (commonly known as the “sixth generation”) of the film industry in mainland China began to emerge in cinema. The features of the “sixth generation” films are often concluded through a comparison with “fifth generation” films. Youth attachment and urban space in these works constituted a theme in contrast with the historical feelings and local images of “fifth generation” films: “The fifth generation’ selected history, while ‘the sixth generation’ selected reality; the former destroyed ideological myths, while the latter destroyed collective myths; the former presented the agriculture in China, while the latter presented the city; the former chose collective enlightenment narratives, while the latter chose free personal narratives” (Yang 99–105). In short, the “new generation” is different from the “fifth generation.” They are no longer a group identified by a unified style, but belong to a community that has different artistic themes, ideological content and esthetic pursuits. Strictly speaking, the intergenerational appellation can no longer cover such a large and diversified directorial group.

Most directors of the “new generation” were born in the 1960s. Being faced with vigorous social transitions and economic changes, they are wave observers rather than wave riders. They entered society directly after school, and soon discovered that they, sheltered by the “fifth generation,” were too naive and immature to survive the marketization reform of the film industry. The esthetic identity created by “fifth generation” directors and their proficient operation of the market, enabled this new generation to be soberly aware of the insurmountable “wall” they confronted. Therefore, they started to rebel against the “fifth generation.” These new betrayers, who are against political myths, abandoned the grand narrative about native cultures and historical fables. They eliminated “films produced for reading and understanding,” and set out to faithfully make “honest” films (all graduates in 1985 from Beijing Film Academy 24–25) in their joyful searches for inspirational sources and expression objects in the mundane world. Due to a lack of a broad understanding of social life as well as being under the influence of European art film trends such as “experimental films,” “auteur films,” etc. during professional training, works of “new generation” directors obtained a sense of self and pride to some extent. For artists who grew up in difficult times and on the edge of mainstream culture, what they calmly reproduced was in fact showing parts of their living status. Thus, the “new generation” highlighted the discourse of “otherness” stance at the beginning, and their attention to living conditions and life
experiences (adolescent growth, the reality of anxiety, emotional diversity, schizophrenia, incomplete life, etc.) of modern alternative urban people manifests an obvious autobiographical nature and an anxious sense of self-love and self-pity” (Jun Bing, “A Parallel Study” 60–68).

Zhang Yuan’s *Beijing Bastards* (1993) objectively recorded the survival of the young alternative urban people through themes such as sex and abortion. Wang Xiaoshuai’s *The Days* (1993), Guan Hu’s *Dirt* (1994), and Lou Ye’s *Weekend Lover* (1995), also realistically documented the mental state and the emotional entanglement of the marginalized “new human beings” (alternative urban youth). Zhang Ming’s *Rainclouds Over Wushan* (1996) described the real life of the marginal young men and women who were associated through love and sex during the construction of the “Three Gorges” in the new era. Lu Xuechang’s *Grown Ups* (1997) told of the growth of an introverted and solitary boy from the early 1970s to the 1990s to explore the passing of youth and the changing affection of his peers in this broad historical background. Similarly, in films such as *Morning Glory* (Hu Xueyang, 1995), *Pickpocket* (Jia Zhangke, 1997), *Suzhou River* (Lou Ye, 2000), and *Still Life* (Jia Zhangke, 2006), directors devoted their personal experiences and understandings to marginalized people’s sufferings in real life.

“The marginal writing of ‘the new generation’ in part came from the self-concerned and instinctive observation of targeted objects that are controlled by their subjective consciousness; that is to say, it is a projection of subjective emotions in individuals’ personal world and surroundings. The emphasis on individuals’ self-awakening and self-awareness, confession to personal experiences, as well as revivification of the true state of life, is affected by European art films. The alternative writing implicates the elitism and yet narcissistic modern ideals, as well as natural rather than conscious humanitarian concerns” (Jun Bing, “A Parallel Study” 60–68). Indeed, alternative writings and personal expressions are increasingly narrowing “the new generation’s” way to rebel. Moreover, it is also difficult for the autobiographical or semiautobiographical writings, which are full of self-love and self-pity, to be accepted by the masses: “Limited subject matters and random narratives are bound to lose inspiring themes, and films without uplifting themes are hard to touch the audience” (Jun Bing, “Analysis of Film Creation Status” 93–99). It is gratifying that the unconventional and marginal narratives as well as the unique deconstruction of films enable these isolated directors to be aware that they must return to the public and the mainstream to reach a higher artistic level and to regain the audience as well as the market. Consequently, “new generation” films which cater to mainstream discourse and the commercial market appeared, such as *Seventeen Years* (Zhang Yuan, 1999), which calls for truth and warmth; the light comedy *Spicy Love Soup* (Zhang Yang, 1997); *A Beautiful New World* (Shi Yunjiu, 1999); and *Postmen in the Mountains* (Huo Jianqi, 1999), which praises love and dedication.

4. The “aggressive generation’s” transboundary fusion and the coexistence of mundaneness and mythology

Since the beginning of the 21st century, people in mainland China have been open to novelty and freedom. The postmodern pop culture which has the cultural ideal of
weakening the sanctified politics and moral structure as well as abandoning the modern “Utopia” went through rapid growth (Jun Bing, Directors’ Film Creation and Cultural Speculation 214). Younger than the “new generation,” the “aggressive generation” (mostly born in the 1970s and appeared on stage after 1999; some of them started from the “new generation,” for example, Lu Chuan and Ning Hao, etc.) quickly established their own discourse system and narrative field by using different topics and subjects, as well as mixing various genres, and exploring cinematic language. In a way, they have made breakthroughs in both film content and form, and their combination of both mundane life and mythology won wide recognition from the audience. Based on the coexistence of the elite culture, mainstream culture, and the pop culture under the context of globalization and postglobalization, directors such as Lu Chuan, Diao Yinan, Wu Ershan, Cao Baoping, Zhang Meng, and Xu Jinglei became the “aggressive generation” in the new era ten years after the film market reform (started from 1992) in mainland China. Their films integrated various elements with diversity, hybridity, and heterogeneity. Due to loose creative contexts and mature filmmaking mechanisms as well as rapid development of the film industry in mainland China, the “aggressive generation” is able to attach more attention to artistic innovation, language exploration, and the esthetic acceptance of films. In addition, cooperative cinema chains invested in by mainstream cinemas, film institutions, and collective capital, interact and compete with independent cinemas solely funded by private capital or overseas capital. Decisively impacted by the market, the “aggressive generation” has made various new works and masterpieces with all kinds of themes and styles, and the audience also easily accesses these works in a timely manner. The rapid growth of internet platforms and mobile terminals driven by powerful digital technologies enables younger directors’ works to be supported, advertised, and promoted and then to become public hot spots and favored by the audience. In general, the “aggressive generation” that comes from all kinds of areas sticks to their emotional expression and strives to be different. They attach importance to the market effect of their films and hold fast to the humanities and basic morals, as well as emphasize the effective communication of the entertainment value of cinema.

The mundane realism held by the “aggressive generation” is a new creation. It has neither the sense of bitterness and heaviness possessed by the “fifth generation” under the context of national history and cultural speculation nor the individualization and narrow-mindedness featured by the “new generation” due to their own plights and small social circles. The “aggressive generation” usually unintentionally sets their peers in realistic films, and pays more attention to life conditions, mindsets, and survival circumstances of the majorities in various ranks and classes within the country or a city. The Chinese western Mountain Patrol (Lu Chuan, 2004) soulfully demonstrated the lush countryside (Hoh Xil) which is repeatedly trampled upon by poachers and then saved by antipoaching experts as well as endangered lives (Tibetan antelopes) in an extremely emotional way. The gangster movie Black Coal Thin Ice (Diao Yinan, 2013) displayed the life experience of a detective who solved a mysterious case by ways of “fishing” (pretending to pursue the female suspect) after he was demoted as a factory security officer. It implies the more cruel and tough side of the human mind (or a crazy idea or a persistent thought that is hard to realize in reality, or an emotional outburst and impulse of a mistreated, insulted, and misunderstood man) in every corner of the
bitter life behind the dramatic story, *The Equation of Love and Death* (Cao Baoping, 2008), a movie about morality and ethics, dramatized the true love of a lady who went crazy in a slightly exaggerated way when her boyfriend disappeared for four years, and revealed the contradiction between inflated greed and conscience as well as the helplessness of individuals. The gangster film *The Dead End* (Cao Baoping, 2015) and *Cock and Bull* (Cao Baoping, 2016) described the importance of respect, conscience, and care for individuals’ self-improvement, personal freedom, family relationship, and social harmony (especially to those who lost themselves) with magnificent landscape and enriched plots.

Due to frequent exchanges among the world film arts industries in the context of globalization and postglobalization as well as the increasing influence of Hollywood movies on contemporary global film industries, the “aggressive generation,” which has a broad vision and is trying out genre films in mainland China, takes more examples from Hollywood genre traditions when making their own. Some of their films still imply the modern cultural and artistic concepts which are often in Hollywood and European art films. In a sense, expanding the boundaries and cross-boundary fusion is the common endeavor of the “aggressive generation.” The mythological stories of *Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe* (Lu Chuan, 2015) and *Mojin-The Lost Legend* (Wu Ershan, 2015) are evidently influenced by science fiction films produced by Marvel Studios in Hollywood in the 21st century including *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), *Wolverine* (Gavin Hood, 2009), and *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), as well as those produced by DC Comics including *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013), *The Dark Knight: Trilogy* (Batman Begins by Christopher Nolan, 2005/The Dark Knight by Christopher Nolan, 2008/The Dark Knight Rises by Christopher Nolan, 2012). As science fiction films, they have mixed elements of fantasy (a subgroup of science fiction films) and horror films and thrillers (of the same genre level). Subject matters such as love, treasure hunting, evil spirits, monsters, and zombies are also mixed. The youth film *Go Lala Go* (Xu Jinglei, 2010) and *Dear Enemy* (Xu Jinglei, 2011) focused on study, work, and the life of young people in modern cities, and integrated style features or type elements used in ethical movies and comedies. Subjects including love, encouragement, gender equality, the will to live, fashion trends, and exotic charm (for example, scenes set in Thailand in *Go Lala Go* and London in *Dear Enemy*) are organically combined. Although *The Dead End* and *Cock and Bull* sought a formal sense of alienation to a certain extent, they tended to mix elements from comedies, thrillers, and gangster films into the main frame as bandit movies. The two films extended extreme “situations” and blind “free choices” of individuals in these situations with twisted and bizarre coincidences in real life and touching humanity, implying a sense of existentialism.

The “fifth generation” was indeed concerned with the allegorical and historical discourse among the underclass under the guise of folk customs and rituals, and the “new generation” was full of self-regard and self-pity as well as unconscious human sympathy. Distinctive from those two generations, the “aggressive generation’s” concern for the underclass is realistic, worldly, humane, and conscious. Additionally, this care for the underclass is a result of referencing excellent cinematic arts in Europe and America under the context of Chinese traditions and postmodern culture. In other words, the “aggressive generation” directors, who are familiar with digital technologies and the Internet and have a broad international vision, refined their works and
necessarily presented a modernity; that is to say, their works corresponded to the modern society and contemporary esthetics in a diversified film making environment. In a way, it is because of these young directors’ promotion and practices, that the domestic film industry is able to grow at unprecedented levels and go international in the 21st century and arouse enthusiastic and profound reactions. With an objective narration of a “fallen” detective with a full sense of humanity and humanitarian consciousness, rich literary arts and mysterious colors, and an open ending (fireworks bursting off brilliantly at the end of the film predicts multiple possible futures), the film Black Coal Thin Ice is undoubtedly in line with the polysemantic and ambiguous modern perception and the appreciation taste of the contemporary public. The “aggressive generation’s” works mostly showed modernity based on the international vision and the context of pop culture. 3D fantasy movies such as Chronicles of the Ghostly Tribe and Mojin-The Lost Legend interpreted landscapes, humanization, and generalized moralizing; Black Coal Thin Ice and Cock and Bull displayed relatively abstract, formalized, and humanized transformation; comedies Lucky Dog (Zhang Meng, 2008), The Piano in a Factory (Zhang Meng, 2011), Everybody’s Fine (Zhang Meng, 2016) recalled the obedient and sentimental past and addressed the noisy, complicated, changeable, and individualized reality.

The existence of multiple cultures has divided the audience with different cultural perceptions. As a popular art and a mass medium, films catering to audiences with different esthetic tastes, appreciation levels, and preferences in different cultural backgrounds are naturally made due to the constraints of audience acceptance. Therefore, diversification and class differentiation become inevitable. The “aggressive generation’s” ethics films, historical costume films, and Chinese westerns echoed the modern elite culture. Moreover, various genre movies (gangster movies, science fiction films, youth films, comedies, police movies, etc.) fit with postmodern pop culture. Filmmakers can make proper individualized choices for their creations according to the context of the discourse, their knowledge, esthetic taste, and so on, and are able to point to modern elite culture or postmodern pop culture. Inspirations from the national ideologies, cultures, and artistic atmospheres (the modification of modernism and postmodernism, the rise of business culture and capital, the flourishing of utilitarianism and hedonism, etc.) are the driving force for the “aggressive generation” to make proactive and creative choices. This is also the fundamental reason for the coexistence of mundane and mythic concepts among the “aggressive generation.” The practice and consideration of successful films in Europe and America have also played a part. In the context of multicultural coexistence, “the aggressive generation” can easily break through the boundaries of different generations of directors to form a competitive and flourishing atmosphere in the film making industry. The practices of the “aggressive generation,” who insists on their own cultural adherence, artistic beliefs, and moral bottom lines, have partly indicated the right direction and the inevitable course of future filmmaking in mainland China.

5. Conclusion

The course of development for the mainland Chinese film industry over the four decades after the reform and opening-up policy displays a spiral trend from the continuous reflection on and rebellion against political myths to summary and return.
During this winding but colorful journey of art and culture, success and failure, gain and loss interweave. The reason is due to the creator’s lack of a systematic grasp of the arts on the whole. M. H. Abrams proposed “four elements” (artist, work, universe, and audience) (4) which are generally recognized by domestic literary circles. The four elements mainly center on four viewpoints including “director,” “film,” “story,” and “audience.” It can thus be concluded that cinema is the total of visual art, synthetic art, narrative art, and popular art. In fact, cinema is the product of the dynamic balance of the four elements: visual art, synthetic art, narrative art, and popular art, and its essence lies in both an independent and unified relationship (Jun Bing, “Study on the Distinction of Film Art” 126–132). Filmmakers need to be aware of this.

As a representational visual art, films can easily show actions and images, as well as describe specific, direct, and vivid stories. Many of the “fifth generation directors” works (such as Yellow Earth, Red Sorghum, My Father and Mother, etc.) benefited from the directors’ attention to the artistic expression of frames, and their frames of visual impact as well as moderate and refined verbs and actions left a deep impression on the audiences. As film is an intuitive and complex synthetic art, directors are required to deepen their social practices, to perceive different regions, classes and cultures, and to extract ideas from life bit by bit. In Story of Qiu Ju, reasonable recreation to the original novel written by Chen Yuanbin allowed it to win an international award. Hero, combining singing, dancing, martial arts, and other traditional culture with computer technology, created a legendary box office in the domestic market. As a narrative art, films must have a good story and appropriate portrayal. A film indulging in empty visuals without vivid, interesting, well-arranged, and fluctuating stories will inevitably fail (Chen Kaige’s The Promise is a typical example). Of course, narrative must have its ontological significance, and should be the premise of modeling expression; otherwise, the film may be obscure and unable to resonate with the masses. This is also acquired from the lessons and experience of the previous five generations who were infatuated with modeling, ignored narrative, and then returned to narrative. As a public art, films need to be accepted by the majority of the audience, and also satisfy the esthetic pleasure of the audiences as much as possible. Each filmmaker should go into the density of life and the public, and learn to replace thinking as an audience. In conclusion, “fourth generation” filmmakers produced “short stories under a great age” that are close to life and meet the needs of the audience. The “fifth generation” returned to narrative ontology in the early 1990s while the “new generation” returned to mainstream culture, and the “aggressive generation” created genre fusion and mixture of mundaneness and mythology. All these revealed that the acceptance of the audience has always been an important part of the film creators’ consideration.

In summary, as an art, film is a mundane art; as a myth, it is a mundane myth. Or, film is a mundane art with a mythological nature, but is more mundaneness than myth. Only by full realization of this point, and being aware of the dynamic equilibrium of the “four elements” (director, film, story, audience) in practices, can directors give full play to the characteristics of the film art, find and avoid creative misunderstandings, and create good works with excellent box office reception. Based on this, coupled with the reform of the external film mechanism, the mainland China film industry can truly
strive to restore its own brilliance in the new century and effectively fulfill its historical and cultural mission.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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