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**Feng Xiaogang, New Year Films, and the Transformation of Chinese Film Industry In the
1990s**

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**Feng Xiaogang, New Year Films, and the Transformation of Chinese Film Industry In the
1990s**

by

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Dedication

To My Parents

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Abstract

Feng Xiaogang, New Year Films, and the Transformation of Chinese Film Industry In the 1990s

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2009

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My thesis analyzes China's most famous commercial film director, Feng Xiaogang, and his New Year Films against the background of infrastructure reform in the Chinese movie industry. The past three decades have witnessed dramatic changes in the Chinese film industry and phenomenal growth in commercial film production due to the movie industry reform that was launched by the Chinese government in order to commercialize the film industry. Feng Xiaogang is both a beneficiary and a contributor to the commercialization of the movie industry, and his

unprecedented success in the movie industry also reflected the cultural changes within the film industry. This thesis first examines the transformation of the film industry due to the movie reform that allowed Feng Xiaogang to cross over from the television industry to the film industry, and the emergence of independent film companies also provided Feng with the opportunity to make commercial films. Next, I particularly analyze Feng's first New Year film, *The Dream Factory*, which shows Feng's approach of combining entertainment and social criticism in the film. Finally, I will analyze the popularity of his New Year films from an 'auteur' perspective.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Chinese film industry has gone through a dramatic transformation since the early 1990s. Like other state-owned industries, the Chinese film industry, in the wake of the Chinese government's economic reform policy, had to change its mode of operation. In particular, it had to cope with the shock of competition from Hollywood, after the polity was changed to allow the importation of Hollywood blockbusters in 1994. The Chinese film industry and Chinese filmmakers had already been experiencing an unprecedented period of challenges caused by the privatization of China's economic structure and the related changes in popular taste. During this rocky period, no other Chinese filmmaker made the transition to the new commercial emphasis in catering to popular taste more successfully than Feng Xiaogang, who quickly became the most famous and prolific commercial film director in China. Born in 1958, Feng is a native Beijinger and the son of a professor of Communist Party College and a nurse. After his parents divorced, Feng grew up and lived with his mother and elder sister. In 1978, Feng was admitted to the Department of Film Design at the Beijing Film Academy. He almost became a schoolmate of the fifth generation directors who were admitted to the BFA the same year, but due to his family's financial hardship, he gave up the opportunity, and enlisted in the Chinese People's Liberation Army. After his dismissal from the army, he

joined the Beijing Television Station as a set designer in 1985. He was a set designer in four television serials: *Triumph at Midnight* (1986), *Da Lin Meng*(1987), *Underwear Cops*(1987), and *Good Men, Good Women*(1988). After working in the television industry for almost ten years, Feng got his foot in the door of the film industry in 1994, the year his directorial debut, *Gone Forever with My Love*, was released. Later, he dedicated himself to commercial film production, focusing on New Year's films, targeting the Lunar New Year market. Although Feng did not have any training in film, he was the only filmmaker whose New Year's films could compete in the domestic market with Hollywood blockbusters.

The idea of the New Year's Film was derived from Hollywood's marketing strategy for timing the release of blockbusters to major holiday weekends or the period around specific holidays, such as Christmas, New Year's, and students' summer and winter break. Hollywood's marketing strategy was adopted by the Hong Kong film industry first, thus introducing this form of scheduling into the Chinese sphere. Because the Hong Kong film industry's structure and operation are closer to Hollywood's, Hong Kong also produces several films for the New Year's season (Zhao 2003, 68). Jackie Chen's *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) was the first to be introduced and imported specifically as a New Year's Film to the Chinese film market. After that, the state began importing Hong Kong's New Year's films to mainland China for the New Year's season.

In 1997, Feng's first New Year's comedy, *The Dream Factory*, became a dark horse in the film market and surprised his film peers. It cost four million *yuan* to produce and took in thirty-three million *yuan* at the box-office. A Chinese film has not received

this high of a box-office return with such a low production cost for a long time. In general, it was well known within the film industry that most Chinese films in the 1990s whose production cost were over three million *yuan* could not recover their cost at the box-office and suffered deficit. In addition to the comedies *The Dream Factory* (1997), *Be There, Be Square* (1998), *Sorry, Baby* (1999), *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001), and *Cell Phone* (2003), Feng also attempted different genres for the New Year's market, such as a melodrama (*A Sigh*, 2000), an action film (*A World Without Thieves*, 2004), a martial arts film (*Banquet*, 2006), and a war film (*Assembly*, 2007). All of his films ranked among the top-three grossing movies in their year of release.

Feng single-handedly cultivated the Lunar New Year's film market through the above-mentioned nine successive box-office smashes since *The Dream Factory*. As the Chinese film industry has continued to transform itself in the new era, Feng has consistently made films that are strong enough to compete with the Hollywood blockbusters that swept through the domestic market with increased number in the aftermath of China's opening of that market as a condition for entering the WTO in 2002. It is fair to say that Feng helped recover the commercial film tradition of the Shanghai based studios in the 1920s and 1930s that were expropriated and re-organized, first by Japanese invaders, then by the nationalists, and finally by Mao's revolutionary government. Feng was the first real beneficiary of China's movie reform movement and market economy; his films, in turn, provided a template, or at least an inspiration, for the Chinese film industry that was mired in the art and propaganda films of the planned economy epoch. His breakout success in commercial film production gave Chinese films

and filmmakers a model for striking back at the Hollywood blockbusters with films that were more fully reflective of China's cultural space. Feng's road to success, however, was by no means a smooth one. He encountered the typical prejudice against light commercial fare in his early filmmaking career from the cultural field of Chinese cinema, which was oriented to art-film production. Feng eventually rose to power on the back of his successes in the new millennium; it is now common to read his name as one of the three most influential film directors in China, along with art-film directors Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige. Feng's career is well worth academic attention and serious consideration. His ascent to the status of a taste making commercial film director indicates the direction taken by the Chinese film industry as it has begun to acculturate to a new and quite different role, which provides less didactic, more entertainment oriented, and profit-driven films. The intent of the movie reform policy is being fulfilled, as commercial film gradually becomes the dominant film practice in the film industry.

Research Questions and Methodologies

Feng Xiaogang and his New Year films has become the object of my research due to two main reasons. First, my research attempts to complement existing scholarship on Feng Xiaogang and the Chinese film industry. Secondly, my study aims to examine the significance of Feng's commercial film production for the Chinese film industry during the transformation in a post-socialist global context.

My approaches to understanding the Feng Xiaogang phenomenon are, first, institutional and industrial analyses. From my point of view, Feng's career development

is closely bound to the transformation of the Chinese film industry due to movie industry reform. So, this thesis attempts to examine New Year films and the Chinese film industry from a political economy perspective.

In addition to industrial analysis, I attempt to combine film studies with culture studies in order to stress the importance of the social context to analyze films. I try to answer questions such as how and why Feng succeeded as a commercial filmmaker and rose to power in the film industry in the New Millennium, and why his New Year films become popular. So, my thesis involves a semiotic analysis of Feng's first New Year's film, *The Dream Factory*, to understand how he combines entertainment with social criticism in this film. Additionally, I consider Feng a unique *auteur*, and thus my interpretation on New Year comedies is relevant to an *auteur* analysis.

In brief, my interdisciplinary offers a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese commercial cinema and counteracts the textual-focus methodology in film studies.

Theoretical Perspectives

My thesis is informed by Pierre Bourdieu, Mikhail Bakhtin, *auteur* theory and postmodern theory. Bourdieu's concepts, such as field, capital, and habitus, help me make sense of the questions of (1) how and why Feng successfully crossed over to the film industry and chose to make commercial films; and (2) how and why his films evoked criticism and resistance in the field of Chinese cinema even though he became the number one box-office director at that time—or rather, precisely because he has become the number one box-office director. Bourdieu's theoretical framework and categories are

enormously helpful in revealing the dynamics of power relations in the field of cultural production and social life. Bourdieu argues that each “field” has its own laws of functioning and a hierarchical organization independent of economy and politics. The field is positionally constituted, with the positions vertically distributed by a principle of distinctions, such that agents are continually assessing the specific position they occupy and devising strategies to successfully maintain it or ascend higher in the field according to some dimension of intangible capital (cultural, social, or symbolic) (Bourdieu 1993, 30). I seek to transpose and modify Bourdieu’s conceptualization of the French literary field to the field of Chinese film practice by including a far greater degree of political patronage, which means that political effects, rather than purely aesthetic or audience-driven ones, are the most important determinants in structuring the field.

Furthermore, Bourdieu’s notion of capital gives us a useful category to employ in analyzing Feng’s position-takings. As Bourdieu points out, “As a rule those richest in economic, cultural and social capital are the first to move into the new position”(Bourdieu 1993, 68). According to Bourdieu, capital can take a variety of different forms. Bourdieu introduced four types of capital: economic capital (wealth, property), social capital (networking, social resources), and cultural capital (knowledge, education credentials, skill, and family inheritance and symbolic capital (prestige, honor) (Bourdieu 1986, 243). It turns out that Feng had accumulated social capital and economic capital in the television industry before making his transition to the film industry. Part of this story is simply that Feng took his experience of making television comedies, which gave scope to his disposition for ensemble and collaborative work, and transposed it to

the Chinese film industry at a transformational moment. But part of this story departs from the usual institutional story in that the political dimension here is significant: Feng was motivated, in many ways, by his unpleasant encounters with censorship, attributing them, partly, to his lack of bargaining power in terms of cultural capital. Feng thus not only sought to realize an aesthetic vision, but also to accumulate cultural capital to be used in bargaining with political authorities.

Feng's commercial films have a distinctive personal style. A remarkably consistent body of themes, narrative patterns, and filmic styles can be observed in Feng's work all the way from his comedies to his action stories and melodramas, including the work of the television years with which he launched his career. In keeping with Andrew Sarris's *auteur* theory, I examine Feng as an *auteur* by analyzing style, genre, narrative, and popularity of his films. Sarris mentions in his famous essay "Notes on the *Auteur* Theory in 1962:" "Some critics have advised me that the *auteur* theory applies only to a small number of artists who make personal films, not to the run-of-the-mill Hollywood director who takes whatever assignment is available."¹ Sarris disagrees, contending that this point of view exhibits a "crucial misunderstanding of the film making process and how the director functions within it."² He proposes four criteria to evaluate an *auteur* of the film, including the distinguishable personality of the director and the technical competence of the director.

¹ Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 561-564.

In my thesis, I focus on Feng's early comedies made in the 1990s. In order to frame their stylized comedic substance, I use Henri Bergeson's theory of comedy. According to Bergson, "Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of mechanical arrangement."³ I discuss the way Feng weaves his comic stories into playful games. The parameters of the games give Feng's comedies a special cast. This ludic approach is close to Bergson's famous concept that "Comedy is a game, a game that imitates life."⁴

Bakhtin's concepts of carnival and the carnivalesque are useful for my analysis of Feng's first New Year's film, *The Dream Factory*. Bakhtin was especially interested in the way literature faces carnival, the temporary celebratory period in medieval times in Western countries during which the lower classes released themselves from official order and entertained themselves by mocking and breaking down social boundaries, albeit temporarily. These features and the trace of the carnivalesque spirit can be discerned in Feng's films. In addition, Jameson's concept of utopia in his article, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," is helpful in showing Feng's approach to managing social anxieties, entertainment, and state censorship in *The Dream Factory*, which can be brought out by comparing the film with the Spring Festival Gala on television, as well as the original novel on which *The Dream Factory* was based. As Jameson argues, the art

² Ibid., 561-564.

³ Henri Bergeson, *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), 105.

⁴ Henri Bergeson, *Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), 105.

work in mass culture performs a double task, creating “a transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be ‘managed’ or repressed” (Jameson 1990, 141). Jameson’s position is a response to the common claim that that mass culture is designed to create “false anxieties,” “false needs,” and impose “false consciousness.” There are many moments of pastiche and parody in *The Dream Factory*. I argue against what Jameson sees as the “bland” or “humourless” function of parody: “Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter” (Jameson 1990, 17). Instead, I would like to argue that the film is stylized by what Hutcheon terms “critical parody” (Hutcheon 1989, 93) and “complicitous critique” (Hutcheon 1989, 106, 151). Parodic self-reflexivity and its implicit content of political critique and historical awareness are emphasized, in Hutcheon’s view, in that “through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (Hutcheon 1989, 93).

Literature Review

There are only a handful of scholars who touch upon Feng’s films and the Chinese film industry. My literature review has two foci. First, I will review the scholarship on Feng Xiaogang and his New Year’s films. The other focus is on the

commercialization of the Chinese film industry. Few academics in the West in the 1990s were aware of Feng Xiaogang and his films. Perhaps the earliest extended treatment of him is the interview that was published in *Positions*, by Michael Kaene and Tao Dongfeng. In this interview, Feng talks about his television series, *Chicken Feathers on the Ground* (1994) and *The Dark Side of Moon* (1996), both of which ended up being banned by the Chinese government. From Feng's self-description, we can discern that his realistic approach to filmmaking and concern with the working class informed his early television production. Feng also gives his interviewers a picture of a Chinese filmmaker's struggle with China's harsh censorship. This interview shows that his early television experiences prefigure his later career changes, and that Feng was highly conscious of the relationship between censorship, audiences, and investors.

Feng drew the attention of the American film industry, critics, and scholars in 2002, the year when *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001) was shown in America. This film, bankrolled by Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia, was an experiment for Feng in exploring the international market. Although Feng had long been a household name in China, he was a new and unknown director for most American audiences and scholars at the time. After the release of *Big Shot's Funeral* in America, overseas Chinese and American scholars began to pay attention to Feng's commercial films and his positive influence on the Chinese film industry. Articles about his movies began to be published, using the approach of textual analysis. These studies provided a basis for future comprehensive research. Two articles, written by Chinese scholars, were published one year after the American release of *Big Shot's Funeral*. They provide helpful general

background knowledge about Feng Xiaogang and each focuses on a close reading of *Big Shot's Funeral*. Kong Shuyu, in her article "Big Shot From Beijing: Feng Xiaogang's *He Sui Pian* and Contemporary Chinese Commercial Film," argues that Feng's *He Sui Pian* (New Year's films) are devoid of social criticism, although conceding that these films do capture the ongoing social changes and social issues generated by China's rapid economic development and shift to a market economy.⁵ She points out that Feng depends heavily on Beijing black humor to deal with moral, cultural, and social contradictions in contemporary China, but that this humor is ultimately defeatist, eliminating potentially confrontational criticism. According to Kong, the proof of Feng's conformist stance is in the way his films give release to the feelings of stress and unfairness that the working class is experiencing during the social transformation, while at the same time affirming ideology and mainstream social values. Kong also connects Feng's humor to Wang Shuo's language style, but she does not provide any detailed defense for her position that Feng Xiaogang's satire is less hard-edged than Wang Shuo's. Finally, there seems to be a discrepancy between her rhetoric about Feng and her approach to *Big Shot's Funeral*, which is interpreted from a classic meta-cinematic standpoint.

In the same year, Wang Shujun published his article on Feng, "Big Shot's Funeral: China, Sony and the WTO"⁶ in the *Asian Cinema Journal*. Wang takes a textual

⁵ Shuyu Kong, "Big Shot from Beijing: Feng Xiaogang's *He Sui Pian* and Contemporary Chinese Commercial Film," *Asian Cinema* 14, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2003): 175-87.

⁶ Shujun Wang, "Big Shot's Funeral: China, Sony, and the WTO," *Asian Cinema* 14, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 2003): 145-154.

analysis approach, placing the film within the context of China's joining the WTO on December 11, 2001. He reads *Big Shot's Funeral* as an extended metaphor for the power relations between the West and the East, as implied by a Chinese-American character Lucy, who exists at the boundary between the American director in the film, Don Tyler (played by Donald Sutherland) and the unemployed Chinese cinematographer, Yoyo (played by Ge You). Wang argues that the romance between Lucy and Yoyo reverses the traditional image of a bi-racial relationship, in that Lucy chooses Yoyo over Don Tyler. Unlike Kong, Wang claims that Feng's films do contain a certain amount of social criticism hidden behind the laughter and satire, though his analysis does not focus on this aspect. Wang focuses on how the farce, which is structured by the precariously maintained opposition between the authentic and the fake, is an image of the economic contradictions of intellectual property in the film. It is a sore spot for global organizations like Sony that China does not vigorously enforce copyright laws. The whole issue underlies Feng's theme in the film: who, after all, does own the intellectual property in a film? Those who contribute the intellect? How is it property at all?

Although both authors above mention the meta-cinematic tendency that involves a film within a film theme in Feng's *Big Shot's Funeral* in their articles, neither puts this into the context of his other films. Possibly inspired by Wang and Kong, Jason McGrath provides a more detailed analysis of meta-cinematic elements and reflexive irony in Feng's movies.⁷ Considering *He Siu Pian* a new model for a Chinese national cinema that

⁷ Jason McGrath, "Metacinema for the Masses: Three Films by Feng Xiaogang," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2005).

could compete with Hollywood blockbusters in the local film market, McGrath selects three of Feng Xiaogang's New Year comedies: *The Dream Factory* (1997), *Be There or Be Square* (1998), and *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001), all of which, he thinks, demonstrate a strong meta-cinematic tendency. According to McGrath, Feng uses the meta-cinematic motif to reflect the Chinese film industry in crisis, and uses the technique of reflexivity to build up laughter and entertainment. With *The Dream Factory* in particular, McGrath argues that Feng's narrative unfolds a reflexive commentary on the production and consumption of film as a commodity and fantasy.

As Feng's rising status and the increasing role he plays in the film industry, scholarship on Feng's films slowly increased. Zhu Ying's article, "Feng Xiaogang and Chinese New Year Films," compares Feng's New Year films with Hollywood's high concept films. She follows Justin Wyatt's definition of "high concept" as "a particular type of narrative that is relatively straightforward, easily communicated, and readily comprehended" (Zhu 2007, 47), to argue that Feng's early New Year's films "defy the textual conventions of Hollywood blockbuster films as well as Zhang Yimou's martial arts blockbusters, yet the evolution of Feng's New Year films in terms of narrative strategy witnesses a gradual move towards a high concept formula that is at the core of Hollywood and Zhang Yimou's blockbuster films" (Zhu 2007, 44). In order to elaborate her argument, she borrows Robert McKee's classical three-arc schema to argue that Feng's early New Year's films are low-concept films whose stories are based on mini-

plot ‘preferring open ending, internal conflict, and multi-protagonists,’⁸ or anti-plot ‘favoring coincidences, nonlinear time and inconsistent realities’⁹ that is opposite to the classical narrative of a high concept film. She describes Feng’s *A World Without Thieves* (2004) as a signal of his moving to high concept films. In this film, she argues, Feng breaks with his early episodic approach of storytelling. She then seeks to bring out Feng’s lack of social criticism, due to the conventions of the commercial film genre, by comparing Feng’s film to Li Yang’s art film, *Blind Shaft*. Her selection of Li Yang’s film is problematic, however, inasmuch as it does not consider the total film system which allows Li Yang to make radical art films for foreign consumption at the film festivals—indicating a politics of elitism as to who does and who does not see the film—in contrast to Feng’s attempt to make sure his films are seen by as many people as possible. By ignoring the politics inherent in the exhibition circuit, she exhibits her own blind spot to the material conditions that make possible the critical stance. In addition to analyzing narrative strategies of Feng’s New Year’s films, she also pays attention to the marketing strategy of Hollywood’s high-concept films in Zhang Yimou’s martial arts blockbusters, and argues that Zhang’s commercial films “more aptly [fit] the high concept style than most of Feng’s films” (Zhu 2007, 59). However, she ignores Feng’s marketing approach for his early films. She goes on to claim that Feng’s low-concept films touch upon many social issues and social transformations that have more cultural relevance to Chinese

⁸ Ying Zhu, "Feng Xiaogang and the Chinese New Year Films," *Asian Cinema* 18, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2007): 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 54

audiences than those of Zhang Yimou. But inasmuch as Chinese political culture often recycles historical episodes to make statements on contemporary matters, Zhang's commercial blockbusters cannot be said to be totally irrelevant to the contemporary concerns of Chinese audiences. Zhu's appropriation of the Hollywood high-concept vocabulary to discuss the Chinese film context is a little mechanical, but does help elucidate a dynamic in Feng's films, although her shifting of gears to discuss Zhang's films dilutes the focus of her argument.

Zhang Rui's dissertation-based book, *Cinema of Feng Xiaogang: Commercialization and Censorship in Chinese Cinema after 1989*, combines an account of the history of contemporary Chinese cinema and a case study of Feng's films. Building on Andrew Sarris and Janet Staiger's *auteur* theory and Stuart Hall's thesis, summed up in the phrase "the double movement of containment and resistance," she argues that "Feng is a unique *auteur*, who is making films under political and economic pressures in a post-socialist state while still striving to create works with a personal socio-political agenda."¹⁰ She correctly points out that Feng should be approached and interpreted within the specific social and political context of contemporary China. Although she traces some important events in the film industry in the 1990s and early 2000s, Zhang's historical narrative of the transformation of the Chinese film industry lacks depth of analysis. It is worth noting that all Chinese filmmakers are making films under political and economic pressure in the post-Mao China. The key is in Feng's

¹⁰ Rui Zhang, *The Cinema Of Feng Xiaogang: Commercialization And Censorship In Chinese Cinema After 1989* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 2.

response to that pressure: how does he approach social issues in his commercial films? She does not consider Feng in terms of his human agency, nor provide in-depth analyses of any of Feng's films; all her analyses of Feng's films follow the same pattern of presenting us with a description of the theme, plot, and characterization.

Stanley Rosen's "'The Wolf at the Door': Hollywood and the Film Market in China From 1994–2000" examines the relationship between Hollywood and China from the mid-1990s until late summer 2000.¹¹ The article falls into two parts. The first part focuses on Hollywood blockbusters' impact on the local film industry. He examines China's film policy of importing Hollywood blockbusters in 1994 in the context of the cultural situation at the time this policy was implemented. He analyzes Hollywood's success in the local market by looking at the star poll, popular magazines, discourse, market shares of the local market, and the relationship between the Chinese government and Chinese filmmakers (which he finds rich in contradictions). In the second part, Rosen examines Hollywood's frustration over its negotiations with the Chinese government. Hollywood's ambition to explore China's lucrative film market was continually frustrated by the government's administrative intervention. These interventions are embodied in its regulation of foreign investment in cinema construction, in its import quotas, its restriction on the distribution of Hollywood's own films and its granting monopoly power to the China Film Corporation over the import of foreign films, as well as the state's unwillingness to crack down on China's pirated video compact disks (VCDs) and DVDs.

¹¹ Stanley Rosen, "The Wolf at the door: Hollywood and the Film Market in China," in *Southern California and the world*, ed. Eric John Heikkila and Rafael Pizarro (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002).

All of these factors affect Hollywood's interests, going beyond the receipts for its blockbusters' performance in the local film market. His article provides a valuable document for future research on the Chinese film industry. In particular, the article provides a useful view of the American perspective on the Chinese film industry, as well as documenting the trade negotiations between China and Hollywood. Rosen noticed that Hollywood's invasion of China caused intense debates among filmmakers about what kind of Chinese films should be made by Chinese filmmakers to beat Hollywood blockbusters. His suggestion, which, it must be remembered, antedated the rise of China's own blockbusters, is that the survival of Chinese films depends on moving in Feng Xiaogang's direction.

The relationship between Hollywood and China is also taken up in the paper written by Wan Jihong and Richard Kraus, "Hollywood and China as Adversaries and Allies."¹² Their paper focuses on the Chinese film industry after 1993, the turning point in terms of infrastructural reform in the Chinese film industry. They analyze the Chinese film industry's competition with Hollywood as a process of learning from and cooperating with Hollywood. Although Hollywood is a rival for the Chinese film industry, and competes with the domestic film industry, it is also possible, they argue, for the film industry to cooperate with Hollywood in terms of improving technology and pushing the government to relax political control and to fight piracy and other unfair business practices.

¹² Jihong Wan and Richard Kraus, "Hollywood and China as adversaries and Allies," *Public Affairs* 75, no. 3 (2002): 419–434.

There was no book-length study on contemporary Chinese film industry in the age of globalization before 2003, when Zhu published her groundbreaking book, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System*.¹³ Most scholars focused on the social, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of Chinese cinema and confined their approaches to cultural studies or textual analysis. Zhu adopts the integrative approach of the institutional school of political economy, combined with cultural studies, to give us a striking analysis of the film industry in transition from its position in a planned economy to its position in a market economy, which was the movement that the film industry underwent from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s. She argues that the crisis of the Chinese national cinema is fundamentally an economic issue in the context of cultural globalization. Thus, Zhu's book touches upon the economic forces, politics, and cultural production that comprise a more complex picture of Chinese cinema. She suggests that Hollywood's classic narratives have been part of Chinese cinema's tradition since the 1920s and 30s—an assertion that ignores the huge impact of European art film and Soviet film culture on the fifth generation directors. She particularly focuses on the fifth generation directors to demonstrate how, during this transformation, Chinese filmmakers were struggling with Hollywood blockbusters as the institutional embodiment of market pressure by making art cinema that could respond to the demands of cultural consumers. Zhu's focus, however, is exclusively centered on major filmmakers such as Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Zhang Yimou, while ignoring other filmmakers, such as the

¹³ Ying Zhu, *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003).

younger generation directors and the commercial filmmakers of the period. Moreover, her comparison of Chinese cinema in the 1990s with that of the 1920s and 30s is either evidence of a flaw in her research or, more likely, an unsuccessful contrarian bid to revamp the orthodox reading of Chinese film history.

My thesis is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, I describe the film landscape of the 1990s in China: the top-down movie reform movement and related movie policies, the Hollywood blockbuster invasion, and the mode of production of the Chinese film industry. Against this background, I analyze how Feng as a successful television screenwriter and director calculatedly crossed over to the film industry in order to make commercial films--an unusual move in an industry in which (unlike the American film industry) there are rigid protocols determining the division of labor between television and film. As a result of China's movie policies during the late 1990s, the prosperity of independent film companies created financial possibilities for commercial film production in general, and for filmmakers like Feng in particular. I examine how Feng calculatedly moved toward the New Year's film production, and thus created a new position for himself in the cultural hierarchy Chinese cinema.

The second chapter is a case study of Feng's first New Year's comedy, *The Dream Factory*. I examine the revival of the Chinese carnivalesque spirit in traditional festivals and cultures that is embodied in this film, and how Feng uses pastiche and parody to implicitly express social criticism while providing entertainment. The third chapter explores Feng as a unique *auteur* by examining the style, genre, and popularity of

his films. In this chapter, I focus on his early New Year's films, that is, his New Year's comedies from the 1990s, which are his trademark productions in his filmmaking career. This chapter particularly attempts to understand the popularity of his films in China.

Chapter Two

Feng Xiaogang, Independent Film Companies, and the Chinese Film Industry

In the Late 1990s

Introduction

Feng signifies a new generation, a different breed of commercial filmmakers, and his operation represents a new filmmaking practice in China. In contrast to previous generations, Feng crossed over from the more popular media, television, and worked with film companies unaffiliated with the state-controlled studios on the less prestigious genre – comedy. Feng’s rapidly rising career and social status indicates the significant change in the ethos and organization of the Chinese film industry in response to the growing influence of intensified market forces and globalization. In this chapter, I place Feng’s career into the larger context of industrial transition to understand the dynamic relationship between individual filmmaker and the system of Chinese cinema in the era of economic reform and media conglomeration. The transformation of Chinese film industry created a favorable environment and enabled Feng to cross over from the television industry to the film industry. Feng, overcoming obstacle and changing the rule of the game in the field of Chinese cinema with entrenched players with vested interest, has been a rising power to be reckoned with in a time of realignment of politics, art, and capital in post-socialist China.

The Chinese Film Industrial Crisis in the late 1980s and the 1990s

Feng's personal development had a close relation to the development of the film industry, so it is necessary to assess the film industry in the past decade in order to assess Feng's work. The Chinese film industry entered a downturn in the late 1980s and the 1990s. During this period, the state began to marketize the film industry, but their conservative reform measures did not engender the anticipated results due to the state's ambivalent attitude towards the film industry and its political control over the industry. The Chinese national film industry was established in 1953 and modeled after a Soviet-style centrally planned economy, operating from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s. Consistent with the nationalized studio system, production, distribution, and exhibition of Chinese cinema were all planned according to the CCP's production target (Zhu 2003). To achieve the state's goal, the state provided the studios with production funds, purchased film prints from the studios, and then distributed to theatres in towns and cities for screening. The Film Bureau, directly under the PRC Ministry of Culture, was responsible for the industry's management and planning (Du 2004). The state was therefore the principal player and planner in the Chinese film market. Under this highly centralized and planned economic system, the film studios did not interact with the film market. Therefore, the studios took no monetary risks, and the filmmakers did not have to consider the film market and audience. Consequently, the industry was entirely state-directed and as a result, became a propaganda machine that produced mainstream propaganda films that helped disseminate Communist ideology and ensured its political control.

Meanwhile, the film industry confronted a great threat—the arrival of television in the mid 1980s. Like the U.S. and many other countries, television replaced film as the Chinese people's primary entertainment since the late 1980s. As a result of television's popularity, Chinese cinema lost 5.2 billion moviegoers in 1984 (Liu 2005), and Chinese film attendance dropped from 2.1 billion to 4.5 billion from 1982 to 1992 (Rosen 2002). Additionally, Chinese people had far more entertainment choices, such as video and karaoke bars, due to an increase in disposable income. Therefore, there is no denying that Chinese cinema had lost its status as the most popular entertainment form in China and had entered into a recession.

To halt the decline of the film industry, the tidal wave of infrastructural reform began to touch the film industry in the late 1980s when the state launched a campaign to boost the marketization and decentralization of the film industry. The sixteen state-owned film studios that seven of them are in Beijing and others are located in other big cities, were turned into independent legal entities in market competition, but they were still not real players in the marketplace given that they were not granted distribution rights for their own films. Simultaneously, the state cut off financial backing with the exception of those films involving revolutionary themes. In the interim, an unchanged flat rate policy remained. The state-controlled Chinese Film Export & Import Corporation (CFEIC) bought film prints from the studios at a flat rate, which engendered the studios' awkward status in the marketplace. Under the centralized studio system, the studios neither accrued greater financial benefit from popular films nor suffered financially from unpopular ones. As a result, the studios never developed a profit-centered culture. Furthermore, in the

distribution-exhibition sectors, the state's reform measures only limited raising ticket prices in order to enhance box-office revenues, as well as dismantling the monopoly held by the CFEIC in favor of granting distribution rights to local distributors. Due to the state's top-down policy and conservative measures, the three sectors' original equilibrium had been destroyed and the real market-oriented studio system has not been set up. In other words, the original integration between production, distribution, and exhibition had been deconstructed, but the new market-centered synergy among the three sectors was nowhere in sight.

Apart from the financial crunch caused by the inefficient structural adjustments in the production, distribution, and exhibition sectors, the state was still engaging in serious film censorship. Politics has always controlled the operation of the Chinese film industry, although in different periods the state has granted filmmakers differing degrees of autonomy. It is worth mentioning that the 1996 Changsha Conference was a step backwards for the marketization of the film industry. This film conference was held in Changsha to discuss ways of improving the quality of Chinese cinema. At this conference, some films with sexual and violent themes were criticized, while Chinese cinema's social and pedagogical function were re-emphasized. Accordingly, producing propaganda films became a safe priority after the 1996 Changsha conference. Many of them were about socialist heroes and biographies of socialist leaders, such as *Da Zhuan Zhe* (1996), *The Opium War* (1997) and *Roaring across the Horizon* (1999). However, Chinese audiences stayed away from these films, and ticket sales came mainly in the

form of purchases of group tickets and administrative demand. In other words, the state took on the role of the consumer by creating artificial demand for these films.

Serious censorship, coupled with the financial crisis, dealt heavy blows to the film directors' dynamics and artistic creativity. Most talented directors insisted on controlling over the production of their films. For instance, the fifth generation directors Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, chose overseas investment and distribution. Their artistic achievement in the international arena, such as Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984) and *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), also lured younger talent to follow in their footsteps and turn to international film festivals for publicity, financial backing, and distribution. Presence in international film festivals became the quickest way to accumulate symbolic capital and pursuing various festival awards became an art standard in the field of Chinese cinema. Given art films' political subject matter and operation outside the state-controlled film production system, those films of the fifth and the sixth generation directors who initially the graduates of BFA in 1989 and later include younger directors from the BFA and the Central Drama Institution, were rendered inapproachable to the Chinese common audience.

It is not surprising to see that the whole industry exhibited a polarized hierarchy in film production in which the levels were determined by the political, cultural, and economic prestige accrued by the makers of propaganda films on one end, and of art films and underground films on the other. Commercial cinema was at the bottom of the

hierarchy in Chinese cinematic production, which bore the double constraint of insufficient financial backing and political censorship that created production value problems and directly influenced film quantity and quality. Hence, commercial films were allocated the lowest status in the hierarchy. Yet, they also possessed the most potential in the marketplace since the reforms had, after all, called for an acceleration of marketization. Theoretically, the purpose of this increase was to attract the largest audience segment.

It is clear that Chinese cinema provided little choice for the Chinese audiences at the time. Consequently, the huge film market was soon dominated by Hollywood blockbusters when the state agreed in 1994 to import ten Hollywood blockbusters per year based on the 50-50 box-office split agreement (Rosen 2002). The initial purpose of the policy was to attract the audiences back to movie theatres. However, returning audiences and box-office revenue could not revive the film industry. Box-office revenue did not flow to the film studios and, more importantly, the propaganda-style films were not competitive with Hollywood films, further impairing the film industry. Political censorship and the shortage of production capital make it difficult for Chinese cinema to compete with Hollywood blockbusters. Furthermore, Chinese filmmakers' principle of "art for art's sake" and elite film education make them unready for and disdainful of commercial film production. For instance, Zhang Yimou once looked down upon commercial film production, while he and Gong Li were cast as the protagonists in a Hong Kong commercial film *Qin Yong* (1989). After the film was done, he even refused to dub for the film. He later explained the reason why he participated in this film was

because they only wanted to be together and dispel rumors about their relationship.¹⁴ Wang Quanan, won the Golden Bear award for Best Film for the movie *Tuya's Marriage* at the Berlin international festival in 2007, expresses his thoughts on commercial film: "when China first started raising interest in commercial film, there were no expert directors who had studied it. The market was forming, and talent and the cultivation of talent required time. It's difficult for people to depart from their background and education. My worth is not in shooting commercial film. I wouldn't be able to do it well."¹⁵ Undeniably, almost all Chinese filmmakers grew up under the centralized film system or were educated in European-art-inspired Beijing Film Academy. Either they were not willing to commit to commercial cinema production, or not knowledgeable about how to make competitive commercial films. Feng Xiaogang, a television screenwriter and director, is an avant-garde figure dedicated to making commercial cinema. The horizontal integration of television and film industries in the mid 1990s provided him with the opportunity to cross-over and become involved in commercial film.

¹⁴ Yi Lu, "Zhang Yimou wants to fight with Hollywood blockbusters for the market," *Shidai Business Newspaper*, December 18, 2005, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/s/m/2005-12-18/0618932379.html> (accessed November 26, 2007).

¹⁵ Megan Shank, "Last Word with Wang Quan'an," <http://www.meganshank.com/translations/last-word-wang-quan%E2%80%99an/> (accessed November 26, 2007).

The Integration of Television and Film Industries

Among television talents, no one in the last decade made the transition into the Chinese film industry more successfully than Feng Xiaogang. His successful cross-over from television into the film industry is undoubtedly a result of the state's policy of the horizontal integration of television and film industries at the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s. Under the planned economic system and the centralized film system, it would have been impossible for Feng to cross the boundary between the two industries to become a film director. Both industries were administrated by the state but had their own human resource management system. Any talent who wanted to change his/her job and entered into the other industry had to go through bureaucratic procedures. In addition, both industries also had their own talent training institutions. Beijing Film Academy, which was founded in 1956, provided the film industry with various talents, while Beijing Broadcasting Institution (now referred to as Communication University of China), which was established in 1959, trained talent for the television industry. Both of these institutions assigned their graduates to various television stations and film studios, respectively.

In the arena of film production, film studios were comprised of film directors from the BFA or apprentices trained by the studios. For the studio directors, the chances of directing a film depended on their age and experience. Sometimes, the leader of the state directly assigned an experienced director to make a special propaganda film. This talent hierarchy lasted many years in the studios under the centralized system until the

Guangxi film studio first broke the rules and gave an opportunity to the young director of the fifth generation, Zhang Junzhao. He collaborated with the cinematographer, Zhang Yimou, to make the first flagship film of the fifth generation, *One and Eight* (1983), which shocked the film industry with its fresh visual style. Since then, some studios began to break the talent hierarchy and provided opportunities to the young directors who just graduated from the BFA, thereby intriguing a peak period of Chinese art film production in the mid 1980s, represented by Zhang Junzhao (*One and Eight*, 1983), Zhang Yimou (*Red Sorghum*, 1987) and Chen Kaige (*Yellow Earth*, 1983).

At the end of the 1980s, the popularity of television and the decline of the film industry produced antagonistic competition between the two industries. In fact, when television was in its infancy, the industry needed a large amount of professional talent and production facilities, but the film industry refused to collaborate, damaging the first chance to take up the television market. It is obvious that the Chinese film industry shared Hollywood major studios' early uneasy response to television and missed the opportunity to have a stake in the television market. It is worth mentioning that unlike Hollywood, both industries are the state-owned industries, and they did not have the autonomy to take action towards or against the horizontal integration.

The mandated horizontal integration first came in the early 1990s, and its purpose was to support the film industry through television and cease the film industry from declining. In the early 1990s, there was a series of mergers. In 1993, the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television decided to let the state-controlled CCTV take over Central

Newsreel & Documentary Film Studio. Beijing Science & Education Film Studio and Agricultural Film Studio of China merged with CCTV in 1995. The former specialized in newsreels and propaganda documentaries, while the other two studios specialized in producing films about science, agriculture, and education. These three studios were the products of the planned economic system. In the 1980s, the state completely financed these three studios, and their films usually lasted 20 minutes and were shown before a feature film in movie theatres. As the marketization of the film industry, these films had already lost their market and no longer were released in the theatres. These studios made most of their programming or documentaries through television techniques and broadcast via television. As a result, those mergers did not truly realize the purpose of supporting the film industry, which was producing feature films.

An important step toward the horizontal integration was the establishment of the Movie Channel (CCTV-6). In 1995, the Movie Channel came into existence and was formally launched on January 1, 1996, broadcasting films and relevant film programming. Although CCTV runs the Film Channel (China Central Television) Network, the film industry provides resources. Since then, the film industry has begun to penetrate the television industry through labor, capital and production. Most important, CCTV-6 opened the second market for film distribution. At the beginning, all of CCTV-6's production funds came from presold advertising time. The films that CCTV-6 are broadcasting included foreign films they bought, TV movies they made, and Chinese films licensed by the studios. CCTV-6 owned the largest collection of Chinese films—up

to 4000—and 95% of Chinese films’ television broadcasting rights within fifty years.¹⁶ From the best year, CCTV-6 paid license fees over 600,000 yuan to film studios for the copyright of Chinese films which the station broadcasted, and it had invested more than 200,000 yuan for film production.¹⁷ CCTV- 6 invested 30 million yuan every year to produce their own film programming and documentaries about film.¹⁸ BFA’s students and studios’ filmmakers become the main force in providing the CCTV-6 with programming. Currently, there are 2.5 billion Chinese viewers watching the CCTV- 6, and it is ranked second in the CCTV Network, outranked only by CCTV-1, the primary channel of the CCTV Network.

In addition, the movie channel provided film talent with opportunities to produce small budget television movies and to cross-over between the two industries. Under the conditions of the shortage of film production and the decreasing of film quantity, television movies gave a lot of young film talents an opportunity to hone their skills and accumulate experience through making TV movies and television programming. In general, each TV movie only needs 500,000 yuan with a standard digital video camera. All production cost will be compensated by means of TV advertising. Clearly, the

¹⁶ Kang Xie, “An Abstract from the interview with the head of CCTV-6,” Oct 16, 2006, www.gio.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=34739&ctNode=3444 (accessed November 26, 2007).

¹⁷ Ying Zhu. *Chinese Cinema during the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003), p85

¹⁸ Kang Xie, “An Abstract from the interview with the head of CCTV-6,” Oct 16, 2006, www.gio.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=34739&ctNode=3444 (accessed November 26, 2007).

boundaries between the two industries are disappearing and limits on talent cross-over are less difficult. With the continuous decline of film production, some studios already realized the importance of the television market and began to produce television dramas that were becoming main resources of revenue for the film studios. For example, Xiaoxiang Studio produced and distributed up to 170 episodes of television drama every year. As a result, there was an obvious migrating trend in which filmmakers humbled themselves and were participating in television production for a living. With the exception of those world-famous directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige who have proven that they can attract overseas investment, most directors had trouble finding film production capital and had to turn to the TV industry to make TV dramas and TV programming. Of this group, the most notable are Zhang Junzhao, Hu Mei, Yin li, and Xiao Feng, who are the fifth generation directors and the classmates of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige.

Although most of film directors and other film professionals had to turn to television production for a living, television as a new medium still occupied an inferior status in the eyes of the film industry. In 1998, there occurred a trend of mergers in the field of education as a result of reform in education system. Beijing Film Academy was proposed to merge with Beijing Broadcasting Institution. In order to maintain its international reputation and education style, Beijing Film Academy argued with the state many times, refusing to merge with Beijing Broadcasting Institution. The internal debate among film scholars on this matter within the Beijing Film Academy and the film industry lasted several years. In 2002, BBI changed its name to the Communication

University of China and set up its own college of Television & Film, finally ending this long-time debate, and Beijing Film Academy maintained its independence.

All in all, the integration of the two industries provided a favorable environment for talent cross-over between the two industries. However, most of the migration happened from the film industry to the TV industry but not the other way around. Feng Xiaogang defied this trend and is the only television director so far who has successfully maneuvered from television to the film industry. His switch came at a point of crisis in the commercial film sphere where there was an urgent need for popular films – films that could generate a solid profit stream – and pass through the rather narrow conditions laid down by political censorship.

Into Commercial Film Production

Feng took a different route from his peers to enter the film industry. How could he successfully defy the trend of labor cross-over between the two industries although he does not have any professional training in the film industry? Bourdieu's notions of capital and habitus are useful to analyze Feng Xiaogang's position-takings in the field of Chinese cinema. Bourdieu points out, "As a rule those richest in economic, cultural and social capital are the first to move into the new position" (Bourdieu 1993, 68). According to Bourdieu, capital can take a variety of different forms and mainly four types of capital: economic capital (wealthy, property), social capital (network, social resources), cultural

capital (knowledge, education credentials, skill, and family inheritance), and symbolic capital (prestige, honor) (Bourdieu 1986, 243).

Before entering the film industry, Feng had already accumulated social, symbolic and economic capital through his earlier experiences as a screenwriter and director in the television industry. Without any professional training, however, Feng was lucky enough to have a creative association with Zheng Xiaolong and Wang Shuo, two influential figures. Zheng was a famous television & film screenwriter and the head of Beijing Television Station Arts Center. Wang was an influential and controversial novelist. This is an instance of what Bourdieu meant by social capital, “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1986, 248). The network Feng created for himself is quite crucial to his successful career as a television screenwriter and later a director in the television industry. As he said, “Without Zheng Xiaolong and Wang Shuo, I won’t be able to have today’s achievement.”¹⁹ It is reasonable to conclude that it was Zheng and Wang, who discovered Feng’s potential artistic talent. Thus, they were very important figures in Feng’s career. Feng collaborated with Zheng as a second screenwriter on two film screenplays, *Unexpected Passion* (1991) and *After Separation* (1992). Both films earned nominations, including Best Film Screenplay, at the 1992 and 1993 Golden Rooster film festivals in China, the most

¹⁹ Wei Zhou, "Feng Xiaogang is not a Silent Lamb but is a Starving Wolf," *Jiangmen Daily*, December 22, 2004, http://e.jmnews.com.cn/disp.aspx?sid=%7B9EAD59769EBB074F0E0A086481258830%7D&data_id=47560 (accessed December 2, 2006).

prestigious film festival in China.²⁰ Then, Zheng introduced Feng to Wang Shuo. Feng began to collaborate with Wang on the TV comedy serial *Stories from the Editorial Board* (1992). This serial touches upon many social hot issues rather than political issues in the 1980s and makes mildly sarcastic comments on them, raising some debates among the authorities in the TV station, but eventually passed the internal censorship. The serial provided the audiences with a good outlet and its humorous and witty dialogue knocked audience dead. It was not surprising to see that this popular TV serial won Best TV drama at the 1992 Golden Eagles, the most prestigious TV award. The fields of television and film began to notice Feng's talent for screenwriting. In 1993, Feng and Zheng Xiaolong co-directed the TV serial *Beijingers in New York*, which helped establish Feng's career as a successful director and screenwriter. The serial recounts Beijingers Wang Qiming and his wife Guo Yan work through the American dream in New York, which is based on the novelist Cao Guilin's own immigrant story. The screenplay of *Beijingers in New York* was co-written by Wang Shuo, Cao Guilin, and Feng Xiaogang. To produce this drama serial, the Beijing Television Art Center borrowed the loan from bank, and made completely in New York City. The drama was a huge commercial success, and earned accolades for Zheng and Feng. *Beijingers in New York* won Best Long TV Drama at the 1993 Golden Eagles, making Feng a famous figure in the field of

²⁰ Xinyu Zhang and Hongyan Zhang, "Humor is a Sin," in *Yangmou, Like the Gentle Slap in the Face* (Beijing: Dongfeng Publishing, 2005), http://www.gmw.cn/content/2006-01/17/content_357308.htm (accessed December 2, 2006).

Chinese television. It is safe to conclude that Feng had acquired symbolic power in the field of Chinese television that benefited his future cross-over to the film industry.

The most important step Feng took to overcome the boundary between the two industries was the launch of Good Dream Film & TV Production Company with Wang Shuo on September 13, 1993.²¹ It was one of the earliest independent film companies. In particular, it was quite rare in the early 1990s that television screenwriters owned a television and film company. So, Feng created himself a practical channel to break into the film industry as an independent producer and director. His directorial debut, *Gone Forever with My Love* (1994), was the first film of the company, but this romantic film was a box-office flop and critical failure. Disappointed by his first attempt, he went back to TV production and directed the TV serials, *Chicken Feathers on the Ground* (1994) and *The Dark Side of the Moon* (1996), realist works exposing corruption in the government work unit and describing the lives of intellectual criminals, respectively. *Chicken Feathers* is based on the novels *Work Unit* and *Chicken Feathers* written by the famous writer Liu Zhenyun. These two novels were marked as representatives of new realism in Chinese literature. The serial centers on a high-headed university graduate, Xiao Lin who finds himself at the bottom of the power hierarchy in a government work unit. He has to deal with the mundane rituals of work relationships, and faces the difficulty and complexity of daily life outside of work unit that conspire to diminish his sense of pride. He was gradually tainted by the government official culture (*guan chang*

²¹ Xiaogang Feng, *I Dedicated My Youth to You* (Beijing: Changjiang Wenyi Press, 2003), 80.

wen hua) and into the philosophy of work unit to improve his living condition. Through the character Xiao Lin, the drama reflects the majority of Chinese's daily life and their live conditions in the 1980s and the 1990s, representing Chinese's psychological changes profoundly affected by China's economic reform.

Dark Side of the Moon was Good Dream's last television project before it went into bankruptcy, and was adapted from the novel of the same name written by the novelist Wang Gang. The drama describes two intellectuals, Mou Ni and Li Miao, who come to Beijing to pursue a successful and rewarding career. However, after they enter the society, they realize that they are just powerless who are located at the bottom of the social hierarchy and did not see any chance to succeed. Their inflated desires toward money and success and high expectation on themselves lead them to take risky shortcuts of being bilkers in order to change their fates and get rich quickly. In order to reach their goals, Mou Ni and Li Miao socialize with various figures at the expense of their dignities, affection, and even sex. Finally, Mou Li ends up in the jail and awaiting execution. The serial represents the impacts of the economic reform and the *xiahai* phenomena on intellectuals. The term, *Xia Hai*, means 'wading into the sea', which referred to Chinese people who left the security of the state-owned work unit (*Dan Wei*), and plunged into business to make money in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The serial exposes the corruption of the national bank system and the protagonists' moral embarrassment and the struggling of being a double role of as an intellectual and a businessman as well. *Chicken Feathers on the Ground* and *Dark Side of the Moon* revealed the dark sides of

the economic reform and could not pass the censorship. Both serials were practically banned from broadcasting by the Beijing Television Station.

Good Dream's film projects, *I am Your Dad* (1995) and *Miserable Life* (1996), also had the same bad luck as the above-mentioned drama serials. *I am Your Dad* (1995) is a faithful adaptation from Wang Shuo's own controversial novel of the same name and is Wang's first and only directorial effort to date. Feng helped adapt Wang's novel for the screen. However, the film was banned by the state and never officially released in China until 2000, the year when the film smuggled into Switzerland and premiered at the 2000 Locarno International Film Festival and also won the festival's top prize, the Golden Leopard.²² *I am Your Dad* describes the tumultuous relationship between a widowed father, Ma Linsheng, and his teenage son, Ma Che. Ma Linsheng, who experienced the Cultural Revolution, is chairman of the labor union in a small work unit. He tried to retain his authority as a father when dealing with the conflicts between him and his son, who grew up in a new age. However, his authority always is challenged by his son. He alternates different ways to be bond with his son, but his son still wants to break away from him by finding him a new wife. He is unable to bridge the gap between him and his son. Although the film is mainly a story of the relationship between a father and his son, it also indirectly criticizes bureaucrats and bureaucracy.

One year later, Feng wrote the movie screenplay *Miserable Life*. However, on the tenth day after the film began to shoot, the government's film censorship board informed

²² "Award for banned Chinese film," BBC news, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/878549.stm> (accessed November 26, 2009).

Feng that they did not approve the film screenplay and the film shooting should be stopped. Feng mentioned the reason why this film was shut down in his biography by citing the official document of censorship about the film, "Since cinema plays a leading role in circulating social values and moral regulation, *Miserable Life* nonetheless involved extramarital love affair and sex that should not be described with a favor tone in the film. The screenplay was not approved. We suggest to change the subject of the film or to make radical changes. Even though the film finished its production, the state won't be able to release the film."²³ As the social environment was more open and more tolerant toward extramarital lover affair, Feng revised this screenplay four year later and gave it a new name "A Sigh" (2000). *I am Your Dad* and *Miserable Life* cost Good Dream 5 million *yuan*, but did not see any financial returns.

The censored television serials and the shutdown of the films were a huge blow to Feng's career and frustrated his pursuit of the neo-realist aesthetic. Good Dream and Feng soon became box-office poison in the fields of television and film. Individual investors began to stay clear of Feng Xiaogang.²⁴ Good Dream slumped into a crisis and finally ended in bankruptcy. Feng at this point was hemmed in by censorship, a lack of individual investors, and his embarrassing position between the two industries.

²³ Feng Xiaogang. *I Dedicated My Youth to You* (Beijing: Changjiang Wenyi Press, 2003), 87-88.

²⁴ Xiaomin Zhong, "Feng Xiaogang's Company is in a Crisis," Modern Express, http://chuangye.cyol.com/content/2006-03/09/content_1331955.htm(accessed December 2, 2006).

At this crucial moment, the head of Beijing Film Studio, Han Sanping who wanted to produce commercial films that could pass through censorship and earn cash at the box-office, appreciated Feng Xiaogang's comedy talent demonstrated in his previous comic television serial, and assigned him to direct a comedy film for the Lunar New Year of the year. Feng grasped this opportunity, becoming the first mainland director to direct a New Year film.²⁵ Why did Feng choose the culturally-deprived commercial film to resume his filmmaking career, instead of insisting on making realistic film or art film as did the fifth and the sixth generation directors? After all, the trajectory of the director Feng Xiaogang, whose televisions and films were censored, would seem to predict moving in the direction already shaped by other fifth and the sixth generation directors. However, as a non-professionally trained and cross-over film director who lacked the international recognition, it would be very difficult for him to make films out of the studio system and target the international festivals. So, in the face of financing trouble, censorship, and the opportunity, it was his disposition that determined that he was more likely to compromise with film censors. It was also Feng's professional trajectory that shaped his actions and enabled him to take advantage of comedy that he had become familiar with in his previous television works. More importantly, comedy relatively easily passes the censorship. For instance, *The Dream Factory* was based on Wang Shuo's novella *You Are Not a Common Person* (1993). Feng was granted a cinematic

²⁵ Fada Aunt (pseudonym). "About New Year Films," <http://www.filmsea.com.cn/geren/article/200209260066.htm> (accessed Dec 2, 2006).

adaptation right of the book by Wang Shuo. In consideration of censorship, Wang reluctantly agreed at Feng's request that his name would not appear in the film since Wang was at that time a sensitive figure for the government. As a newcomer in the film industry who was eager to realize this project, Feng did not want to take a risk confronting the state on any sensitive content, potentially resulting in a ban of his second film. As a result, *The Dream Factory* did not grant Wang Shuo an authorship. Five years later, Feng declared in his biography that the film was adapted from Wang's *You Are Not a Common Person*.²⁶ Furthermore, in order to pass through the censorship, Feng adapted this novella into a positive story that leaved out sensitive characters and harsh sarcastic remarks, and changed the pessimistic views in the original novella.²⁷ Feng judges himself as "a person who can compromise easily. As a commercial film director, you will have to learn how to compromise."²⁸ He confessed to a reporter about why he chose to make commercial films, "I am a quite down-to-earth person because I suffered a double setback. Our TV dramas and films were banned in calendar years 1995 and 1996. I realized that there are some kinds of things you cannot resist, and there are some kinds

²⁶ Xiaogang Feng, *I Dedicated My Youth to You* (Beijing: Changjiang Wenyi Press, 2003), 105.

²⁷ Meng, Jing. "The People Who support Feng Xiaogang," Nov22, 2005, <http://www.lifeweek.com.cn/2005-12-01/0000113867.shtml> (accessed Dec 2, 2006).

²⁸ Xiaogang Feng, "Tide: Feng Xiaogang Gave a Surprising Speech," speech delivered on Mar, 21 2005 in Guangzhou in the conference "Chinese Language Cinema in the Background of One Hundred Histories - Crisis and Hope", <http://women.sohu.com/20050321/n224778365.shtml>(accessed Dec 2, 2006).

of things you can insist on. From this point of view, I am a realist.”²⁹ He was that kind of director who adjusted quickly to the commercialization of the film industry. He abandoned realism as the dominant aesthetic norm for New Year films, being neither confronting the state with sensitive subjects and contents, on the one hand, nor too responsive to the aesthetics for the audiences who have been his first concern. As he says, “There is one stance that I have to insist on is that my films are made for mass audience. I cannot give up mass audience just for critics or for myself.”³⁰

In addition, Feng’s unsuccessful experience as an entrepreneur helped him cultivate self-responsibility to film investors, “I have not only to make good movies but also profitable movies so that I have the courage to face the movie investors. I won the investors’ respect. There are not many movie investors for Chinese films. Most of them have been disappointed by Chinese films’ box-office performance.”³¹ Feng has no doubt become one of few Chinese film directors who do not need to worry about financial backing for his films since he has been keeping a pretty good reputation among film financing investors. In comparison, the majority of Chinese film directors, and in particular, the fifth and the sixth generation directors did not build a sense of financial

²⁹ Sanlian lifeweek. “Why did Feng Xiao Blaze His Own Trail? (Weishenmo Feng xiaogang Neng Kaipi Yitiao Xuelu?),” Nov 28, 2005, <http://club.job.sohu.com/r-reporter-16271-0-2-0.html> (accessed Dec 2, 2006).

³⁰ Feiyu Zi (pseudonym). “Interview Asian Star Feng Xiaogang,” NanFeng Daily, Dec 27, 2001, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/mc/2001-12-27/68262.html> (accessed Dec 2, 2006).

³¹ Longcheng Jin, *Box-office Star: The Films by Feng Xiaogang*, (Beijing: China Broadcast & Television Press, 2005), 133.

responsibility for their films, partly because they were cultivated by a centralized studio system in which the studios provided money for film directors, and partly because they were educated by the European-art-centered Beijing Film Academy that adores European art films and emphasizes film as an art. They most likely refused any compromise with the state, looked down on commercial film production, and emphasized artistic self-expression through film art. Furthermore, the achievement of the fifth generation directors helped canonization of the principle of 'art for art sake', which encouraged younger generation directors to follow their steps to target international film festivals instead of audiences. These directors thus did not have financial responsibility and audiences in their mind when making their own films. Consequently, most of their films could not break even and as a result made investors lose a lot of money.

In sum, Feng deviated from the classical path of the fifth and the sixth generation directors to achieve symbolic power and dedicated himself to a new mode of production and narrative system, that is, commercial film. Feng successfully revived his career as a film director by establishing the New Year film as a key commodity in the field of Chinese cinema. This strategy is an outcome of his habitus and careful calculation within the structure of the film industry.

New Year Film and Independent Film Companies

Feng's agency is significant for his cross-over and New Year film production during the transition of the film industry. Although the name most associated with the

New Year Film is Feng Xiaogang, the story of the New Year Film also involves the emergence of independent film companies (those owned privately), which created the space for financial investment in commercial cinema and allowed Feng, an independent director operating outside the state-owned film studio system, to develop his film projects. The state's movie reforms were designed to solve the industry's finance crisis by opening film up to private capital, which in turn gave the impetus for making films that were commercially successful, as opposed to the incentives that took precedence in the state film industry (propaganda, aesthetic quality, etc.). There had been sporadic independents involved in film production since 1985. However, most of them were small-scaled and short-lived companies or one-off independent productions. These independents films nevertheless had to carry a state-owned studio insignia. The turning point came in 1997, the year when the state began to speed up movie reform and encouraged independent companies to invest in film production. Since 1997, the state has been gradually granted qualified independents the legal status to produce, distribute, and exhibit films. In 2002, China finally lifted the bulk of its restriction on film production, and subsequently private companies and investors began to produce films independently without having to carry a state-owned studio insignia. Since then, there has been an even greater relaxation of the rules relating to independent film production, which has encouraged a flurry of independent companies.

The access of private capital to the film industry is without a doubt a significant leap forward in developing commercially viable films with high production values and stars, creating a commercial film culture within the film industry. The last time China hosted a

truly independent commercial film sector was back in the 1920s and the 1930s, the so-called golden age of Chinese studio commercial film, which benefited from the relaxation of censorship. However, the film industry today remains under state control, which means that it is closely overseen by the state, and suffers from private funding shortfalls, as the China national banking system is hesitant to loan money to independents for film production. Thus, independent film producers turned to private figures who could bring finance themselves, which made them vulnerable in the market, constrained their financial capacity and the risks they would take to pursue innovative commercial film. It was not until 2008 that several relatively large well-operated entertainment independents established relationships with China's banks, such as Huayi Brother, PolyBona Bona and Enlight Media.

Feng's New Year Films have been closely bound up to the struggles of the independents. Beijing Forbidden City Film Company and Huayi Brothers & Taihe Film Investment Company are the main investors for Feng's New Year films and ones of earliest beneficiaries of movie reform among independent film production companies. Coming from different backgrounds, these two independents took different route to their involvement in the production of New Year Films. Forbidden City financed Feng's the first two films *The Dream Factory* and *Be There or Be Square*. Later, Feng was put under contract as a director of Huayi Brothers, which invested in Feng's other films. Feng and these two independents have paved the way for successful commercial cinema production by cultivating the market for the New Year genre, which allowed them to employ fresh

marketing strategies, higher value modes of commercial film production and to vertically integrate production, distribution and exhibition in one studio package.

Founded on April 9, 1997, Beijing Forbidden City was in fact a semi-official film company consisting of a Production Department, a TV Drama Department, and Sanlian Distribution Company. The company received financial support from the Ministry of Cultural and Film Bureau and the Beijing Municipal Government, with stock holders that include Beijing TV station, Beijing TV Art Center, Beijing Art and Audiovisual Publishing House, and Beijing Municipal Film Company. Due to its special background, Forbidden City was the first film production company to be granted the rights of film production and distribution from the state.³² Of course, propaganda film became their production priority, and they ground out several high-quality propaganda films, such as *The Days without Leifeng* (1996) and *Going to School with Dad on My Back* (1998), the distribution of which was supported by the state in the form of purchases of group tickets and administrative demand. Even with government backing, box office receipts were still not good enough for the company to continue this line of films alone. Accordingly, the company decided to add commercial film to its portfolio, which came at a fortuitous moment for Feng, who was seeking financing backing for his film *The Dream Factory*, which was originally conceived as a Beijing Film Studio (BFS) project. BFS did not have the capital, however, to carry the costs alone. Forbidden City thus had the option to

³² Tao Chen, "The Secret of Forbidden City Film Company," *Caijing Magazine*, May 14, 2005, <http://www.caijing.com.cn/cns/gsyzy/other/1999/05/05/1141456.html> (accessed November 26, 2009).

finance Feng's screenplay as the company's the first commercial film project, co-producing the film with BFS. This film was released with 150 prints on Dec 20, 1997.

The Dream Factory's most significant contribution to Chinese commercial cinema lay in realizing the vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition. Forbidden City as a partially state-owned film company was able to practice a greater flexibility in all of these aspects of the film business, as compared to the rigid controls that made state-owned studio work both comparatively expensive and money losing. In China's Soviet-style state-own studio system, the vertical integration of production, distribution and exhibition was not a market formed vertical integration, since the three sections under state control were badly coordinated and depended, in effect, on subsidies at the ticket office end. Integration such as that seen in the New Year films had never happened before on any commercial or art film. The company nonetheless effectively took advantage of its special political situation and stock holders to integrate all three aspects of the film seamlessly. This effort of the vertical integration not only contributed to the box office milestone but also provided a model for Chinese commercial film production in general. For instance, when *The Dream Factory* was in the pre-production, the company organized eight meetings with the managers of Beijing's movie theaters and Beijing Xinyinglian Distribution Company, allowing the screenwriter and the producer to discuss the screenplay and its market potential. In these meetings, the theatre managers and distributors, who were very knowledgeable about moviegoers' entertainment needs, made suggestions that were incorporated into the screenplay, which, in all, was revised

eleven times³³. This kind of pre-production collaboration had never before been to a Chinese film production, and was unique in its emphasis on the popular tastes of the audience. More importantly, Feng and Forbidden City took full advantage of the scope provided by Beijing Xinyinglian Film Distribution Company, one of its investors, to prearrange the film's release date all over the country, thus guaranteeing the best schedules for the film release at the theatres.

Furthermore, the company cut ongoing production costs on *The Dream Factory* by introducing the Hollywood point system, whereby participants in the filming were given percentages-points-of box office revenues. Feng agreed to bear the risk with the company, and postponed taking his entire salary until after the film's box-office revenue passed five million *yuan*, at which point he took his fixed salary and began to derive his point share. This approach aligned the crew with the process of filming a commercially successful product.

Under the state-owned studio system, the studios did not launch marketing campaign to promote films, given that the state entirely controlled film production costs (thus deflating incentives for recouping costs), and controlled distribution as well. The ticket sales were often supported by local government institutions. This command and control system was theoretically unaffected by the question of demand, which undermined the need for marketing. *The Dream Factory* innovatively used marketing on the American

³³Ying Wu, Beijing Business Newspaper, Feb 25, 2008, <http://www.bbtnews.com.cn/whcy/channel/political39353.shtml>(accessed Dec 2008)

model, thus changing the entire Chinese film industry. Marketing has now become a recognized factor in movie making, crucial to box-office success. There is no doubt that *The Dream Factory*'s stunning box-office owed much to its Hollywood-style marketing strategies, although it still relied on the Beijing municipal government's official support to sustain itself during the production process. Feng and Forbidden City took full advantage of the venues provided by its stakeholders-Beijing TV station and Beijing Film Company (the local distribution company of the state-controlled Chinese Film Export & Import Corporation)—to promote the film through movie trailers, print advertisements and a campaign to publicize the film's release date all over the country. *The Dream Factory* was the first Chinese film to place big movie posters in the subways to promote the film. This strategy paid off. Additionally, Feng and the stars of the film also traveled the country promoting the film.

While these marketing strategies are commonplace in most of the world's commercial film industry, they were quite new for Chinese film production at that time. Chinese cinema has languished partly from the refusal to recognize the importance of marketing. The disincentive to spend money on marketing under the centralized film system had carried over as a legacy into the new, freer regime. For instance, a temporary upsurge of commercial film production around the 1980s had failed to ignite the industry partly because marketing was not part of the overall strategy, and partly because the independents received no support from the state. Chinese commercial films confined themselves to obsolete publicity methods, such as movie posters, up until the success of *The Dream Factory* showed how marketing campaigns could become an integral part of

the filming process. Feng continued to collaborate with Forbidden City on his second New Year film *Be There or Be Square* (1998), which grossed fifty million *yuan* mark at the box-office. This combination of opportunity, compromise with the state, and financial risk-taking paid off for Feng when his films smashed box office records, thus winning him the position in the field of Chinese cinema.

If Forbidden City's successful attempt at vertical integration owed much to the official support, Huayi Brothers consciously set itself up on the model of Hollywood-style vertical integration. This was the idea of its founder, Wang Zhongjun, who received his Masters degree in mass communication from an American university.³⁴ He then returned to China to pursue his goal of becoming the Chinese version of Jack Warner. Wang, along with his brother Wang Zhonglei, founded a small advertising firm in 1994 with the registration capital \$ 100,000. Within a few years, Huayi Brothers Advertising became one of the top 10 advertising firms in China. In 1997, Huayi Brothers Advertising began to expand into the field of film and television production. Huayi Brothers' interest in film production at the beginning was centered on art and propaganda film, not commercial. In Huayi Brothers Advertising's first film deal, they purchased the domestic distribution right of Chen Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1998), and the next year co-financed the famous art film director Jiang Wen's *Devils on the Doorstep* (1999) and Huang Jianzhong's propaganda film *My 1919* (1999). Huayi Brothers lost money on these three films, but they created a profile for themselves in the

³⁴ Biographical Dictionary of New Chinese Entrepreneurs and Business Leaders, <http://web.rollins.edu/~wzhang/nce.htm>(accessed Dec 2, 2006).

film industry that drew a lot of attention. In 2000, Huayi Brothers began its collaboration with Feng Xiaogang, putting him under contract to direct a certain number of films. As a result of this switch from distribution to film production, Huayi has gradually risen to be a power in the film industry. Wang Zhongjun recalled his decision in an interview in 2006: “When I signed a ten-year contract with Feng six years ago, nobody cared about Feng Xiaogang in the field of Chinese cinema, although Feng had had four films ranked the top three at the box-office four years in a row before 2000. But now, Feng is put into juxtaposition with the famous art film directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige.”³⁵ Wang’s remark unconsciously reveals one of the aspects of filming that is true in Hollywood as well as China: even commercial film is concerned with symbolic prestige. Half art, half industry, commercial filmmakers try not only to make money, but to garner respect from their peers. This, of course, inflects the film industry in unique ways. Feng and his later successful commercial films helped establish the company as one of today’s leading independent film production companies in China. Since then, Huayi Brothers’s film production priority tends to be commercial film.

Huayi Brothers’s overall business strategies are to take full advantage of their advertising resources and expand the company vertically and horizontally. Huayi Brothers and its advertising client *Taihe Real Estate Investment Company* co-invested in Feng’s *Sorry Baby* (2000), which took in 44 million *yuan* at the box-office and ranked

³⁵ Zhongjun Wang, “CEO of Huayi Brothers Speaks Out the Truth: Nobody Cares about Feng Xiaogang Six Years Ago,” October 26, 2006, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/s/m/2006-10-22/17541294477.html> (accessed Dec 2, 2006).

number one among the domestic Chinese films; they also co-invested in another box office hit, *A Sigh* (2001) that grossed 44 million *yuan* and rank number two at the box-office. The box-office success of these two films allowed the participants to establish a film and television production company in March 2000. The Huayi & Taihe Film Investment Company began with a total registration capital of 50 million *yuan*, with Huayi and Taihe each taking 50 percent of the total investment. Realizing the crucial importance of developing film talent, the Huayi Brothers set up *director workshops* for under contract directors, who include Feng Xiaogang, Lu Xuechang, Lu Chuan and Teng Huatao. Just as in classic Hollywood, the directors' contracts allow them to direct for the company only. In 2001, Huayi Brothers Talent Management was founded and has recruited a lot of celebrated actors and actresses, making it the one of the biggest talent management agencies. Moreover, in order to effectively distribute their films, Huayi Brothers and Xi'an Film Studio co-founded the *Xiying and Huayi Distribution Company* in Feb, 2003. All the Huayi's films enter the theatres through this distribution company. This was the first semi-private film distribution company (Xi'an Film Studio being state sponsored). Huayi Brothers nowadays has five subsidiaries with operations in film, TV drama, music, talent management, and advertising industries. *Huayi Brothers* in the new millennium has grown into a burgeoning conglomerate in an expanding media marketplace.

Due to Wang Zhongjun's American media education, Huayi Brothers' consciously followed and localized the Hollywood model in marketing and financing. They also imported some new Hollywood features. For instance, *Sorry, Baby* was the

first Chinese film to employ covert advertising, or product placement embedded in the film's scenes. While it is additional revenue for Hollywood films, in the case of *Sorry, Baby*, the revenue from product placement exceeded the film budget of 10 million yuan. The success of product placements as a revenue generator has encouraged its employment in Feng's later film: *A Sign* (JiTong IP card、Oulu Classical Housing), *Cell Phone* (Motorola cell phone、BMW), and *Big Shot's Funeral* (Sohu.com, PUMA). There are 11 brands that are embedded in *A Sigh*, including Buick car, Adidas shoes, KFC and so on,

Other film directors and their New Year films also borrowed this financing approach, such as *Crazy Stone* (2006, directed by Ning Hao) and *Call For Love* (2007, directed by Zhang Jianya). Furthermore, Huayi has copied the Hollywood use of the lucrative ancillary market, selling DVD and cable and network TV rights, as well as generating sales off CDs, posters, games, and other merchandising. When Huayi Brothers set up a RMB 30.5 million production budget for Feng's *A World without Thieves* (2004), they had already met the cost through ancillary market sales. Due to their advanced knowledge of commercial film production and Hollywood-style business model, Huayi Brothers is currently one of China's biggest independent film companies. In sum, Forbidden City and Huayi Brothers played significant role in Feng's filmmaking career, pioneering opening up a commercial space that Feng's New Year films filled.

Conclusion

Feng's successful cross-over and position-taking in the field of Chinese cinema benefited from the movie industry reform, but also attributed to his own habitus. Feng's successful New Year comedies caused many directors to make New Year films, but no competitor has equaled Feng's success yet. Feng Xiaogang has become a cultural phenomenon in the field of Chinese cinema. If the fifth generation directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige set a model for directors who are interested in art film, Feng Xiaogang no doubt has created the template for directors who want to make commercial film. Feng and his New Year films explored the potential market of Chinese commercial cinema and competed with Hollywood blockbusters in the local marketplace, but at the same time indirectly contributed to the transformation of the film industry from propaganda to commercial.

Chapter Three

The Carnavalesque Spirit and Utopia in *The Dream Factory*

Introduction:

This chapter examines Feng's first New Year comedy *The Dream Factory* (1997). Its tremendous and unexpected success created a sensation in almost moribund Chinese film industry at that point, having watched as the one-two combination of Hollywood blockbusters and Hong Kong commercial films achieved a virtual lock on the domestic market. *The Dream Factory* secured its position in contemporary Chinese movie history due to the innovation that went into its production and its subsequent box-office performance. This film's commercial success helped Feng find a genre model for his later New Year's comedies, which are all set in the milieu of the average everyday urbanite, treating with subtle humor the social issues arising from the wrenching transformations undergone by Chinese society in the post-Mao era. It is the combination of hot-button social issues and humorous dialogues in his films that attracted Chinese audiences back to theaters every year for his films at the New Year's season. A close reading of the film reveals Feng's skill in combining entertainment and social criticism. I argue that the film to some extent not only restores the carnivalesque spirit of traditional Chinese festivals and culture, but also effectively balances entertainment and social criticism through carnivalesque humor.

Chinese New Year, Spring Festival Eve Gala and the Carnavalesque in Chinese Traditional Festivals and Cultures

Feng is the first Chinese filmmaker in Mainland China to see the opportunity for making films that captured the Lunar New Year's holiday market. A New Year's film is thus made intentionally for the Chinese New Year's season, and mostly released around the Chinese New Year, that is, Spring Festival (*Chun Jie*). The Spring Festival is the most important and ceremonious traditional festival in China, just as Christmas Day to westerners. In addition to the Spring Festival, the Lantern Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival are also very important Chinese festivals. Each festival has its own traditional activities and customs. Due to their long histories, various festivals and customs have undergone radical changes. For example, it was during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) that traditional festivals were liberated from the taboos and superstitions which, originally, were their *raison d'être*. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368-1911), there collected around these festivals a variety of entertaining activities (Zhang 1993). Some of these still survive, such as the family reunion feast and setting off firecrackers. Others have become extinct in contemporary China. Hsi-Yuan Chen has examined the evolution of the Lantern Festival celebration during the Ming-Qing period. This festival is celebrated on the fifteenth day of the first month in the lunar year in the Chinese calendar; it represents the climax of the Spring Festival celebrations and symbolizes the completion of the transitional passage from the past year to a new one. According to Chen, the Festival used to be celebrated over several days, while the various social

activities associated with it are now confined to only one day. He (Chen 2004) argues that the carnivalesque can be observed in the celebration:

During the late imperial era, with official approval for lifting the curfew, places like the Lantern markets in the cities and the temple fairs in the villages became spectacles where people, regardless of gender, social status, or any other identities, were all allowed to enjoy the colorful night together. They were both actors and spectators on an open stage with shining lights above. Normally, the separation of night and day, the demarcation of urban and rural, the differentiation of elite and commoner, and the distinction between male and female constituted the order of everyday life in imperial China, as well as the basic ontological principles of Confucianism. Yet, the celebration of the Lantern festival was carnivalesque; people were encouraged to break the rules, cross the above-mentioned boundaries, and even turn them upside-down.

Chen also point out that in China, unlike what Bakhtin claimed about the separation of carnival and church traditions, the Lantern Festival was located at the intersection of official and folk celebration. “The political authority announced its respect for folk culture and customs on the one hand, while, on the other, trying to incorporate it into the political and social order. Although the Lantern festival is a national festival, the political authority is the participant, director and supervisor. As a matter of fact, we can observe that there was a dialectical tension and interdependence between the state and society here. The ruling class hoped to show the image of prosperity through the carnivalesque celebration of the Lantern festival” (Chen, 2004).

However, the carnivalesque elements in celebrations of the Spring Festival and the Lantern Festival disappeared from the landscape of Chinese cultural modernity, as the customs of the people adapted to the profound transformations taking place around them. Especially since the early 1980s, television began to

enter the common household domain, easily replacing film as the most popular entertainment. The Chinese Communist Party took full advantage of this new medium to promote national belonging, its own ideology, and the education of the masses (Zhao, 1998, 43). This cultural populism is achieved through the CCTV's Spring Festival Eve Gala that broadcasts every year since 1983 on CCTV from 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. in the morning to celebrate the Lunar New Year. CCTV is national state-run TV network and the sole legitimate producer of the gala. "The Spring Festival Eve Gala has been institutionalized as part of the ritual of the New Year celebration, and is regarded as 'indispensable for the Spring Festival culture itself' (Zhou 1997, 43). CCTV also produces the Lantern Festival Gala for the Lantern Festival's celebration and the Mid-Autumn Festival Gala for Mid-Autumn Festival every year. In addition to the family banquet, the typical Chinese family will assemble in front of the TV set in order to see the galas during these important festivals. It helps to strengthen the traditional centrality of the family, on the one hand, and to unify families into the "imaged community" of the Chinese nation on the other (Zhao 1998, 58).

Spring Festival Eve Gala is produced under government supervision and the themes of each year are defined by the official demands of the government. For example, in 1997, Hong Kong returned to China, the 15th Chinese Communist party Congress was held, and Ding Xiaoping died. All of those big events were reflected and emphasized in the 1998 Spring Festival Eve Gala (Zhao1998). All programs in the gala have to be approved by the censorship, including the

selections from directors, performers to various program and content designs, before they can appear on the air.³⁶ On the eve of the Lunar New Year, the day of the gala's live broadcast, the CCP's leaders and other high-rank officials sit on the front row, watching the performances with some especially selected guests or their images will be shown on the show if they do not show up. Of course, most people watch the program at home. In addition to CCTV's Spring Festival Eve Gala, other governmental agencies (such as the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China) also produce their own galas, which are shown on various television channels throughout the holiday. All are carefully designed to accord with the official ideology of the moment. While rank and hierarchy are still visible in these official celebrations, they are cast into the background by the general message that China is one big harmonious society, with which the audience is encouraged to identify. It is impossible to hear dissentient voices or to expose social problems during these celebrations. Without a doubt, the hierarchical and propagandizing nature of the gala dominates any moment of spontaneity, in conformity to the rules of what Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1984, 9) calls 'the official feast':

Actually, the official feast looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present. ... the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, and perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable. This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it. The true nature of human festivity was betrayed and distorted. But this

³⁶ "SARFT approved Zhang Xiaohai and Chen Linchun as the directors of the 2008 Spring Gala," August 16, 2007, <http://ent.sina.com.cn/v/m/2007-08-16/12011678497.shtml> (accessed Dec, 2008).

true festive character was indestructible; it had to be tolerated and even legalized outside the official sphere and had to be turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace.

However, the carnivalesque spirit was restored and represented by Feng in *The Dream Factory*. Since 1997, Feng has boldly provided the Chinese people with an alternative celebration, the New Year's film, which has quickly been absorbed into how the Chinese celebrate the holiday as a sort of counter-weight to the *Spring Festival Eve Gala*. Feng always casts Ge You, who is famous in China as a comedian, in a leading role. In effect, Ge has become the nation's carnival fool, leading us into the "imaginary carnival world" where we can witness the upside-down "second life" of his characters that all possess a shrewd everydayness, a commonness that is briefly transformed by the alchemy of carnivalesque humor. Fools (the clown or jester) have long been a presence in Chinese history and culture. In her book *Fools are Everywhere*, Beatrice Otto cross-culturally examines the court jester in the Middle East, China, Europe, India, Africa, and Americas. She argues that "the court jester is a universal character, more or less interchangeable regardless of the time or culture in which he happens to cavort—the same techniques, the same functions, the same license" (Otto 2001, xvi). According to Otto, the function of the Chinese court jester was, like that of his European counterpart, to mock, to ridicule the emperor, and to operate as a cautionary marginal figure, warning the ruler against the folly of pride, or unbalanced behavior. In the Chinese texts, the term jester is similar to actor or entertainer. Jesters are typically clever, roguish, libertine, irreverent, mocking, and witty, all of which can be seen in Ge You's roles. "The role of the court jester might be equated with a morality play or humorous version thereof as the

point of the jesters' remarks is to inform, reform, or inspire through love rather than fear,"³⁷ which is close to Bakhtin's carnivalesque humor. As Bakhtin points out, "Clowns and fools were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season" (Bakhtin 1984, 8). In addition, fools or clowns were common in other arts, such as Beijing Opera (Thorpe 2005) and primitive theatre (Yu 1989). In these two arts, fools not only entertained the audience, but exorcized the humors, the bad spirits. Even today, fools perform in local temple fairs during the Spring Festival and still provide the most popular performances, if the laughter of the audience is to be believed. Bakhtin's "free and familiar contact" (Bakhtin 1984, 10) is still alive in the local temple fairs, but is no longer the dominant aspect of the celebration.

All in all, the carnivalesque elements in celebration of traditional Chinese festivals have disappeared in the post-Mao era. The state employs cultural populism to reinforce social harmony and uses new media to avoid social problems. This is where Feng's New Year's films play an unexpected social role, providing an alternative celebration for the Chinese people, and bringing to the forefront the same social issues that are repressed in the official celebration. But in order not to suffer censorship from the government, Feng, like the imperial court fool, releases his serious messages in the light spirit of carnivalesque humor.

³⁷ Barbara B. Peterson, "Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World (review)," *Journal of World History* 14, no. 4 (2003): 557.

The Dream Factory: An Invitation to the Carnavalesque World

Thus, the tradition of the carnivalesque spirit was recaptured, consciously or unconsciously, by Feng. A close reading of *The Dream Factory* can help us recognize the distinctive carnivalesque features in the film, which, in its inversion of the lives of common people and the social hierarchy, points to the real harshness, injustice and humiliation of everyday life. Although Bakhtin never applied his concept of carnival and carnivalesque to any filmic text, some scholars, like Robert Stam, have done so – albeit, to western films. Carnival, according to Bakhtin, took place during the brief celebratory periods that came around every year in medieval times. This period of time might last for weeks or several months, depending on different areas and cultures. In his book *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1984, 10) describes the carnival:

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.

In other words, carnival was the time for the peasants, artisans and servants to release themselves from the official order and entertain themselves by mocking and breaking down social boundaries, albeit temporarily. This festivity, which combined renewal with decay, according to Bakhtin, implies the revolutionary spirit and carries with it a utopian hope for social change. Within carnival, all hierarchical distinction was

temporarily suspended through “free and familiar contact” and “crowning and uncrowning.” The carnivalesque spirit, as Kiner explains, “is political: it derides serious, official thought and behavior; it brought the high low” (Kinser 1990, X). Bakhtin’s conceptualization of carnival and the carnivalesque translates quite nicely into *The Dream Factory* as well. We can discern the trace of the carnivalesque spirit in the film in which social hierarchy is transcended and overturned through crowning and uncrowning, and the official life of the characters is replaced by a “second life” or “non-official life”, through dream fulfillment. The film leads actors and spectators into a carnival situation, into a popular culture of folk humor, into the boundless world of humorous forms (Bakhtin 1968, 4) as opposed to the official and serious tone of the *Spring Festival Eve Gala* and the discourse of social harmony it imposes through the media.

The film centers on four unemployed staff members of a film studio who operate a small service business, One Day Dream Trips, which surreptitiously uses the studio’s facilities to fulfill various dreams of various customers. The story is easily associated with the downturn of Chinese film industry, which left many employees of the state-controlled studios without jobs. However, the film is not just a reflection of the Chinese film industry, but contains a hidden criticism of everyday life, which is unfurled as we proceed through the film. The One Day Dream’s customers include: an self-employed individual (Ge Ti Hu) wants to be General George S. Patton; a gossip chef who desires to be the kind of hero who can keep secrets under torture; a man who, after a lifetime of bullying his wife, wonders what it would be like to experience his wife’s life of being bullied; a rich man who wants to eat “coarse food” because he is tired of social

banqueting; and a female movie star who wants to enjoy the happiness of being a common person who lives a normal life outside of the glare of the media.

With the help of the One-Day Dream team, these carnival characters release themselves from the social order and their official life order, thereby entering into a world of carnival celebration. Feng suspends or upends social hierarchies to take his carnival characters out of the total world of official life into a topsy-turvy imaginary world. One of important rituals in the carnival is to select a king and mock him and then uncrown him eventually during carnival (Bakhtin 1968, 81 & 197). Mocking authorities was part of the parodic humour of the carnival period. Parody was a highly important factor in carnivals, which is realized in the film through the postmodernist sense of the representation of parody and pastiche. In particular, *The Dream Factory* demonstrates a complex application of parody. Under Feng's manipulation, these parodies play themselves out on multiple levels, becoming strategies that bypass censorship to criticize, or mock certain social phenomena and certain kinds of people. I argue against what Jameson sees as the "bland" or "humourless" function of parody: "Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter" (Jameson 1990, 17). Instead, I would like to argue that the film is stylized by what Hutcheon terms "critical parody" (Hutcheon, 1989, 93) and "complicitous critique" (Hutcheon 1989, 106,151). Parodic self-reflexivity and its implicit content of political critique and historical awareness are emphasized, in Hutcheon's view, in that "through a

double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (Hutchron 1989, 93). Gehring also points out, "Parody is the most palatable of critical approaches, offering insights through laughter" (Gehring 1999, 3). Likewise, Joe Lee Davis defines parody as "creative criticism."³⁸ Feng uses this educational tool of "creative criticism" to create laughter while exploiting the social and political implications of satirizing certain characters, given his and his audience's knowledge of the social situation out of which these characters arose. For example, the crowning and uncrowning occur in the film when the team helps a self-employed individual, a small bookstore owner, to realize his dream of being *General Patton* for a day through a parody of the Hollywood movie "Patton" (1970). In this subversive doubling, Feng does not intend to attack the Hollywood movie it imitates, but uses it for a vehicle in order to create parody on a different level, as a means of both suspending class hierarchy and showing the suppressed aggressions that are generated by class stratification. Spoofing the *Chinese Patton* through references to the original filmic text operates to both neutralize the sharpness of the contrast – it is not a contrast made, for instance, with a famous Chinese communist military commander – and thus to allow it space within China's contemporary reality. The bookstore keeper belongs to the category of self-employed individuals (*Ge Ti Hu*) who sank to the bottom of the urban class structure as a result of economic reform at the early stage in China. Most self-employed individuals

³⁸ Joe Lee Davis, "Criticism and Parody," *Thought* 26 (summer 1951), 180.

were actually once employed in state-controlled work units and then laid off by the state, had to scramble to make a living as small business owners, mostly in the service trade. As a Chinese professor pointed out in a white paper published in 2005, “this group of people has in common that they can no longer find employment under the planned economy system, they cannot be accepted by the mainstream, and they must rely upon their adventurous personalities.”³⁹ In the 1990s, as more and more people lost their jobs when state-owned enterprises made infrastructural adjustments, they became part of the pool of the partially employed, the freelancer or the self-employed individual. According to the official economic policy of the 1990s, self-employment was another name for an “informal vocation.” These changes massively affected the social status and social identification of this population. Hence, this new social class encountered strong prejudices and social pressures during the 1980s and the 1990s, which was a tremendous status downgrade from the years under Mao, when such workers were praised as the vanguard of the revolution. Feng intentionally chose a member of this underclass in order to play with the dream of reversing the class hierarchy and dissolving the very social order that held them, as poor people, down. Meanwhile, through the reversal of social status from a bookstore keeper to a powerful figure, Feng also ridicules the Chinese authority the character represents. “This double process” is obvious in the sequence of making the bookstore keeper’s general dream come true.

³⁹ <http://www.xxcb.com.cn> 2005-4-4 7:50:43(Institutional Analysis and Public Policy)

In order to make the game look real, the One-Day Dream team takes advantage of the studio, and represents desert battlefield tableau, the military hospital and the conference room, but they are by no means simple replications of the Hollywood film *Patton*. The Chinese Patton, who dresses up with a four-star general uniform and rides his military jeep around, does not look very much like the historical General Patton who is described in the Hollywood film *Patton*. It seems that he just wants to enjoy the feeling of being a powerful person: give orders, enjoy respect from lowly soldiers, and abuse his power. We can tell that his personality changes a lot immediately after he plays the general. In the opening scene of this sequence, we see the bookstore owner reading a book about the World War II in his small bookstore, while a customer outside of the frame, who is indicated by a voiceover, asks for a book to be delivered to him. Cut to a close-up of the owner, whose facial expression indicates that he is reluctant to leave his reading – his daydream - to do the job that earns him his living. These shots vividly indicate that he is not satisfied with his current status of being a small individual entrepreneur, ordered around by others. When Yao Yuan (the protagonist played by Ge You) comes to his bookstore to pick him up for the journey to his dream fulfillment, an immediate change comes over him as he walks out of the bookstore and pops in the jeep. He is visibly living in his dream of being a commander. This becomes more obvious after he plays the general. He becomes a different person, who is arrogant, mean and intolerant of dissent. In the sequence of the conference room, the Chinese Patton and his underlings are supposed to discuss the progress of the war and possible strategies for future actions in front of a European map, but the team uses a Nanjing map instead. Here, the level of

parody creates its effects both from the reference to the dream world of Hollywood and their (incomplete) translation into a completely different cultural situation. Yao Yuan reports in a quite formal tone to the general: “General, we cannot find a European map. Here is a map of Nanjing, China. You must put up with using it.” Adding to the humor of imperfect culture grafting is that when they talk about the progress of the armies, Beijing streets names come out of their mouths instead of locations on the map of Nanjing. The humor arises from the logic of incongruity, which undermines the high cultural reference to a world historical event, World War II, and its translation in the Hollywood dream world, to the hybrid reality of contemporary China, where even mass fantasy has been Americanized.

On another level, these substitutions within substitutions cause us to relate the scene to the continual elisions, dictates and bad faith of China’s film censorship or bureaucracy. The Chinese Patton blames his underlings when they express dissenting opinions; in particular, three of his underlings are ordered by the Chinese Patton to be executed. In fact, Feng makes changes here when adapting this passage from the novella, in which the general who loses the battle is ordered to go back to America, instead of being given a death sentence. This scene can be read as a metaphor of Chinese cinema censorship and reminds us of Feng’s experience with the government banning his work. Then, in the end of the episode, we see our bookstore owner go through the process of uncrowning, like an emperor being undressed. This episode operates through the double process of instilling and irony by using the framework of fantasy and dream fulfillment to criticize and satire the assumptions about power which would arise in the head of a

downtrodden man whose life is at the beck and call of others. The Chinese Patton is, in this sense, the man's revenge upon that demeaning social reality, and a recapitulation of the arrogance of high-level Chinese bureaucrats. Thus, a critique of the system is expressed to the audience through the conjunction of the topsy-turvy reversal of the Chinese social hierarchy and the parody of Hollywood dream life in the movie "Patton" (1970). "Patton" itself, about a war America gloriously won, was made during the period in which America was ingloriously losing the war in Vietnam – thus originally encoding, itself, a dreamlike reversal of real circumstances.

Feng also touches upon gender issue in Chinese society, reversing gender hierarchy through the carnivalesque uncrowning of a "king" of the family, a husband. In this episode, the husband wants to taste the feeling of being abused because he does not understand why his wife does not complain about being hurt by his callousness and is, in fact, always loving to him. He even guesses that such suffering and tolerance must be wonderful feelings. This husband is a typical male chauvinist, indifferent to his wife's true feelings when he treats her badly. In order to offer a comic insight about marriage and vividly represent the image of a chauvinist husband, Feng's One Day Dream Team hit upon the idea of degrading the husband to a hired hand working for an abusive employer - his landlord's wife – in a scene that parodies a famous sequence from an old Chinese film, *The White Haired Girl* (Bai Mao Nu, 1956). The episode shows the landlord and his wife abusing him until, finally, the laborer "husband" cannot stand anymore and stands up for himself in the middle of role play; it is at this moment that he realizes what he has been doing to his wife. The team persuades him to treat his

wife nicely. As a result, by way of his ritual degradation and self-reproach, the husband achieves a moment of “renewal” in which he resolves to become a good husband. Feng has special interest in the marriage theme, which continued to be explored in his later films, such as *A Sigh* (2000) and *Cell Phone* (2003). This may be related to his family experience. He grew up in a single-mother family and witnessed his parents’ divorce when he was six years old in 1964. In an interview, Feng recalled his father: “that year [1964], after viewing fireworks in the Chinese National Day, my father asked me to make up a poem for the fireworks I watched. I could not work it out and just made up doggerel. My father was very angry. He bumped my head against a wall and called me stupid. My mother hates my father’s bad temper and notions of education. This was the reason they broke up.”⁴⁰ Therefore, Feng expresses his solicitude and respect for women who contribute to their families and criticize male chauvinism through this episode. There is no denying that this utopian role reversal, which brings the effects of male chauvinism into the consciousness of the perpetrator, does nonetheless touch upon a deep cause of gender hierarchy.

In order to balance the indirect critique of class and gender hierarchies, Feng strategically pleased the film censors with the nostalgic expression of hero worship in the beginning of the film, representing a gossipy chef’s “hero dream.” A cowardly chef who lives in an age of peace has been dreaming of what it would be like to be a

⁴⁰ Ling Zhang, “Closer to Feng Xiaogang”, *Dianying Tongxun*, No.6, 1999.

revolutionary hero keeping a secret from the counter-revolutionary enemy for one day, withstanding all temptations and trials. The secret that Yao Yuan designs for the chef to keep is one-sentence line “I would rather die than tell you” (*Da Si Wo Ye Bu Shuo*). Yao Yuan tells the other team members that they won’t be able to get the secret from the chef. Qian Kang and Liangzi, who do not know the designated secret, are in charge of using a beauty trap and physical force to torture the chef and get him to leak the secret. The game begins with pastiche of sequences from Chinese films, such as “Beauty trap” and “Physical Ordeal.” The chef plays an anti-Qing hero in Late Qing Dynasty. In face of a beauty, played by the team member Zhou Beiyang, and “soldiers of Qing Court,” played by Qian Kang and Liangzi, this concupiscent and coward chef nonetheless quickly surrenders and tells the secret “I would rather die than tell you” to them. This leads, as Yao Yuan must have known it was going to, to a comic misunderstanding, since the line, “I would rather die than tell you,” seems to mean, to the “inquisitors,” that the chef is showing that he is not afraid of torture. They continue to scare him through various instruments of torture while his fear mounts until, finally, they realize from the chef’s fearful facial expressions that “I would rather die than tell you” is precisely the secret. In the end of the episode, the chef concludes that he is not only very gossipy but also very cowardly. The nostalgic idea of the revolutionary hero, a common trope in the Maoist era, is expressed through the chef: “Not everybody can become a revolutionary hero. I have the utmost admiration and respect for heroes.”

The episode is composed of “a neutral practice of mimicry” of different sequences from Chinese films and a Soviet film, which would seem to fall under

Jameson's criticism of pastiche as "humorless" and "non-historical." Yet it gains its effects by juxtaposing the past and the present in such a way that the totality of the present stands revealed as, in truth, incomplete, before the past from which it arose. That the present should lose the aura of totality is the very effect that the carnivalesque aims at. This is the function of the film's numerous intertextual moments, its continual quoting of other films. For instance, there is one scene in which Yao Yuan is hit by a flower flowerpot, and exclaims, quoting the line from the Soviet revolutionary film *Lenin in October* (1938), "Please rescue Lenin quickly and Bukharin is a betrayer." This is typical of an aspect of Feng's work that blends the personal and the public: he likes to use a lot of classical lines from classical Chinese revolutionary film and Soviet films that were very popular in the 1970s, when he was growing up. But the effect the imitation causes is not so much to ridicule the style of those old films as to create a genially humorous effect. In sum, Feng intentionally and skillfully mixes up humor, hidden criticism, and revolutionary discourse, making criticism less visible and recognizable.

From Novella to Movie: Adaptation, Social Anxieties, and Entertainment

The Dream Factory was adapted by Feng Xiaogang from Wang Shuo's novella *You Are Not a Common Person*. Since Wang Shuo was a controversial figure for the government, Feng reached an agreement with Wang Shuo that the film wouldn't give

Wang official authorship credit in order to pass the censors. This strategy was effective and the script was approved by the film censorship board. However, more importantly, Feng made significant changes in the film from the original novella. The written narrative of political mockery and intellectual hostility has been transformed, in the film, into something quite different, which can be characterized as a depoliticized social concern that is the type of move that characterizes Feng's narratives in his later films as well. Paying special attention to these strategic alterations helps the viewers observe Feng's skills in negotiating between the critique of social conditions, the popular need for entertainment, and the state's ever present censorship.

The discrepancies between the film and the novella indicate that Feng intentionally avoids the apparently political criticism in the novella when he translated it into film, turning instead to address social anxieties and desires. As Jameson argues, the art work in mass culture performs a double task, creating "a transformational work on social and political anxieties and fantasies which must then have some effective presence in the mass cultural text in order subsequently to be 'managed' or repressed" (Jameson 1990, 141). Jameson's position is a response to the common claim that that mass culture is designed to create "false anxieties," "false needs" and impose "false consciousness."

Feng represents and manages real social anxieties and desires in his own way and releases them with the carnivalesque humor. Several strategies of addressing social anxieties can be observed in his adaptation of Wang's novella. Feng changed the status of several characters in the novella when adapting it for the screen. For example, the

one in the novella who wants to be “General Patton” is not a bookstore owner, as in the film, but a cyclo driver who was once sentenced to 10 years in prison because he was hooligan and liked fighting in the street. Wang Shuo also satirizes the CCP’s “people’s democratic dictatorship”⁴¹ through placing slogans in the mouth of this person (Wang 1993, 212). Feng replaced these comments and softened the character, while still indirectly ridiculing the Chinese bureaucracy. Feng obviously took to heart the experience of seeing his television drama *Dark Side of Moon* banned because of its criminal-centered narrative. The change from a criminal to a self-employed individual still highlights his concern about the urban proletariat, especially his astute observation of the dynamics of the new class hierarchy that emerged from the economic reforms.

Additionally, Feng left out other political criticisms and the mockery of intellectuals in the novella. For example, Wang Shuo represents a critical parody of the “nonviolent verbal struggle session”, which was a feature of the Cultural Revolution. In the novella, the character Yang Zhong encounters verbal struggle against him, not on political grounds, but just because he once expressed dissatisfaction with the way his partners were doing business. Another “verbal session” happens to a popular writer like Wang himself, in which Wang satires cultural elitists and their prejudices towards popular culture and popular writers. These episodes were left out of the film. Parody, which was Wang Shuo’s means to criticize and mock the Cultural Revolution, is retained in the film, but the political connotations are modified or erased.

⁴¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/People's_democratic_dictatorship(accessed Dec 2008).

Where Wang is political, Feng's instincts are for the social. Thus, Feng adds new contents that do not exist in the novella in order to show social anxiety and social contradictions. He brings to the forefront the many social issues that arose in the wake of the economic transformation, such as the housing issue, the gap between the rich and the poor, and unemployment. It is on this level that the "poverty dream" is played out. Feng satirizes a rich boss who is tired of gourmet food and wants to realize his dream of being poor and eating coarse food. He is sent to a remote poor village by the team to taste the bitter life of peasants and asks the peasants not to give him any meat but coarse food to eat. This sequence exposes the issue of wealth inequality in Chinese society. In this sequence, the rich man is degraded to a position in which poor and rich achieve "free and familiar contact," which, mythically, reigned among "people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age" (Bakhtin 1984, 10). In two months time, the rich man has disgraced himself by becoming a well-known chicken thief in the village. After eating up all chickens in the village, he sits on a small mountain every day, waiting for the team to pick him up. Spotting the team coming from the distance, he begins to cry out. Eventually, he loses all sense of his dignity by devouring the chicken that the team bought for him under the gaze of the villagers. This "emperor" has no clothes. Although the rich man promises to invest in a poultry farm for the villagers, when Lao Qian (played by Feng), asks him if he wants to experience poverty again, he replies, "I can't wait to sleep with lobster every day." This satire of the rich man engenders a lot of laughter. Obviously, we do not see the result of

“change and renewal” from the degradation. The carnivalesque spirit is beyond the reach of the wealthy by definition, as there is no room for them in the inverted world.

The same failure of “renewal” occurs to a female celebrity, too, who dreams of being an ordinary woman with a private life. After deciding to quit the entertainment industry, she disappears from the public view with the assistance of the One-Day Dream team and happily enjoys a private life for a while. However, her character begins to reassert itself as she longs for the spotlight again. Unfortunately for her, when she gave up her position, she gave up her attraction and share of the market; trying to make a comeback, she discovers that nobody cares about her. She can’t even find a small role in any movie or TV show. She becomes a joke and tastes the bitter fruit of obscurity. It is funny to see her longing to give an autograph to the staff, since, when she was a star, she despised giving autographs. This sequence mocks the hypocrisy of celebrity lifestyles and their ambivalent psychological addiction to fame. Like the rich man above, she cannot easily shake off the need for fame, gain and luxury as she thought she could do. Therefore, this degradation fails to be balanced by renewal in a slightly different way than occurs with the rich man: while he can return to his wealth, fame is a less stable entity. The satire towards the wealthy class exposes their invisible aspects and weakness through degradation and uncrowning. Bakhtin argues that carnivalistic laughter “presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper class, of all that oppresses and restricts” (Bakhtin 1984, 92). It is clear that the wealthy class does not triumph over the loss of their power and privilege.

The theme of the “housing dream” is another addition by Feng, which shows his sensitivity to the everyday living conditions of common people. In this episode, a couple, who have lived in different cities for a long time, not having the money or status to obtain an apartment that was supposed to be allocated to the man through his work unit, want to finally live together since the wife has been diagnosed as having a terminal cancer. The husband is very sad and feels guilty for not providing a “home” for his wife. The team members, Yao Yuan and Bei Yan who happens to meet him in the hospital, sympathize with the couple’s plight and decide to lend their new home to them. So, the husband can finally be with his wife during her final days in their dream apartment. The couple’s sad tale reflects a very real problem that countless people encountered in the 1980s and 1990s. China implemented the public housing allocation systems under socialism, before housing privatization allowed individuals to buy homeownership of their allocated public house at the end of the 1990s. The houses of Chinese people used to be allocated to state-sponsored work units in terms of their working experience and social ranking. It usually took a long time for a low-level employee to get a public house for his family. Before getting their own public house from their working units, most Chinese people used to live either with their parents or in the work unit’s single apartment, which is a dormitory type space shared by co-workers – exactly the situation of the husband in this “house dream” episode. This sequence became famous in China, with one line in the film becoming a very popular slogan: “A marriage without love does not bring happiness, but a marriage without a house is even worse.” It was not uncommon for people to marry solely in order to get a house, or to

get out of cramped living quarters. Hence, the house became a big concern for ordinary people. It was not just the husband's dream; it was dream of the whole Chinese people. Feng here truly captured the concern of ordinary people, which, again, made his New Year's films seem like an alternative to the official celebration.

The finale is hardly a happy ending, but rather a bittersweet ending in the sense that the wife passes way from cancer on New Year's Eve and the One-Day Dream team is nearly bankrupt, due to its many cases of free service. The only sweet thing is that Yan Yuan and Bei Yan get married in the end of the film. On the night of New Year's Eve, the team gets together to celebrate the New Year. We are told that their business is hard to maintain, but their passion does not disappear. Over drinks, they even come to an agreement to continue their service for common people in need for free, if necessary. They mock themselves through laughter: "we should be protected as a rare species, rather than the panda," because we "do not love money and only love truth." This is a jibe at the Chinese people, who are seeing their traditional virtues dissolve in the striving for economic development and modernity. The film also contains certain criticism toward leadership. When, in the housing dream, Yao Yuan suggested that the husband explain his situation to his work supervisor, the husband responds with a pained look. The implication is that the leadership is disconnected from the troubles of the people.

Feng's *The Dream Factory* tones down Wang Shuo's sharp mockery in his novella. As importantly, the images of hooligans (paizi) in this novella – hooligans

being the signature of Wang's work - have been replaced by good-natured unemployed workers in the film, which have close relation to Feng's working class origins and personality. Feng is a populist. The positive moments in his films are always about the moral heroism of ordinary life, the kindness, wisdom, dignity and positive attitude of ordinary people facing hardship. He carefully brings into his films various "social anxieties" and "desires," rather than "repressing" them. He manages to suspend, however briefly, the social pressures and anxieties of his audience through the humorous Beijing vernacular, parody, and satire. Into the film's carnival world, he intentionally introduces the mockery of the rich and the famous. He indirectly ridicules "Chinese authorities," which produce a lot of laughter. Laughter is a release from social anxieties and a form of criticism that, at the same time, deflects punishment. So, laughter in this film and other Feng's films is a kind of positive laughter, akin to Bakhtin's notion of carnivalesque laughter.

Conclusion

The Dream Factory brings its characters from their real situation into a briefly utopian moment in which social regulations are suspended or turned upside down and anxieties find their release in wishes. Meanwhile, the film indirectly criticizes social hierarchy and class difference through laughter. Since this film touches upon Chinese people's daily life and their concerned social issues through funny stories and dialogues, their reception was very good. Beijing's box-office received 11.5 million

yuan. It was the only film that recouped its production cost in one city at the time.⁴² Does the team permanently reform the cruel husband's tyranny of his wife? Does the bookstore owner shake off the misery of his debased status quo? There is no obvious result or solution for these matters. Life is still going on with the way they are. The pleasure of transgression can only be achieved and enjoyed within the "film" of the film.

Bakhtin's carnival has been criticized by some critics for its negative aspects. Peter Burke in his article "Bakhtin for Historians" points out that Bakhtin over-idealizes carnival.⁴³ For Michael Bernstein, carnival is just an authorized and harmless liberty, because "ruling conventions allow themselves to be mocked due to a full confidence in their own power to emerge still more firmly entrenched the following morning" (Bernstein 1986,106). However, not all contemporaries think of the carnivalesque as "harmless safe valve". Some authorities are still afraid of its powers to disrupt and subvert. In every country, the carnivalesque is repressed to some extent, either by political or commercial power. In the context of China, the Chinese government always closely supervises media, especially film. In comparison to the monologic propaganda film or the high-end art film, Feng's *New Year's Films* were much more successful at closely touching upon ordinary people's daily lives, with all the social criticism this implies. *The Dream Factory's* success, along with the subsequent films, highlights

⁴²Ying Wu. *Beijing Business Today*, Feb 25, 2008,
<http://www.bbtnews.com.cn/whcy/channel/political39353.shtml>(accessed Dec 2008)

⁴³ Peter Burke, "Bakhtin for Historians", *Social History* 13 (1988), 86.

Feng's aesthetic wisdom in creating strategies to accommodate tough censorship, although he never portrays the permanent overthrow of convention through the carnivalesque spirit. If "the most deeply liberating function of humor is to free us to hope for the impossible, our sense of humor is a mirror of our aspirations, reflecting our desires to escape the limitations that circumscribe our lives." (Jenkins 1994, 10), then Feng's New Year's films not only represent the reality and human condition, but also project reconciliation with difficult social contexts in the ordinary person's optimism, stubborn, and enduring virtues.

Chapter Four

Feng Xiaogang as an *Auteur*? Style, Genre and Popularity of New Year's Films

Introduction

This chapter explores Feng's New Year comedies in order to understand their popularity in China. Feng positions himself as a commercial film-maker, who has sought and frequently achieved box-office success. Often, directors of "hit" films are considered to be limited by the stereotypes of the genres they work in and the extra-aesthetic, commercial considerations, which guide their films, so that they are consigned to a critical ghetto. Yet, Feng's directorial work cannot be dismissed for that reason. Rather, as a film director with a distinctive personal style, he should be seen as an *auteur*. A remarkably consistent body of themes, narrative patterns, and filmic styles can be observed in Feng's work all the way from his comedies to his action stories and melodramas, including the mature work of the television years with which he launched his career. It is largely this consistency and generic repetition that have attracted the audiences to movie theatres, even during the downturn of the national film market. Since the late 1990s, Feng has become a famous brand name among audiences and a "guarantee" of box-office for film investors. Feng was one of the few Chinese film directors whose films could compete with Hollywood blockbusters in the national film market before 2002. After 2002, Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige began to explore commercial film production, with Zhang directing such works as *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), and Chen Kaige directing

The Promise (2005). Still, in the commercial film arena, no director has topped Feng. Feng has even earned respect among his film peers in the highly successful Hong Kong film industry, which has its long history of commercial film production and culture. Peter Chan, a famous Hong Kong director, has applauded Feng as “the Mainland-China film director who combines art with commerce best in his films.”⁴⁴

Feng is one of the few Chinese directors who write the scripts of his own films. Out of the ten movies Feng has made so far, he took sole screenwriting credit on seven and co-wrote the other three. During his years in the television industry, Feng co-wrote several television dramas and films with Zhang Xiaolong and Wang Shuo. As a film director, he worked closely with several Beijing-based novelists, such as Wang Shuo and Liu Zhenyun. It is characteristic of an auteur, according to Truffaut’s auteur theory, to work from his own scripts or at least exert full control over the film production process (Puttnam1998, 198). Given this definition, Feng is a *auteur* director, for not only does he write or at least co-write his films scripts, but he is involved in all the elements of making the film. For instance, Feng is considered to be the true editor of his own films. While Feng in person does not operate the film editing machine, like the majority of Chinese film directors, he supervises the editing process. Chinese film directors have a great deal of authority and creative control of their own films, including the postproduction phase. It is a filmmaker rather than a producer who controls film editing process. In most cases, a

⁴⁴ “The Director of *Painted Skin* Gordon Chen Likes Chinese director Feng Xiaogang Best,” Dalian Wanbao, June 6, 2008 <http://ent.people.com.cn/GB/8222/86596/132329/132331/7696020.html>(accessed Dec2, 2006)

film editor is hired to edit the film under the film's director's guidance. Even after the first cut of the film is censored by the state, it is still the filmmaker who controls the reediting process and revises the film in terms of the state's suggestions.

However, Chinese critics who are influenced by European art film and the achievements of Chinese fifth-generation directors, barely accord *auteur status* to commercial, as opposed to art, film directors. The longtime prejudice towards commercial cinema and directors is owed not only to the predominant bias towards commercial film culture within the Chinese film industry, but also to a stereotypical thinking about authorship itself. Sarris mentions this in his famous essay 'Notes on the *auteur* theory' in 1962: "Some critics have advised me that the *auteur* theory applies only to a small number of artists who make personal films, not to the run-of-the-mill Hollywood director who takes whatever assignment is available," Sarris challenges this contention as showing a crucial misunderstanding of the film making process and how the director functions within it.⁴⁵ Sarris and other American exponents of European origin *auteur* theory included Hollywood commercial film directors, such as Hawks, Minnelli, and Hitchcock, among the *auteurs*. Famously, Hitchcock had an enormous effect on the very embodiment of *auteur* theory, the French New Wave cinema. Likewise, by using this critically redefined notion of the *auteur*, we are able to pick out aesthetically interesting characteristics of Feng's New Year films, and to suggest why his films have proven so popular in China. I will mainly concern myself with Feng's the first

three comedies *The Dream Factory* (1997), *Be There or Be Square* (1998) and *Sorry Baby* (1999), because all three movies are nearly identical in their styles, playful narratives and Beijing vernacular.

Games, Working-Class Characters, and Romantic Love

Feng's New Year's films (*hesuipian*) have quite recognizable stylistic and thematic personalities. As Stam points out, "Intrinsically strong directors, auteur theory argued, will exhibit over the years a recognizable stylistic and thematic personality, even when they work in Hollywood studios. In short, real talent will 'out' no matter what the circumstances."⁴⁶ Feng's cinematic productions follow the Hollywood strategy of producing movies with recurring formulaic and stereotypical features. The recurring themes include: the extramarital love affair (*A Sigh* and *Cell Phone*); unemployment (*The Dream Factory*); the opposition between the rich and the poor (*The Dream Factory* and *Sorry, Baby*); commercialism (*Big Shot's Funeral*); and oversea-Chinese exotic life (*Be There or Be Square*, *Beijinger in New York*). While his last three films explored new genre material, namely, action film, martial arts, and war, the majority of Feng's New Year's films combine romantic love and comedy, staging the same type of the working-

⁴⁵ Andrew Sarris, "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Leo Braudy Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 561-564.

⁴⁶ Robert Stam, "The Cult of the Auteur," in *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 84.

class characters as they go about their adventures in urban Beijing, and capping the plots with happy endings.

Feng has evidently learned from his years of screenwriting how to create an interesting, consistent and event-filled narrative arc, which distinguishes him from the somewhat weak story-telling in most of the films of the fifth and sixth generation directors. An interesting story is of utmost importance for Feng Xiaogang. As he says, “I do not think about the metaphysical aspect of a film at the beginning, but start instead from an interesting story. If I discover one particular meaning or connotation hides behind the story, I am happy to add it into the story. If I don’t, it does not matter to me as long as there is a lot of fun in the story”.⁴⁷ His concept of film conforms to what Braudy says in *Genre: The Convention of Connection*: “In genre films, the most obvious interest is neither complex characterization nor intricate visual style, but pure story.”⁴⁸ Basing his ideas on the “law of pleasure” - that is, what will keep audiences interested in the stories and the characters - Feng views his films as channels for satisfying a spectator’s dream rather than educating an audience or for self-expression. Entertainment is his primary concern when working on a film script. The way Feng weaves his comic stories as a playful game gives a special cast to his comedies. This ludic approach is close to Henri Bergson’s famous theory that “Comedy is a game, a game that imitates

⁴⁷ Zheng Tan, “Interview with Feng Xiaogang: I am a director of common people”, In *Film Art*, No. 2, 2000

⁴⁸ Leo Braudy, *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 668.

life.”⁴⁹ According to Bergson, “Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of mechanical arrangement.”⁵⁰

Likewise, Feng treats his comedy as a playful childish game, and invites the audience to enjoy playfulness with him in the season of Chinese New Year. To achieve the goal of playfulness, Feng Xiaogang employs several strategies that combine humorous dialogue with role playing games. In *The Dream Factory*, the storyline features a film troupe of four (Party B), which creates dreams for their clients' (Party A) for a day. Feng's plot accumulates scenarios of role-playing games to create the serial structure of the film. The troupe's first customer is an inflated bookstore owner who wants to be Patton. He is given pearl handle pistols, a pool cue, four stars (one better than Patton), driven around in a jeep and given the city of Nanjing to attack. Other dreamers include a cook, movie star and a wealthy boss. In addition, Feng uses unexpected gestures and mugging to construct humorous or incongruous moments. Again, these moments point to the ludic aspect of comedy, the boundaries it creates within and against dominant social norms. An examples can be seen in *Be There or Be Square*. The male protagonist, Liu Yuan, salutes the police while the police are escorting the film crew driving on the street to arrive at the set. In another scene, Liu Yuan teaches the American police how to speak Chinese. When the class dismissed, the whole class stands up and says, “Serve the

⁴⁹ Heri Bergeson, *Laughter; an essay on the meaning of the comic* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), 105.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p105

people.” The wisecracking dialogue plus exaggerated physical acts lead to a lot of laughter.

Moreover, Feng likes to explore and prolong absurd situations in his New Year’s comedies to both ludically ‘dematerialize’ social norms and achieve a comic effect. For example, the problem out of which all the other problems in *Sorry Baby* derive is this: bus driver Han Dong is owed 100,000 *yuan* in back pay by his boss, Ruan Dawei, who has devised a variety of excuses in order not to pay his debt. Finally, to get the money he is owed (money he is going to use to take care of his sister’s hospital bill), Han Dong kidnaps Ruan Dawei’s girlfriend. Unexpectedly, his boss actually taunts Han, betting he does not have the courage to kill his girlfriend and warns Han that he will report his crime to the police. Ruan’s nonchalance enrages his girlfriend, the victim, who thereby decides to cooperate with her kidnapper. It turns out that she knows Ruan Dawei’s weak points. The two conduct a campaign of mockery to humiliate Ruan. That the two changes from kidnapper and kidnaped to collaborate generates an exhilarating sense of the absurd, an atmosphere of subverted norms in which romance between the two becomes possible.

Feng’s interest in using formal ludic elements to structure the plots that unfold in his first three comedies allows him to break with the traditional linear plot structure. His films oftentimes juxtapose seemingly unrelated episodes and funny moments. The development of a romantic relationship, the central pattern of classic comedy, is the connecting thread in many of Feng’s films. The romantic relationship becomes a way of ritualizing the seemingly independent ludic episodes, transforming them into stages in the

central romance. However, Feng has no interest in representing a classic love story like *Romeo and Juliet*, in which the lovers, selected from high society, are identified as such from the outset. Instead, his films portray the realistic love of common people with a humorous tone. Fun is his goal of playing out a romantic relationship between its romantic protagonists. Before establishing an alliance between the romantic protagonists, Feng plays a game of “cat captures rat,” from the initial sexual antagonism of the romantic couple-to-be to harmony.

To some degree, Feng’s the first three New Year’s comedies adhere to the classic code of the Hollywood screwball comedy, although Hollywood screwball and New Year comedies share neither historical background, culture, or theme. Both Feng’s New Year’s comedies and the screwball comedy are structured, broadly, around courtship, the romantic protagonists going through the progress of “sexual antagonism-compromise-harmony” before reaching a happy ending. Unlike screwball comedy, the sexual antagonism between the romantic lovers in the New Year’s comedies no longer stems from differences of class and ideology, because the romantic lovers have no obvious class differences and conflicts. Their sexual confrontations or contradictions emerge from their different values, expectations and attitudes toward life. Similar to screwball comedy, the New Year’s comedy is loaded with plenty of one-liners and snappy, ironic, wisecracking repartee between the antagonist-lovers. The male and the female protagonists, in typical Chinese fashion, are afraid of directly expressing their feelings toward each other. Therefore, teasing and bickering are the ways the romantic couple expresses their feelings and deal with their conflicts. The male protagonist often flirts with his love

interest through his irony and witty banter. As much as they banter and bicker, they also clearly care about one another, though this does not lead immediately to romance. Eventually, the female falls in love with the male protagonist's humor and inner qualities that at the beginning she saw in a whole different light. To sum it up: conflict or anxiety invariably is resolved in the most fundamental of all New Year's convention, romantic love.

In general, it is the male protagonist who plays a leading role in initiating a transition in a relationship from friend to lover. Typically, however, he uses the rhetorical tool of deniability – jokes and humor – to express his feelings. Finding love is not only a pleasure in itself, but also a release from his everyday anxieties – the escape from which has been materialized in the ludic situations in which he finds himself. Meanwhile, the audience is enjoying the mimetic pleasure of watching the unlikely courtship develop while feeling a temporary release from their own social tensions and anxieties. Romantic love and the humor it causes thus counterweights the bitter life of the characters and the social tensions revealed by the stories.

Feng's most of film narratives center on the male leading character, following Hollywood's star strategy. In Hollywood serials like James Bond, the series inserts various big name male actors in the 007 role. Feng almost always casts the big comic actor Ge You as his New Year's comedy lead. Ge You and a variety of female movie stars in every New Year film have become a conventional formula. Feng likes to have Ge You play a type taken from the lower-class echelon, or society's marginal groups. The exceptions to this rule include *Cell Phone*, *A Sigh* and *The Banquet*, all of which feature

central characters who are no longer of the low classes or the marginals. Feng has a warmhearted fondness for his lower-class characters. Strikingly, unlike the Hollywood formula, which demands handsome leading men, Ge You is not a good-looking actor and could even be categorized as an ugly actor. He is certainly not attractive in the Chinese sense. Ge You's roles are unexceptional, balding middle aged men, unambitious, and without decent careers. They exist on the margins of urban life. Take, for example, the first three comedies: Ge You is an unemployed studio staff in *The Dream Factory*, a Chinese immigrant living a marginal life in America in *Be There or Be Square*, and a freelance bus driver being exploited by the owner of a travel agency in *Sorry Baby*. These characters are visibly "marginal" people compared to the general population in China, measured by behavior and social attitudes. These characters are depicted realistically, flaws and all. They are shown to be cowardly, cynical, crafty, and greedy in a cheap way, but, on the other hand, they are good-natured people, wise and accommodating. These good qualities help them in the end to achieve love, even though on the surface they are far from any woman's dream of an ideal lover/husband. Most importantly, what these characters share is a sense of humor. All of them adopt a humorous attitude towards their anxieties, their tough life and the daily challenges presented by economic reform and social transformation. Their humor highlights their optimistic spirit when struggling to make ends meet through odd jobs, unemployment, or keeping their integrity as social values deteriorate, such as money worship, and loss of belief and so on.

One could draw a parallel between the adventures of these low-classes or marginal people – where marginality refers to a refusal to submit to the social order – Feng's own changing social status, the compromises he has endured to create commercial film as a product of popular culture. *A World without Thieves* (2004) is Feng's most extensive exploration of the motif of marginality was made in. The film tells the story of Wang Bo (Andy Lau) and Wang Li (Rene Liu), married career grafters. The couple swindles their way across China until one day they run into Sha Gen (starring Wang Baoqiang) in a train, a country bumpkin who is convinced that he lives in a world without thieves. Contrary to his conviction, the train Gen boards is chock-full of thieves, including Uncle Bill (starring Ge You), a meister of legerdemain from the old school who finds his match only in Bo. While Bill's men are prowling after Sha Gen's sixty thousand Yuan savings, Li takes it upon herself to be his protector, and Bo is reluctantly drawn into this ironic battle of good and evil. What drive her to protect Sha Gen is that she is pregnant and her belief in Buddhism. She wants to stop swindling for her unborn son. Finally, Wang Bo agrees to protect Sha Gen's property and rescues him from Uncle Bill. Interestingly, the transgressors of law, this couple, become in the course of the film the law's upholders, although their motivation is for themselves. Wang Bo pays a huge price for his past crimes when he changes sides: he is shot to death by Uncle Bill Yet he has managed to save both Sha Gen's property and his utopian fantasy about how the world works. Harmony is reached and social order is retained. In the final scene, the undercover cop who has been on the trail of these grafters in the train finds Wang Li in a restaurant and tells her that Uncle Bill has killed Wang Bo. The film ends with the

implication that there is room for mercy in the perpetual conflict between the social order and its transgressors: the undercover cop does not arrest Wang Li because of her pregnancy and what she did to Sha Gen.

Feng identifies with the lower-classes and the marginal, but his own status in the culture industry has witnessed a change from marginality to the mainstream. Underneath the surface of cynicism and irony, his films show his identification with traditional values, such as filial piety, family values, patriotism and moral values. There is, indeed, even a dose of social criticism hidden in the stories. Although these characters are of the mischievous and artful lower class, and sometimes act illegally, Feng endows these low-class figures with good natures that are evident to the audience, who can see through their surfaces. Ge You's commonplace face represents and speaks for all the common people who have gone through the momentous social transformations of values and life-style in contemporary China. Ge You's persona and humor reflect the social tensions and contradictions of the cynical 1990s, and easily gain him audience identification. Ge You may not share the authorship with Feng on the New Year's films, but these are surely his films too, unimaginable without his presence and performance. This fortunate collaboration helped form Feng's unique style and has been key to his mass market appeal. As Ellis points out, "The movie star is the creative presence."⁵¹

⁵¹ John Ellis, "Stars as a Cinematic Phenomenon," In *Film Theory and Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999). 598-605.

Wang Shuo, Beijing Urban Culture, and Popularity of New Year Films

Feng's New Year's films demonstrated vivid Beijing street culture. Most of Feng's films were filmed in Beijing; he was inspired by Beijing street scenes, and saturated his film dialogues with Beijing vernacular. Beijing, for Feng, has become a stand in for the ongoing changes of Chinese society. Feng's camera mostly focuses on native low-class Beijinger in the post-socialist China, contending with economic reforms in the unceasing struggle to realize their dreams in the face of multitudinous anxieties. Feng owes this thematic to a 90s popular and famous Beijing-based novelist, Wang Shuo, to whom Feng's approach to Beijing humor is often compared, especially in his first three New Year's comedies -- *The Dream Factory*, *Be There or Be Square* and *Sorry Baby*. It is no exaggeration to say that Wang Shuo's spirit has been imbued into Feng's soul. As Feng says, "Although Wang Shuo's depiction seems simple, our ordinary life and ordinary language became so lively and fascinating. His perspective on advancing with the times and adopting different angles in seeing things produced a profound and far-reaching influence on my later career as a director and became programmatic texts that guided my shooting of *hesuipian* (New Year's film)." ⁵² Wang Shuo's novels are set in the milieu of the culturally confused generation succeeding the Cultural Revolution, one marked by rebellious behavior and street language. Wang Shuo takes advantage of popular source, such as street language and the Beijing vernacular, to make fun of revolutionary slangs and elite intellectuals, and to show common people's anxieties and

⁵² Xiaogang Feng. *I Dedicated My Youth to You* (Beijing: Changjiang Wenyi Press, 2003), 44.

self-contradictions as well as the residual impact of socialist idealism in its confrontation with a now hegemonic commercialism. Feng has appropriated Wang Shuo's hooligan-style [pizi] humor, which samples Beijing vernacular (fast talk or tiaokan). In Beijing dialect, the word 'tiaokan' is frequently used to mean 'to imply criticism in joking' or 'to play satirical joking.' It is also defined by scholars "as a parody of official language, past and present."⁵³ The targets of Wang's unrelenting satire include intellectuals and revolutionary discourse, and he was one of the first to grasp how the use of Beijing's local dialect, with its constant melding together of pop slang and street language, could be used to critique the post-socialist Chinese reality in a way that wasn't grounded in the obsolete revolutionary language of the past. Wang's language is cynical, hardboiled, and free from moralism.

This is the vernacular Feng loves to use in his New Year's comedies. Feng has been such a fan of Wang Shuo's hooligan writing that he has even memorized Wang's novels. Moreover, as is well known, Feng initially emerged in the television and film industries as a member of Wang Shuo's creative group. He was regarded as the one who best understood Wang Shuo. The two of them have run a film company together, which, of course, provided endless opportunities for Feng to study how Wang works. After running into some trouble from the state censors, Feng made his mark in film industry as the director who could most easily transpose Wang Shuo's style, and especially his humor, into commercial cinema. Feng's first two films are adaptations of Wang's novels.

⁵³ Claire Huot, *China's new cultural scene: a handbook of changes* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 186.

Yet, even here, Feng adds his own distinctive touch. Where Wang is cold and sharp, Feng's New Year films are much gentler. Where Wang is satiric and mocking, Feng tends to buffer the mockery through self-satire and less relentless character examination. Nonetheless, audiences easily identify the close relation between Wang Shuo and Feng.

Wang Shuo and his novels have been such a social phenomenon that they created, for the China's general audience, a certain recognizable attitude. This provided a readymade foundation for the popularity of Feng's New Year films. "In the past decade, more than 10 million copies of his books have been sold, and most of his twenty-odd stories and novels have been made into movies or television miniseries."⁵⁴ By Wang Shuo's own account, every one of his books since 1992 has sold more than 100,000 copies – all the more impressive in that most other writers cannot expect to sell one-tenth of that number.⁵⁵ Most of the readers of Wang Shuo's novels were young Chinese, who are also the most avid movie goers. Wang Shuo's influence extended through television and cinema. As Chi Li, a well known woman writer, pointed out in 1990, "Wang Shuo is currently hot on the market. Find any ten modern youth on the street and at least six will be able to talk with great knowledge about Wang Shuo. The other four may not all have read Wang Shuo's novels, but almost all have watched the television series *Yearning*

⁵⁴ Yusheng Yao, "The Elite Class Background of Wang Shuo and His Hooligan Characters," *Modern China* 30, no. 4 (2004): 432.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 467

(1990) and *Stories of an Editorial Office* (1992), whose scripts Wang was involved in writing.”⁵⁶

In addition to literature, Wang Shuo’s influence extended to the fields of television and film. He wrote the scripts for numerous television dramas, as well as for films that hit the big screen. As Wang Yichuan points out, “there occurred a trend of confluence of Beijing-flavor literature and media works in the 1990s.”⁵⁷ ‘Beijing-flavor literature’ refers to those literary works that have a distinctive Beijing style in depicting unique cultural characters of Beijingers, their lives, living environments, and folk customs.”⁵⁸ According to Wang, the revival of Beijing literature spilled over into Beijing-flavored television dramas and films. The novelists in this trend included Wang Shuo, Liu Zhengyun and Liu Heng, all of whom have worked as screenwriters for Feng’s New Year’s films. Wang Shuo was the forerunner of this scene in the eighties. The year of 1987 was so-called ‘the movie year of Wang Shuo’ given the fact that Wang Shuo’s four novels were adapted into films and hit the screen in the same year of 1988. They are *Samsara*, *Da Chuan Qi*, *Half is Sea, Half is Fire* and *The Troubleshooters*. Of these, only *The Troubleshooters* achieved commercial and critical success, due to its fidelity to Wang Shuo’s original novel. The other three films made great changes from the original novels, which disappointed Chinese audiences primed for Wang’s hooligan characters,

⁵⁶ Ibid., P465

⁵⁷ Yishuan Wang, “Yu Yingshi Gongwu de Beijing Wenxue”, *Journal of Beijing Social Science*, No.1 (2003),107.

⁵⁸ Qing Zhang, “Rhotacization and the 'Beijing Smooth Operator': The social meaning of a linguistic variable,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 12, No 2(2008), 201.

humor, and witty dialogues. After Wang Shuo's directorial debut *Ba Ba*, a project of *Good Dream*, was banned by the state, Wang dropped out of the public view. Ten years later (1997) after the height of the Wang Shuo phenomenon, Feng, with his sensitivity to Wang's linguistic inventions, transposed the essence of Wang Shuo's fiction and humor onto the big screen. However Feng couldn't simply faithfully follow the original content Wang Shuo's novels without getting in trouble with the censors. Wang Shuo's balancing act had been to criticize some sensitive issues and even official ideology in his work, without going too far. After 1989, the social context in the late 1990s was a lot of different from the late 1980s, which was considered the period of the 'thinking-liberating movement'. The CCP chairman Jiang Zemin launched a 'spiritual civilization' movement to push the film censorship further tightened marked by 'Changsha Conference.' As China implemented economic reforms and an open-door policy to imports, it underwent a huge transformation from a rigidly planned economy to an open market economy, which brought about huge shifts in the culture. In intellectual circles, enlightenment and realism became the main cultural slogans. In the late 80s, the critical attitude towards history and reality, the ambiguous pursuit of romanticism and political idealism had culminated in such phenomena as 'Misty poetry' (Menglong Shi) in literature and the Fifth Generation's experimental films in cinema. But these phenomena were quickly submerged by commercialism and consumer culture as the economy rapidly marketized. As a result, traditional values such as idealism and humanism were challenged on a number of levels, not least of which was the challenged to intellectual values presented by the Wang Shuo phenomenon.

The generations who had been educated to see the world in terms of communism, idealism and revolutionary sublimity of the Mao era were disoriented and stranded by the ongoing waves of marketization and commercialism. The dialectic of their spiritual confusion gave them no stable spot upon which to stand, but tossed them between the seemingly obsolete forces of idealism, on the one hand, and a hardened attitude of skepticism and cynicism on the other. Wang Shuo was not simply another writer about these subjects, but was a premier symbol of this generation. In consideration of the censorship he would no doubt face, Feng chose to soften Wang Shuo's hooligan characters by making them merely denizens of the lower class. As a corollary to this decision, Wang's political sarcasm and incisive criticism was also weakened or eliminated. Feng was attracted to the idea of using Wang's humorous linguistic style and his focus on urban street society to show the 'bitter & sweet life' of a group of characters affected by China's economic reform, all without touching on the nerves of the government or elite intellectuals. Thus, even though there is a lot of satire and sarcastic banter in the films, these things are played out in the context of a romantic love relationship, or as a way of making broadly funny comments about rich people and certain social phenomena. The humorous dialogue temporarily relieves the fears and anxieties aroused by the recognition of social conflict and tension, but they also lead to no pragmatic end outside of the film: Feng's films never suggest any political action which might solve the problems generated by these conflicts. As Wright points out, "Genre films produce satisfaction rather than action, pity and fear rather than revolt; one could say that they serve the interests of the ruling class in that they assist in the

maintenance of the status quo, and they throw a sop to oppressed groups who, because they are unorganized and therefore afraid to act, eagerly accept the genre film's absurd solutions to economic and social conflicts – or accept the fact that it would be absurd to expect a solution. In this way, a whole political domain is discredited. When we return to the complexities of the society in which we live, the same conflicts assert themselves; we return to genre films for their easy comfort and solace, and hence their popularity.”⁵⁹

Conclusion

Feng's New Year's comedies present a vision of Chinese contemporary life, urbane sophistication and the human condition. His achievement lies in the use of game, like situations and games of verbal repartee to create movies of a surprising sophistication under a commercial and popular surface. While Feng's New Year's comedies provide entertainment and laughter to the audience, they also capture some of the truths of contemporary life, especially for the vast majority of Chinese. When lower class characters confront the lure of money, the crisis of marriage value, and materialism, they represent a reality the masses easily recognize as their own. Humor, in the New Year's comedy, participates in “the most deeply liberating function of humor, [which] is to free us to hope for the impossible. Our sense of humor is a mirror of our aspirations, reflecting our desires to escape the limitations that circumscribe our lives.”⁶⁰ Feng's

⁵⁹ Judith Hess Wright, "Genre Film and the Status Quo," in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 2003), 54.

⁶⁰ Ron Jenkins, *Subversive Laughter* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 10.

generic comedies have become embedded in the way the Chinese celebrate the Lunar New Year, in much the way the genre of Christmas films and specials in America have become part of that holiday. This testifies his films' popularity among Chinese audiences, and he should be entitled as one of the great auteur of contemporary Chinese cinema.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

It was not until the 21st century that Feng Xiaogang was appreciated and respected by the film industry and his peers. His rising status as a powerful figure shows evidence of the changing culture in the film industry, due to economic reforms and the commercialization of the industry. In the 1990s, there was an overarching authoritarian monologissa in the field of Chinese cinema. For Bakhtin, “monologissa” is “a single, authoritative narrative voice intended to convey thematic message – in favor of contending, unharmonized voices intended to communicate and process – even some measure of confusion.”⁶¹ In the field of Chinese cinema, ‘monologissa’ is embodied both in the government’s political ideological controls over film production and in artistic standards amongst critics. The former is evidenced in film censorship, which provides little space for Chinese directors’ artistic creativity whatever in art film or commercial film. That’s the main reason why there was prosperity in underground films in the late 1980s and 1990s. Some of the fifth and sixth generation directors were tired of dealing with censors and preferred overseas funding to produce their own films and overseas distribution as well. As we know, the fifth generation directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, made a huge contribution to Chinese cinema. Their artistic works have

⁶¹ Michael Dunne, “Wild at Heart’s Three Ways: Lynch, Gifford, Bakhtin,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 23 (1995), 6-13.

drawn worldwide attention in the past twenty years. Their artistic achievements impacted subsequent young directors as well. These young directors followed in their footsteps to international film festivals, which had become a safe venue for them to get symbolic capital and stand out in the field of Chinese cinema. So, winning an international film prize becomes an important standard to appraise a director's artistic achievement.

However, their achievements are also indirectly related to a monologic artistic standard, which was part of the monologism in the field of Chinese cinema. Expressing themselves became some Chinese directors' primary goals and their only concerns when they were in production. The industrial aspect of film art and the entertainment needs of audiences were collectively ignored, and replaced by either political concerns or artistic pursuits. The whole focus in the field of Chinese cinema became considering film only as art, and almost all directors dreamed of making art films and pursuing international film prizes. As a result, commercial cinema, which has to cater to the mass audience, has been looked down upon by Chinese filmmakers, beyond mere considerations of the poor quality of most commercial films due to funding problems and censorship.

However, advances in marketization along with the booming of the global economy pushed the Chinese film industry to be on the crossroads of either submission to Hollywood blockbusters and their challenges, or taking new opportunities to build a dialogic environment in the film industry, which has encouraged various film productions with newly relaxed film censorship standards, which has benefitted the industry. Especially after China joined the WTO in 2001, the number of Hollywood blockbusters per year imported to China went up to 20 in 2002 (Rosen 2002), and the number will

continue to increase in the future. It is possible that the film industry may eventually face a more serious survival crisis.

In addition to outside pressure from Hollywood, Chinese filmmakers have to face Chinese audiences' changed tastes in movie consumption. With the open door policy, people were eager to appreciate the diverse cultures from outside China. China's fast-paced economic growth of the past three decades has improved the Chinese people's living conditions, but at the same time put a lot of pressure on their shoulders. They seek entertainment after work. Thus, the improvements in well being are accompanied by demands for more diverse and higher quality entertainment. It is obvious that most Chinese propaganda films and art films in the 1990s and early 2000s could not satisfy their entertainment needs. Since 1994, Chinese audiences have been watching Hollywood blockbusters, which have satisfied the Chinese people's imaginations, and their yearning for progress, freedom, modernity, and democracy. Hollywood blockbusters have provided technologically advanced production values, for instance, computer enhanced FX, a more naturalistic acting style, and streamlined plots which had not been seen on the screen of Chinese cinema for a long time. Because of this, the Chinese film market has been easily and quickly dominated by Hollywood blockbusters. During the industrial crisis, only Feng's New Year's films could compete with Hollywood blockbusters in the local market place. Feng demonstrated his directorial talent of providing Chinese audiences with entertaining films which captured the daily lives of contemporary Chinese as they struggle to make the transitions due to the economic reforms. His films' popularity not only benefited from his acute sense of the film market

and the audiences' favor, but also from his appropriation of Wang Shuo's literature and language. Feng has become a brand among Chinese audiences through his genre film production. Feng's success benefited from movie industry reform and his own habits and calculated career choices. Meanwhile, it is not an exaggeration to say that Feng Xiaogang and his profitable films had been gradually influencing the ecosystem of the field of Chinese cinema. His New Year's films were imitated by other directors, which indicate that he is now an influential director in the field. The New Year's season has become the most highly developed and mature film market for Chinese films. More and more directors began to take commercial film seriously and target the New Year's season. Even well-known art film directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, are now willing to make commercial films.

In the new millennium, the Chinese government and film elites have realized that it is urgent to build a more healthy industry by ensuring an open environment in which varied voices or genres should be permitted, absorbed, and supported so that colorful film production can grow, develop and revive in the fiercely competitive global environment. A film industry without profit-centered works' support cannot survive for long, and likewise a film industry without art film's creativity and insights would lose its nature as an art. Furthermore, a politicized film industry in the age of globalization would without doubt be overthrown by the power of the market and democracy. So, heteroglossia have begun to be incorporated into the field of Chinese cinema since the new millennium, although a completely democratic and freedom-based film industry is still under way. Heteroglossia, a term coined by Bakhtin in the essay "Discourse in the Novel", refers to

the novel as a genre whose specialty is to contain various voices and types of language that come from a variety of others representing various social agencies. As Bakhtin explains, "Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters" by means of "heteroglossia" can enter the novel. The above-mentioned 'compositional unities' permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelations" (Bakhtin 1981, 263). So, this dialogized heteroglossia becomes a powerful weapon to resist the ideologically hegemonic monologism. For the Chinese film industry, a dialogized heteroglossia can be received through permitting different social voices, various film genres, and film practices. We can see that some efforts have been made to push the commercialization of the film industry. For example, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) invited many celebrated filmmakers and critics to discuss the rate system.⁶² If a new film rating system takes effect, it will be a landmark in the history of Chinese cinema. The SARFT is also relaxing film censorship as well. For example, since Dec 2003, Chinese directors just need to submit film outlines, instead of scripts to the SARFT for examination. Some cities have been granted the right of film examination, decentralizing this function of the SARFT.⁶³

⁶² Arthur Jones, "Film/International: China: Gov't Considers Film Rating System," *Variety*, 2003, 7.

⁶³ Xie Xiao and Liu Xiya, "Film Rating System is under consideration by SARFT," *Nanfang Dushi Newspaper*, March 7, 2003, <http://www.southcn.com/ent/zhuanti/fenji/news/200303100132.htm>(accessed Dec, 2008)

Without a doubt, Feng was the quickest director to respond to the marketization of the film industry among Chinese filmmakers. So, he went through the process in which he was being looked down upon, and then rose to power as the film industry gradually transformed from a socialist to a commercially-dominated culture. Therefore, Feng, as a surviving commercial film director, where there are still too few in today's film industry, should be respected for his pioneering efforts.

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