Descriptions of the Cultural Revolution in Early 1990s Chinese Film and Painting

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Ⅰ. Introduction

From the late 1980s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) experienced a nationwide revival of interest in Mao Zedong (毛泽东 1893-1976), who had seemed to be downgraded from his previous God-like status to the ranks of elder revolutionaries by the late 1970s. A large volume of books was published that focused on Mao's biography, his writings, and his role in Chinese history, and these were widely read. Revolutionary songs associated with Mao were remade as pop songs that became top-selling records. Mao-style restaurants with humble menus were in vogue. Taxi drivers hung Mao's portrait on their rearview mirrors, believing it would protect them from car accidents. It was reported that a number of factory workers in Sichuan even committed suicide in December 1993, because they wished to join the industrial complex they believed Mao had built in his afterlife.[1]

Many scholars have diagnosed this phenomenon, which was named a "MaoCraze" or "Mao Fever" (毛熱), as originating in people's nostalgia for Mao's era that was remembered to be economically stable and ideologically passionate. Although the MaoCraze did not come from Deng's direction, his Party welcomed this

1. Geremie R. Barme, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (New York and London: An East Gate Book, 1996), p. 3.

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phenomenon, hoping it would rekindle trust in the Party and passion for socialism, which seemed to be destroyed by the tragic events at Tiananmen Square in the summer of 1989.

Considering such a nationwide yearning for Mao's era, this study aims to investigate how the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命 1966-1976), one of Mao's biggest errors, was described in early 1990s Chinese visual culture, specifically films and paintings. The main questions are: Did Chinese directors and artists glamorize the Cultural Revolution as a result of being influenced by the national nostalgia for Mao, or did they criticize the Cultural Revolution in spite of the MaoCraze? Are there any different attitudes towards the Cultural Revolution between filmmakers and artists? If so, how, and why are they different?

For the study, I chose three films and two painting series produced in Mainland China between 1992 and 1994 when the MaoCraze hit its peak. The selected films are Chen Kaige (陈凯歌 b. 1952)'s *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王别姬 1993), Tian Zhuangzhuang (田庄庄 b. 1952)'s *The Blue Kite* (蓝风筝 1993), and Zhang Yimou (张艺谋 b. 1951)'s *To Live* (活着 1994). I selected these three films, because they made monumental contributions to the Chinese film industry and, among early 1990s Chinese films, comment most directly comment on the Cultural Revolution.[2] The paintings that will be analyzed are Wang Guangyi (王广义 b.1956)'s *Great Criticism* (大批判) series and Zhang Xiaogang (张晓刚 b. 1958)'s *Bloodline: Big Family* (血缘 – 大家庭) series. Among many artists who used the images of the Cultural Revolution, I chose these two artists, not only because they are prominent artists of 1990s Chinese avant-garde art, but also because they belong to the same generation as the three directors.[3] All of these directors and artists were born in the 1950s, experienced the Cultural Revolution in their teens and early twenties, received university education from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, and delved into new

2. I excluded Wu Wenguang (吴文光 b. 1956)'s 1993 film, *1966, My Time in the Red Guards* (我的红卫兵时代), since it is a documentary film, which requires a different analysis method from the other three films. Jiang Wen (姜文 b. 1963)'s 1994 film, *In the Heat of the Sun* (阳光灿烂的日子) is also excluded, because Jiang is much younger than Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Zhang Yimou.

3. Zhang Hongtu, Yu Youhan, and Li Shan also used Mao's images, but not all of those images are from the Cultural Revolution. Also, these artists are much older than the selected directors and artists. Zhang, Yu, and Li were born in the 1940s and experienced the Cultural Revolution as fully grown-up adults. Geng Jianyi, Liu Wei, and Feng Mengbo did use the images of the Cultural Revolution in their works, but these artists are too young to be compared with the selected five, as they were born in the 1960s and had not even entered elementary school when the Cultural Revolution started.

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artistic languages in their fields.

In Chinese cultural studies, there have been a handful of works that explored Chinese cinema and art together. In his book *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola: Chinese Avant-Garde Art and Independent Cinema*, Lin Xiaoping considered Chinese art and cinema produced between 1998 and 2008 as the creation of the postsocialist trauma, which he defined as the trauma of China's transition from socialism to capitalism. Jerome Silbergeld's book, *China into Film: Frames of Reference in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, also related Chinese cinema and art, arguing that a seemingly new cinematic form of the post-Mao era was, in fact, deeply imbedded in traditional Chinese painting. Youngmi Kim examined 1990s and 2000s Chinese art and film, calling them "image language."[4] These works are similar in that they all regard Chinese art and film as two different types of cultural products produced in the same sociopolitical and cultural background, and they try to show a tight interrelationship between the two. Aligned with these previous works, my study will, as mentioned, relate post-Mao Chinese cinema and art, thus providing a chance to see a large picture of the early 1990s Chinese visual culture.

II. Deng Xiaoping's Evaluation of the Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution, or the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution as its full name is expressed, was initiated by Mao Zedong in May 1966. Its stated goal was to preserve "true" Communist ideology in the country by purging remnants of capitalist and removing traditional elements from Chinese society and to re-impose Maoist Thought as the dominant ideology within the Party. There are different opinions and evaluations of the Cultural Revolution, but no one can deny that it significantly damaged China politically, socially, economically, and culturally. In the top leadership, the Cultural Revolution purged many senior officials, such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping. Countless number of Chinese were persecuted in the violent struggle sessions and suffered a wide range of abuses, including public humiliation, arbitrary imprisonment, torture, sustained harassment, and seizure of property. Urban youths lost their educational opportunities as they were forcibly transferred to rural regions during the "Down to the Countryside Movement (上山下乡运动)." Historical relics

4. Youngmi Kim (김영미), *A Study on New 'Image–Language' of Contemporary China* (현대중국의 새로운 이미지 언어–미술과 언어), Idam Books (이담북스), 2014.

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and artifacts were destroyed, while cultural and religious sites were ransacked in the name of "Destroying the Four Olds (四旧: old customs, old culture, old habits, old ideas)." Such a tragic Cultural Revolution finally ended with Mao's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four (Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen) in 1976.

Official judgment on the Cultural Revolution and Mao was made by Deng Xiaoping's Party at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (中国共产党第十一届中央委员会第六次全体会议) on June 27, 1981 and published in "Resolution on certain questions in the history of our party since the founding of the People's Republic of China (关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议)."[5] On the one hand, this official document harshly criticizes the Cultural Revolution and assigns its greatest responsibility to Mao Zedong. It states that the Cultural Revolution resulted in "the most severe setbacks and the heaviest losses suffered by the Party, the state and the people since the founding of the People's Republic."[6] It also clearly notes that the Cultural Revolution was initiated and led by Mao Zedong, and "the chief responsibility for the grave Left error of the Cultural Revolution, an error comprehensive in magnitude and protracted in duration, does indeed lie with Comrade Mao Zedong."[7]

On the other hand, this document ardently defends Mao Zedong. It argues that the Cultural Revolution thesis is distinctively different from Mao Zedong Thought, although how they are different remains unclear. It also attributes heavy responsibility for the tragedies of the Cultural Revolution to the Gang of Four, who were written as people who "rigged up two counter-revolutionary cliques in an attempt to seize supreme power and, taking advantage of Comrade Mao Zedong's errors, committed many crimes behind his back, bringing disaster to the country and the people."[8]

The document indeed states Mao's achievements during the Cultural Revolution. It says,

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5. The document is now available at many websites. http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64168/64563/65374/4526448.html (Date accessed: October 12, 2014 for the Chinese version); https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm (Date accessed: October 12, 2014 for the English version).
6. "文化大革命使党、国家和人民遭到建国以来最严重的挫折和损失。"
7. "对于"文化大革命"这一全局性的、长时间的"左"倾严重错误,毛泽东同志负有主要责任。"
8. "至于毛泽东同志所重用过的林彪、江青等人,他们组成两个阴谋夺取最高权力的反革命集团,利用毛泽东同志的错误,背着他进行了大量祸国殃民的罪恶活动,这完全是另外一种性质的问题。他们的反革命罪行已被充分揭露,所以本决议不多加论列。"

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> In his later years, he (Mao) still remained alert to safeguarding the security of our country, stood up to the pressure of the social-imperialists, pursued a correct foreign policy, firmly supported the just struggles of all peoples, outlined the correct strategy of the three worlds and advanced the important principle that China would never seek hegemony. During the "cultural revolution" our Party was not destroyed, but maintained its unity; The State Council and the People's Liberation Army were still able to do much of their essential work; The Fourth National People's Congress which was attended by deputies from all nationalities and all walks of life was convened and it determined the composition of the State Council with Comrades Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping as the core of its leadership; The foundation of China's socialist system remained intact and it was possible to continue socialist economic construction; Our country remained united and exerted a significant influence on international affairs.[9]

To reiterate, China retained its unity in politics, fulfilled its duty in national defense, and succeeded in international affairs despite the chaotic situations during the Cultural Revolution. At the end of the same paragraph, the credit for all of these good points was attributed to "the great role played by Comrade Mao Zedong."[10]

The document concludes that Mao Zedong is a "respected and beloved great leader and teacher (敬爱的伟大领袖和导师)" in spite of all the pitfalls of the Cultural Revolution. In short, the Cultural Revolution was erroneous, but Mao Zedong himself was not. Considering that the Cultural Revolution left unforgettable mental and physical scars on the Chinese people, yet Mao and his principles are undeniably the basic foundations of the PRC, this conclusion seems to be the most reasonable compromise that Deng's Party could have reached. After publishing this document, Deng's Party was silent on the Cultural Revolution and avoided officially mentioning Mao Zedong, but this document's conclusion seems to have influenced the cultural products of the 1990s, as will be mentioned below.

III. Descriptions of the Cultural Revolution in Films

The story of *Farewell My Concubine* develops around three main characters – two Beijing opera performers, Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi, and Xiaolou's wife, Juxian

9. "他晚年仍然警觉地注意维护我国的安全, 顶住了社会帝国主义的压力, 执行正确的对外政策, 坚决支援各国人民的正义斗争, 并且提出了划分三个世界的正确战略和我国永远不称霸的重要思想。在"文化大革命"中, 我们党没有被摧毁并且还能维持统一, 国务院和人民解放军还能进行许多必要的工作, 有各族各界代表人物出席的第四届全国人民代表大会还能召开并且确定了以周恩来、邓小平同志为领导核心的国务院人选, 我国社会主义制度的根基仍然保存着, 社会主义经济建设还在进行, 我们的国家仍然保持统一并且在国际上发挥重要影响。"

10. "这些重要事实都同毛泽东同志的巨大作用分不开。"

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– who face important sociopolitical events from 1925 to 1977, such as the Civil War, the Sino-Japanese War, the Communists' victory, and the Cultural Revolution.[11]

In the very first scene, presented even before the credits, director Chen Kaige's thoughts on the Cultural Revolution are clearly audible from the lines spoken by an unknown old man's voice. As two main characters, Dieyi and Xiaolou, walk onto the floor of a dark sports hall, the old man's voice blames the Gang of Four and the Cultural Revolution for prohibiting Xiaolou and Dieyi from performing together for 22 years.

In the last 25 minutes of the film, the director vividly describes the negative sides of the Cultural Revolution. Right after the narration of a radio news report that the Cultural Revolution, which was announced to "touch on the very soul of the people", has started, the scene changes to Xiaolou and Juxian's house on one very dark and rainy night. The director's camera shows Juxian and Xiaolou busy burning now-banned literature and clothing as counterrevolutionary. In front of the fire, Juxian tells her husband that she is so afraid of the Cultural Revolution and asks him never to leave her, kissing him desperately.

In the next scene, the camera shows Xiaolou being questioned by the Red Guards about a few unpatriotic words he said years ago that were overheard by his opera troupe manager, Na Kun. In great terror, Xiaolou asks Na Kun for help but gains no result. Xiaolu helplessly admits his guilt by smashing the brick laid in front of him.

The film continues to show the Beijing opera troupe, including Xiaolou and Dieyi, out in a public struggle session. Dragged away by the Red Guards, who are shouting "sweep away all cow demons and snake spirits", they are forced to put on stage makeup and dresses, to wear signboards on their necks, and to kneel down on the sandy ground. The Red Guards yell, "Duan Xiaolou is the reactionary king!" "Duan Xiaolou and Cheng Dieyi are anti-Party elements!" "Down with Duan Xiaolou!" "Down with Cheng Dieyi!" The red flags, fire, Mao's portraits, and upset youths' screams upsurge the atmosphere. Then the camera stops where a group of Red Guards is urging Xiaolou to criticize Dieyi. Under the threat that they will annihilate Xiaolou if he does not expose Dieyi's guilt, Xiaolou shouts that Dieyi sang for the Japanese, for Nationalist soldiers, for reactionary theater bosses, and for capitalists. Xiaolou also reveals that Dieyi smoked opium and implies that Dieyi had

11. Derived from a novel by Hong Kong's popular writer Lilian Lee, *Farewell My Concubine* was made for the Beijing Film Studio with financing from Hong Kong in 1993.

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a homosexual relationship with Yuan Shiqing, who was a patron and punished as a counterrevolutionary a while ago. Dieyi, enraged, tells the mob that Juxian was a prostitute and provokes the Red Guards to fight against her to death. Under great fear, Xiaolou swears that he does not love Juxian, ensuring that he will never see her again. The camera shows Juxian in despair.

After this intense struggle session, Xiaolou and Dieyi find Juxian has committed suicide in her red wedding gown. Through these scenes, Chen Kaige effectively describes the tragic results of the Cultural Revolution: people's fear, mob violence, betrayals of friends and lovers, and even deaths.

Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*, based on the life story of a boy from Beijing named Lin Dayu or Tietou (Iron Head), portrays an ordinary Beijing family's lives through a series of political movements in the 1950s and 1960s, namely the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. During those chaotic years, Tietou's mother, Chen Shujuan, loses her three successive husbands, and the film is divided into three segments according to her three marriages.[12]

The Cultural Revolution is depicted in the last part of the film when Shujuan married her third husband, Wu Leisheng, explained as an old comrade. Among many aspects of the Cultural Revolution, Tian Zhuangzhuang vividly depicts how unreasonably and suddenly do political judgments on one person change and how violently do the Red Guards treat the accused people.

One day in the film, the Red Guards and young students bring their school principal to a platform and humiliate her by cutting her hair. Even though she asks them for mercy, the Red Guards do not stop criticizing her. Such rude behavior is simply justified by the slogan of the Cultural Revolution: "Revolution is no crime. It's right to rebel!" This scene shows that one person, once acknowledged as so trusted by the Party as to be appointed as a school principal, could be suddenly accused as a bad faction. At the same time, this scene implies that frequent violence was conducted under the banner of "revolution."

Another noteworthy point in this episode is Tietou's attitude toward telling his

12. Tietou's father, Lin Shaolong, was sent to a labor camp in a border region as a rightist, where he was killed by a falling tree while chopping wood. His "uncle", Li Guogdong, falls in love with Tietou's mother but dies of liver failure, partly due to malnutrition caused by the Great Leap Forward. Later, Tietou's later stepfather, Wu, dies because he was humiliated and tortured by the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.

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mother what happened at his school. Without feeling any guilt, Tietou says that the principal is a bad person, because she scolded and punished students, and that students, including him, wrote posters against her, cut her hair, and spat at her. Tietou's excited and innocent nuance carries the director's criticism that, to fulfill its political purpose, the Cultural Revolution mobilized children who did not have either mature thinking or a firm standard upon which to judge their behaviors.

What happens to Wu Leisheng is another live description of unreasonable accusation and mob violence conducted during the Cultural Revolution. One early morning, the Red Guards suddenly come into Wu's house and violently carry this sick man out on a stretcher while accusing him of being an old counterrevolutionary. Even though Shujuan comes in and begs for mercy, telling the Red Guards that Wu has heart trouble, the young Red Guards do not stop bringing Wu out and put posters criticizing Wu all around his house. When one of the Red Guards shouts that Shujuan is Wu's wife, they arrest Shujuan and whip her. Indeed, a group of Red Guards severely beat little Tietou when he tries to save his mother. In this scene, the director well illustrates the merciless violence conducted during the Cultural Revolution.

In the very last scene, Tietou lies unconscious on the ground – viewers are not sure whether he is dead or alive. Tietou's voice narrates that his step father Wu died due to heart disease on November 7, 1968; and his mother Shujuan was sent to a labor reform camp as a counterrevolutionary. A broken blue kite stuck on a tree branch symbolizes that the Cultural Revolution totally destroyed people's ordinary lives and trampled their hopes for a better society.

Adapted from Yu Hua's 1992 novel, *To Live* is another story of one Beijing-based family's struggle under Mao Zedong's rule from the late 1940s to the 1970s. Like the other two films, *To Live* reveals the negative aspects of the Cultural Revolution, especially its unreasonable accusations against innocent people as capitalists and the tragic results.

One day, the main character, Xu Fugui, hears news that his district chief, Chunsheng, who survived with Fugui during the Civil War, is accused as a capitalist, which could cause him to be imprisoned or executed. One very late night when there is no one on the streets, Chunsheng comes to Fugui's house. Asking Fugui's forgiveness for mistakenly killing Fugui's son in a car accident several years ago, Chunsheng proposes that Fugui take all of his assets. Then, Chunsheng starts to

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weep, saying that he was accused as a capitalist and his wife killed herself yesterday. Looking at Chunsheng's hopeless face, Fugui tells him not to lose hope and to endure the situation, but the weeping Chunsheng replies he does not want *To Live* anymore. Fugui continues to try to persuade Chunsheng to live, but when Chunsheng disappears into the dark street, it seems that Fugui's efforts were unsuccessful.

Another person, Mr. Niu, the head of the township, is also unfairly accused as a capitalist. Mr. Niu tells Fugui and Fugui's wife, Jiazhen, that he needs to confess his crimes to the Party, although he has always followed Chairman Mao's path. Fugui and Jiazhen are perplexed by such hard-to-believe news and ask when he can return, but Mr. Niu avoids answering.

Such unpredictable and unreasonable accusations of these two innocent people implies that no one was ever politically safe during the Cultural Revolution; people who were once recognized as faithful to the Party could be sacrificed overnight by a false accusation.

Moreover, the film's director, Zhang Yimou, criticizes the Party's suppression of "intellectuals" through the scenes of Fugui's daughter Fengxia's death. When Fengxia is admitted to hospital to give birth, her family discovers that all doctors have been imprisoned, having been accused as "reactionaries." The hospital was left in the hands of inexperienced young Red Guards. Out of worry for Fengxia's safety, her husband, Erxi, succeeds in taking the head of the obstetrics department, Professor Wang, from a parade of reactionaries. During the delivery, Fengxia starts bleeding due to postpartum hemorrhaging. Not knowing what to do, the young Red Guards cry out for help. The camera shows white cloths covered in bright red blood, flustered Red Guards, bleeding Fengxia having difficulty breathing, and her mother Jiazhen in a panic. One of the Red Guards confesses that "we are just students. We don't know what to do." Dr. Wang is supposed to save Fengxia, but his life is also in danger. After having been starved for many days, Dr. Wang ate too much, too fast of the seven buns and water provided by Fengxia's parents. Unexpectedly, each bun expanded to the size of seven buns, which means the doctor had the equivalent of 49 buns in his belly, putting him into an almost comatose condition. In the absence of any medical intervention, Fengxia bleeds to death following the birth of her son. It is quite a comical situation, yet no one can laugh. Mother Jiazhen's painful cry holding her dying daughter intensifies the misery of this tragic moment.

Through this sadly humorous episode, Zhang Yimou satirizes the Party's decision

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to detain all innocent people necessary to the society. If only the Party had not confined the doctors, if only the prisoners had been fed enough, then Fengxia, one of the masses that the Party so loudly shouted to value, could have had proper medical treatment and avoided such a meaningless death.

As shown above, all three of these directors described the Cultural Revolution in an apparently negative way. Chen Kaige showed the fears and betrayals of the people, Tian Zhuangzhuang depicted mob violence and unreasonable political accusations, and Zhang Yimou revealed false accusations and the nonsense of suppressing "intellectuals" during the Cultural Revolution. Noticeably, there is not a single beautification of the Cultural Revolution.

Such negative descriptions of the Cultural Revolution, I argue, came from the three directors' miserable experiences of it. Chen Kaige openly shared his terrible memory of the Cultural Revolution and admitted that his negative experiences were reflected in his film.[13] Just like Xiaolu betrays Dieyi and Dieyi accuses Juxian, teenager Chen Kaige denounced his own father, Chen Hauikai, a celebrated filmmaker who had been associated with the KMT Nationalist pre-1949 regime. Chen Kaige later confessed that this had filled him with guilt that he has lived with ever since,[14] and this experience modelled the struggle session of *Farewell My Concubine*.[15]

Similar to Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang has a traumatic memory of the Cultural Revolution. Ni Zhen, professor at the Beijing Film Academy where Tian Zhuangzhuang graduated, describes what happened to Tian Zuangzhuang's family in detail in his book, *Memories from the Beijing Film Academy*. According to Ni's description, the Red Guards ransacked the courtyard house that Tian and other families shared and labeled Tian's parents (famous actor Tian Fang and actress Yu

13. Chen Kaige wrote in his autobiography: "During the Cultural Revolution, I suffered; I watched others suffer; I also made others suffer. I was part of the mob." Chen Kaige, *Tree of Dragon Blood* (Longwue shu) (Hong Kong: Tiandi, 1992), p. 85. Recited in Tonglin Lu, *Confronting modernity in the Cinemas of Taiwan and Mainland China* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 66.

14. Yomi Braester, "Farewell My Concubine: National Myth and City Memories", in *Chinese Films in Focus II*, edited by Chris Berry (Basingstoke, Hampshire (England) and New York: Palgrave Macmillan; London: (Published) on behalf of British Film Institute, 2008), p. 109.

15. "You know what happened between my father and me. You know, I just denounced my father, just as you saw in my film *Farewell My Concubine*. (…) There is a big enigma in my heart, and not only in my heart. We cannot forget, even if we try very hard to forget. Spiritually we are living in that period. That's the point." Kalus Eder and Deac Rossell, eds., *New Chinese Cinema* (London: National Film Theatre/British Film Institute, 1993), p. 98.

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Lan) as "members of the black gang in literature and the arts" and "enemies."[16] They were made to stand with their heads bowed as a form of punishment while the Red Guards burned the calligraphy, art, and famous works of literature brought out from the houses of the accused. Soon after, Tian's parents were sent to the "cowshed" (slang for a place of imprisonment) at Beijing Film Studio and undertook supervised labor. The violent ransacking described in *The Blue Kite* reflects such an event that the young Tian Zhuangzhuang witnessed.

Zhang Yimou also had terrifying experiences during the Cultural Revolution. His father and his two older brothers had all been KMT Nationalist officers at the Huangpu Military Academy, which meant his family's political background was especially bad. During the Cultural Revolution, his father was labeled the worst kind of counterrevolutionary – a "double counterrevolutionary", a historical counterrevolutionary and an acting counterrevolutionary. This meant Zhang's father was the principal target of political suppression. Because of that family background, Zhang Yimou said that his entire family found itself in terrible straits, and he felt there was really no hope for him.[17]

The climax of To Live, when Fengxia dies at a hospital, specifically and possibly originated from the fact that Zhang Yimou's mother was a medical doctor who belonged to an unwelcome class during the Cultural Revolution. The imprisonment of medical doctors, their mistreatment by the Red Guards, and the deaths of innocent people caused by that in the film *To Live* reflect Zhang Yimou's thinking that suppressions of the medical doctors was nonsense. Yu Hua's original novel also touches on this issue,[18] but unlike the novel, the medical scene occupies the climax in Zhang's film. Also, with its contrasting colors and vivid sounds, this scene gains more gravity in Zhang's film.

The last noteworthy point is that none of the three films directly comment on Mao Zedong. None of these three films blames Mao for the Cultural Revolution, no matter how negatively they depicted the Cultural Revolution. Condemnation of the Cultural Revolution is not pointing at Mao but at the Gang of Four in *Farewell My Concubine*, as shown in the opening scene when the unidentified old man says,

16. Ni Zhen, *Memories from the Beijing Film Academy*, translated by Chris Berry (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 16–17.

17. Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 111–112.

18. In Yu Hua's novel, Fugui's son dies due to medical negligence while he was donating blood at a hospital.

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"It (not performing together for twenty two years) was due to the Gang of Four and the Cultural Revolution." Mao is also absent from both Blue Kite and To Live. It is apparent that the historical background is during Mao's period, but we cannot see Mao's figure or hear Mao's name in either film. This pattern coincides with Deng Xiaoping's official judgment on Mao and the Cultural Revolution; the Cultural Revolution is erroneous, but Mao is not.

Ⅳ. Descriptions of the Cultural Revolution in Paintings

Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* series, made between 1990 and 2005, is an indispensable work when studying artworks that used the Cultural Revolution image. Basically, *Great Criticism* series is a juxtaposition of figures from Cultural Revolution propaganda posters and famous Western (European and American) brand logos. In *Great Criticism-Coca Cola* (1990-1993, Illus. 1), for example, the Coca-Cola logo is located on the right bottom, while the soldier, peasant, and worker – the most frequent subjects of the Cultural Revolution propaganda posters – are placed on the left. The Coca-Cola logo perfectly follows its original typography and colors as printed on its cans, bottles, and advertisements. Soldier, peasant, and worker are also painted in the same way as the Cultural Revolution posters, represented by their bold outlines and simplified figures. Vivid, yet limited colors (only yellow, red, black, and white are used) and simple composition make Wang's painting look like an advertisement or poster. With the title "*Great Criticism*", which was one of the most frequent slogans during the Cultural Revolution, and with the images that seem to be just cut out from propaganda posters, viewers immediately think of the Cultural Revolution when looking at Wang's work.

Illus. 1. Wang Guangyi, *Great Criticism*–Coca Cola, 1990–93, oil on canvas, 200×200cm, private collection, USA.

Interestingly, however, the *Great Criticism* series says nothing about the Cultural Revolution, according to the four possible interpretations. First, one can think that the soldier, peasant, and

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Illus. 2. Shanghai People's Publishing House Poster Production Group, *Struggle for a Good Harvest and Store Food Supplies Everywhere*, 1973, 53×77cm.
Illus. 3. Central Arts and Crafts Institute, *Make the Great Leader Chairman Mao Proud, Make the Great Socialist Motherland Proud*, 1970, 106×77cm.
Illus. 4. Chinese PLA Chengdu District, *The Army and the People Guarding the Border Together Are a Wall of Iron*, 1971, 77×53cm.

worker are attacking Coca-Cola. The soldier, peasant and worker represent Chinese socialism, and Coca-Cola stands for Western capitalism.[19] In this case, combined with the "criticism" in the title and the aggressive characters pointing at the logo with their firm fists, Wang's work can be read as a criticism of capitalism and China's commodification. An opposite interpretation, if one considers that the Chinese soldier, peasant, and worker are desiring, not attacking, Western brands, is that the painting delivers a message that China now needs to pursue capitalism.[20] Third, *Great Criticism* can also be a neutral description of 1990s China, where conventionally

19. Julia F. Andrews and Shen Kuiyi, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), p. 260.
20. Ibid. p. 260.

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Illus. 5. He Kongde, *The Fight against US Imperialism by the People of the Whole World Will Succeed*, 1965, 54×155cm.

contradicting ideologies and systems, namely socialism and capitalism, coexist. Last, but not least, *Great Criticism* can be read as a satire of such seemingly incompatible coexistence.

In any case, it is clear that Wang's *Great Criticism* series is not about the Cultural Revolution. It neither criticizes the setbacks of the Cultural Revolution nor eulogizes its achievements. To describe bitterness, sorrow, or anger towards the Cultural Revolution is not Wang Guangyi's purpose, either. Rather, the images from the Cultural Revolution propaganda posters were used only to indicate Chinese socialism.

One other noteworthy point is that the determination and zeal for and belief in socialism that dominated the Cultural Revolution posters are now questioned in Wang's work. During the Cultural Revolution, all the figures in the propaganda posters have a great passion for and firm belief in building the ideal socialist state. A farmer "struggles for a good harvest and store food supplies everywhere", hoping to secure the people's need (Illus. 2), a blue-collar worker works himself into a lather in order to "make the great leader Chairman Mao proud, make the great socialist motherland proud" (Illus. 3), and soldiers bravely guard the border against the enemies (Illus. 4). In all propaganda posters, the Chinese voluntarily fulfill their duties in order to build a utopian socialist state, which Mao once envisioned. Furthermore, these images are determined to "fight against U.S. imperialism" by cooperating with "the people of the whole world" (Illus. 5). Without exception, all of the poster figures display great confidence in socialism. In contrast, it is unclear if Wang Guangyi's soldiers, peasants, and workers are pursuing or rejecting socialism. Are they desiring capitalism, as represented by Western brand logos, or are they fighting against it?

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That is to say, Wang Guangyi appropriated images from the Cultural Revolution propaganda posters only to indicate socialism and to raise a question about it.

It was the juxtaposition of the images from the Cultural Revolution and advertisement that makes Wang Guangyi succeed in dispelling the heavy ideological meanings of the Cultural Revolution. *Small Criticism Series* more clearly shows this strategy. In Small Criticism-Mango (1992), for instance, a man with a determined face is holding up a pen in the middle, another man with a smiling face is under him, and a clenched fist is located next to him. These three – determined face, happy face, and clenched fist –are typical Cultural Revolution poster images. In Wang's work, however, they are placed with the English words "melon", "mango", and "orange" and images of each word. This means that images that used to carry highly ideological meaning are now treated as meaningless, everyday objects, such as melon, orange, and mango.[21] By juxtaposing Cultural Revolution poster images with everyday objects, they lose their original heavy ideological meaning and become plain, trivial, and light. As Huang Zhuan noted, political images in Wang's works had only one function: "to break off the established expectations of significance and aesthetic judgments that people had toward these kinds of political images."[22]

Wang's tendency is actually shared by many other artists who used the Cultural Revolution images. Li Shan (李山 b.1942) juxtaposed Mao Zedong with signs of sexuality, Yu Youhan (余友涵 b.1943) added textile patterns in a wide-spread image of Mao with peasants, and Feng Mengbo (冯梦波 b.1966) placed Cultural Revolution workers in computer game settings. Through their works, the Cultural Revolution images started to be used as icons without the previous heavy, sacred ideological passion.

Zhang Xiaogang's *The Bloodline: Big Family* is another important artwork that used images of the Cultural Revolution. *The Bloodline: Big Family* series started when Zhang Xiaogang visited his parents' home in Kunming in 1993. At his old house, Zhang was inspired by old family photographs taken during the Cultural

21. To evaporate heavy meanings of icons is Wang Guangyi's old way to work. In his Post–Classical Series of the 1980s, Wang Guangyi appropriated compositions of master works of classical western art history, such as El Greco's *St. Matthew*, Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*, and Velasquez's *Les Menines*, but reduced their religious reverence or historical heroism to a bitter cold terrain devoid of human emotion, as Karen Smith rightly pointed out. Karen Smith, *Nine Lives: the Birth of Avant–Garde Art in New China* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2008), p. 51.

22. Huang Zhuan, *Visual Polity: Another Wang Guangyi* (视觉政治学：另一个王广义) (Guangzhou: Lingnan Art Publishing, 2008), unpaged.

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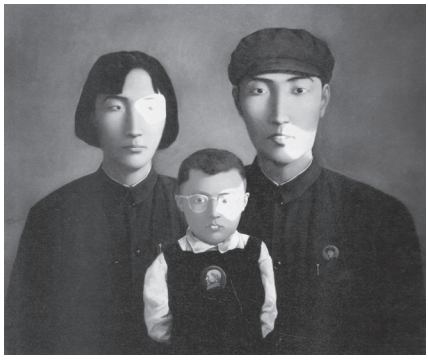

Illus. 6. Zhang Xiaogang, *The Bloodline: The Big Family*, 1994, oil on canvas, 150×180cm, Collection of Hanart TZ Gallery, Hong Kong.

Revolution and began to transport them into his canvas.

To see the work in detail, *The Bloodline: Big Family* (1994, Illus. 6), one of the earliest ones in the series, consists of Zhang Xiaogang's mother on the left, his father on the right, and his elder brother in between them. Brownish-black and white dominates the canvas, with the exception of a child's magenta-colored face and fine red lines. The figures' appearance wholly deliver the sense of the Mao period: parents are wearing the blue-gray uniform of the Mao period; the mother's mid-length bobbed hair is the typical women's hair style of the time, and the father's cap is a fashion for men; the father and son are wearing badges of Mao and Lenin, respectively, as many did at the time.

Although these figures are genuine portraits of Zhang Xiaogang's mother, father, and elder brother, they do not seem to be a real family. Something is strange. First of all, any emotional or physical affection is totally absent, making it difficult to believe them to be a real family. Such alienation between family members is, however, thought to be a genuine reflection of what Zhang Xiaogang's family experienced during the Cultural Revolution. At the time, Zhang Xiaogang's mother suffered from schizophrenia, which caused her (and other mentally ill people) to be excluded from any kind of workplace.[23] In Mao's hard-line socialist society where people work together and share profits, unable workers were seen as parasites who received advantages from others without giving any proper return. Thus, Zhang Xiaogang's family had to fight against their neighbors' despising gazes every day. This harsh situation created a damaging rift in family relations when Zhang Xiaogang was in his late teens, as representatively shown by the fact that his parents never came to see him even when he was hospitalized. That people in the painting look so isolated is possibly a reflection of such a memory.

Second, all the figures look the same. Except for hairstyle, the mother's and father's

23. It was mainly because anyone with a mental illness was thought not to be adequately monitored or to be unpredictable at the best, as art historian Karen Smith correctly described. Karen Smith (2008), p. 271.

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faces are the same: they have the same face shapes, eyes, eyebrows, and nose. They show no facial expression. They are wearing the same suits. These things make people look almost genderless. Francesca Dal Lago and Gao Minglu interpreted such sameness as questioning the humanism and individuality of the time.[24] Their interpretation is convincing when we consider how uniform Mao's China was. Political satirist P.J. O'Rourke's description of the 1970s PRC is a direct example. After gathering information from Nixon's entourage in 1972, P.J. O'Rourke described China's leading fashion trends:

> Unisex is the very first thing that hits you in China. Not that ersatz continental garconette haircut business or high heels for men, but real unisex. The clothing that they wear — it's not masculine or feminine, nor is it as dumpy and sexless as it looks in those Daily News centerfolds, it's just the same for everyone. And the effect of those millions and millions dressed alike without regard for age or station is more spectacular than any Ken Russell outrage.[25]

This description shows that Zhang Xiaogang's people who look so alike are the real portraits of the time. Going one step further, it is possible to imagine how painful it was for Zhang Xiaogang and his family as they struggled against the neighbors' prejudiced views of his mother's mental illness in such a uniform society.

Last, but not least, there are recognizable strange color patches and red lines. They seem to ruin the painting but are, in fact, important symbols. Zhang confessed that he was so afraid when he discovered his mother's illness could be hereditary, and this fear increased when Zhang Xiaogang's daughter was born in 1994.[26] The color patches and red lines represent Zhang's feelings. White, yellowish, or reddish color patches on people's faces tell that abnormal genes can be randomly inherited, while the thin red lines represent bloodlines that can transmit false genes from one generation to the next. Together, they express Zhang's fear of transmitting his mother's false genes to Zhang Xiaogang and from him to his daughter.

All in all, Zhang Xiaogang's *The Bloodline: Big Family* series expresses the fear of difference that Zhang felt during the Cultural Revolution when all individuality was erased from the society. Zhang's family series is a criticism of a stifling lifestyle, as

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24. Francesca Dal Lago, "Inside Out: New Chinese Art, a Conversation with Gao Minglu", *ART AsiaPacific* Vol. 20 (1998): 42–49.

25. P. J. O'Rlouke, "The Boxer Shorts Rebellion," *Age and Guile: Beat Youth, Innocence and a Bad Haircut* (New York: Picador, 1995), p. 14. Recited from Karen Smith (2008), pp. 290–91.

26. Ibid. p. 270.

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Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu rightly noted.[27] Zhang Xiaogang's work does not reveal the dark side of the Cultural Revolution as directly as the previously examined movies, but he maintains negative attitudes towards it much more apparently than does Wang Guangyi.

V. Comparison

Before concluding, I want to highlight the various attitudes the five works exhibit towards the Cultural Revolution. To divide them roughly, the three directors describe the Cultural Revolution much more negatively, directly, and vividly than the two artists. While it is reasonable to say that it is natural for films and paintings, two different media, to have dissimilar ways of telling the same issue, I consider different personal experiences during the Cultural Revolution as the most important reason for the different depictions of the Cultural Revolution among the three films and two painting series. That is to say, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Zhang Yimou, who personally witnessed their parents' persecution and directly suffered from it, could have worse and stronger memories about the Cultural Revolution than the two painters whose families did not experience as severe oppression as the three directors. This argument becomes more convincing when we consider that directors whose families did not suffer from harsh political persecution contain less direct and cruel scenes about the Cultural Revolution. Jiang Wen(姜文 b. 1963)'s 1994 film, *In the Heat of the Sun* (阳光灿烂的日子), and Wu Wenguang (吴文光 b. 1956)'s 1993 film, 1966, *My Time in the Red Guards* (我的红卫兵时代), are representative examples.

Taking a more detailed view, more variety is noticeable among the five works. Although the three directors criticized the Cultural Revolution, the points they highlight slightly differ; as previously said, Chen Kaige described how terrified the Chinese were, Tian Zhuangzhuang blamed violent political accusations, and Zhang Yimou satirized oppressing "intellectuals" during the Cultural Revolution. Also, Zhang Yimou's *To Live* implies a positive future as shown by Fugui's line, "the chickens will turn into geese, and geese will turn into sheep, and the sheep will turn into oxen. After oxen, (…) he (grandson) will ride trains and planes and life will

27. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, "Art, Culture, and Cultural Criticism in Post-New China", *New Literary History* Vol. 28, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 121.

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Illus.7. Cheng Conglin, *A Snowy Day in 1968*, 1979, oil on canvas, 202×300cm, National Art Museum of China, Beijing.

get better and better."[28] However, the conclusions of Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* do not allude to a bright future. The main characters in these two movies either commit suicide or fall into a coma. Wang Guangyi neutrally appropriated the images of the Cultural Revolution, while Zhang Xiaogang expressed the personal fears of during the time.

The different attitudes towards the Cultural Revolution shown in these works are telling when we compare them to films and paintings about the Cultural Revolution in the past. During the Cultural Revolution, all the movies, paintings, and posters were censored by the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party and were used as transmitters of the Party's ideology to the people. As a result, almost all previous films were banned, feature film production nearly stopped, and only a few new ones were produced, such as a ballet version of the revolutionary opera. All artworks, with no exception, beautified China's present under the Cultural Revolution by displaying happy and healthy people and promising that the bright socialist future is near. In contrast, soon after the Cultural Revolution was over, the majority of artworks severely criticized the Cultural Revolution. The so-called Scar Film, such as Xie Jin (謝晉)'s Hibiscus Town (芙蓉镇 1986), depicted emotional traumas left by the Cultural Revolution, and Scar Art, represented by Cheng Conglin (程丛林)'s A Snowy Day in 1968 (一九六八年某月某日.雪 1979, Illus.7), addressed the physical and mental damages done by the Cultural Revolution. That is to say, artworks from

28. Previously in the film, Fugui enthusiastically tells his son, "when the chickens grow big, they will turn into geese, geese will turn into sheep, and sheep will turn into oxen. Then, from the oxen to communism. And everybody will eat meat every day!" However, in the last scene, Fugui replaced communism with planes and trains. It reflects that political passion during Mao's period was replaced with economic ambition in Deng Xiaoping's era.

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one period delivered the same message about the Cultural Revolution: either blind eulogy or severe criticism. Given that, we can read the diverse comments on the Cultural Revolution in the early 1990s films and paintings as one signal (with many others) that indicates that Chinese society had changed to be noticeably more diverse.

Nevertheless, the Party still controlled the cultural realm at some levels. In spite of an enthusiastic reception from the outside world,[29] all five works in this study were unwelcome to Mainland Chinese cultural authorities. *Farewell My Concubine* was alternatively banned and unbanned and won no awards in the PRC. *The Blue Kite* was censored by the Chinese government prior to its final editing and was not given a general release in China because of its criticism of government measures, and a 10-year ban on filmmaking was imposed on Tian Zhuangzhuang. *To Live* was also banned by the Chinese government for its negative portrayal of life during Mao's regime. Works of Wang Guangyi and Zhang Xiaogang were not displayed in Mainland China until the late 1990s. Perhaps, the authorities might have thought there was no benefit for the Party to remind people of the pitfalls of the Cultural Revolution. This fact hints that governmental control over the arts was not relaxed as much as Chinese artists wanted in the early 1990s.

Ⅵ. Conclusion

Five works in this study – Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*, Zhang Yimou's To Live, Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism*, and Zhang Xiaogang's *The Bloodline: Big Family* – were born against the backdrop of the national rumination on Mao, called MaoCraze. In this national nostalgia for Mao's period, directors and artists had a chance to remember their experiences during the time and reflected their thoughts, especially about the Cultural Revolution, in their works.

It was noticeable that all these works still maintain a bottom line: they do not attack Mao Zedong personally. This handsomely dovetails with Deng's early official

29. In 1993, *Farewell My Concubine* won the Palme d'Or, the highest award at the Cannes Film Festival. *The Blue Kite* won the Grand Prix at the Tokyo International Film Festival and Best Film at the Hawaii International Film Festival, both in 1993. *To Live* won the Grand Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994. Since the works of Wang Guangyi and Zhang Xiaogang debuted in the international art world in the early 1990s, they have been invited to the major global museums and galleries and have achieved the highest selling record at international art auctions.

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judgment on the Cultural Revolution and on Mao, as well as the national fondness for Mao of the early 1990s.

It is also important to point out that all the five people showed different approaches towards the Cultural Revolution. Three directors whose families experienced direct and harsh political suppression during the Cultural Revolution tended to reveal its dark sides, yet criticized different points. Two artists whose families did not suffer as severely as the three directors were less aggressive in criticizing or mentioning the Cultural Revolution. Such diversity is an indicator that the PRC had opened a new era, where individual voices were becoming quietly audible. Yet, at the same time, the Party's prohibition on showing the five works in Mainland China indicates that the government's control over the arts was still firm and that the Cultural Revolution remained a sensitive issue.

The Cultural Revolution has been an unforgettable memory for the Chinese people. Ruminations on this "lost ten years" is continuing nowadays, as shown by Zhang Yimou's recent film, *Coming Home* (归来), in 2014 and in numerous artworks, such as Jiang Chongwu's *Nonseries* (2007), Ren Hong's *Red Memory* (2007), and Xiong Qin's *Pictorilage* (2008). To study the changes in the ways to remember the Cultural Revolution will be a lasting topic for the studies of Chinese visual culture and will be a clear window to examine contemporary Chinese society.

■ **Keyword**

Chen Kaige(천카이거), Tian Zhuangzhuang(톈좡좡), Zhang Yimou(장이모), Wang Guangyi(왕광이), Zhang Xiaogang(장샤오강), Chinese Modern art(중국 현대미술), Chinese cinema(중국 영화)

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Abstract

Descriptions of the Cultural Revolution in Early 1990s Chinese Film and Painting

Hayoon Jung

This study examines how the Cultural Revolution was depicted in early 1990s Mainland China by analyzing three films and two painting series, which are Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite*, Zhang Yimou's *To Live*, Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* Series, and Zhang Xiaogang's *The Bloodline: Big Family* series. These works were born against the backdrop of the national rumination on Mao, called MaoCraze. On the one hand, it is noticeable that all these works still maintain a bottom line: they do not attack Mao Zedong personally. This handsomely dovetails with Deng's early official judgment on the Cultural Revolution and on Mao, as well as the national fondness for Mao of the early 1990s.On the other hand, each director and artist showed different approaches towards the Cultural Revolution. To divide them roughly, three directors described the negative sides of the Cultural Revolution more vividly and strongly than the two artists. Such diversity is an indicator that the PRC had opened a new era, where individual voices were becoming quietly audible. Yet, at the same time, the Party's prohibition on showing the five works in Mainland China indicates that the government's control over the arts was still firm and that the Cultural Revolution remained a sensitive issue.

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국문초록

1990년대 초 중국 영화와 미술에서 나타나는 문화대혁명에 대한 묘사

정하윤

이 논문은 마오 열기가 가득했던 1990년대 초 중국에서 문화대혁명이 어떻게 묘사되었는지를 세 편의 영화와 두 회화 시리즈–천카이거의 〈패왕별희〉, 톈좡좡의 〈푸른색 연〉, 장이모의 〈인생〉, 왕광이의 〈대비판〉 시리즈, 장샤오강의 〈대가족 시리즈〉를 통해 살펴본다. 이 영화와 미술작품들은 '마오열기'를 배경으로 나타났다. 마오의 시대에 대한 그리움이 가득했던 시기에 영화감독들과 미술가들은 자신들이 겪었던 문화혁명에 대해 반추하는 기회를 가진 것이라 할 수 있다. 다섯 작품 모두 마오쩌둥을 직접적으로 비난하지 않는다는 공통점을 보이는데, 이는 1981년 덩샤오핑 정부의 공식적인 문화대혁명과 마오쩌둥에 대한 공식적 평가와 일치하며, 1990년대 초반의 마오에 대한 대중적인 호감에 어느 정도 영향을 받았을 것이라 생각된다. 한편, 문화대혁명 기간 동안 겪었던 그들의 다른 경험 때문에, 세 명의 영화감독들과 두 미술가들은 문화대혁명에 대한 다른 태도를 보여준다. 간단히 나누자면, 가족이 문혁 기간 동안 정부로부터 심한 탄압을 받은 세 영화감독들은 그렇지 않았던 두 미술가들보다 더욱 생생하고 강하게 문화대혁명의 부정적인 측면을 드러냈다. 문화대혁명에 대한 다양한 태도는 중국이 개인적인 의견을 표출할 수 있는 사회가 되었음을 시사한다. 그러나 동시에 중국 공산당이 다섯 작품이 중국 본토에서 보여지는 것을 허락하지 않았다는 점은 여전히 정부의 문화 규제가 건재했다는 것과 문화대혁명이 90년대 초반에도 민감한 문제였음을 나타낸다.

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