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Chinese Movies in 1990s

A case of “In the Heat of the Sun” and “Farewell My Concubine”

In 1990s, different film masterpieces were created within China and other parts of the world. Increased innovation led to high-quality movies and the most famous and iconic work included “The Titanic.” At the same time, realist movies started dominating in the market, and phase was also marked by an increase of independent filmmakers. Under this atmosphere, movies, as a form of art, stepped into a new realm in terms of form and content (Silbergeld 2008). Many movies that were produced in 1990s had great effect as they deepened the thoughts of human beings, humanity, and social development. The paper will analyze Chinese movies that were produced in 1990s and use “In the Heat of the Sun” and “Farewell My Concubine” as my examples.

In the 70s of last century, the Culture Revolution began in China and it resulted to low development of Chinese economy, culture, and industry, especially in the aspects of civilization and education. Different educators and artists were killed, and students began to undertake various activities in the countryside. China was civilized country with five thousand years history, but during this movement, it faced culture discontinuity which generated people's fanatic ideas that drown everything. After damaging history relics, the deteriorating Chinese history and culture as well as the humiliated cultural workers were the main themes during the Culture Revolution that had been lasting for ten years (Silbergeld 2008). In the late 1970s, the Culture

Revolution finally ended and the Chinese started to rectify the wrong thoughts and behaviors, and it was followed by Chinese reform and opening-up policy. The society gradually accepted new foreign ideas and culture (Paul 2005). It is during this time that Chinese movie industry embraced its spring with filmmakers, who were educated in Beijing Film Academy, and these people were referred to as the 5th generation of Chinese film directors. Kaige Chen, the director of “In the Heat of the Sun”, and Wen Jiang, the director of “Farewell My Concubine” were among the elites.

“In the Heat of the Sun” was a film adapted from Shuo Wang’s novel, “Ferocious Animal”. The movie was produced during the Culture Revolution in Beijing, starring at a group of kids that lived in military compound (Jiang 1995). Xiaojun Mao, one of the kids, did normal things that a teenager would do. These kids fought, played truant, and flirted with girls on street. It seemed that the Culture Revolution did not influence the kids since they were free from going to school, while older kids went to the countryside. The whole city belonged to these little kids, and they could do anything they wanted without any limitations. In the novel, “Ferocious Animals”, Mr. Wang stated that “I appreciate the time I have lived in, when students didn't need to learn helpless knowledge.”

“Farewell My Concubine” was adapted from a novel of the same name, written by Bihua Li. In the winter of 1942, Dieyi Cheng was sent to learn Beijing Opera by his mother, who was a prostitute. His senior fellow apprentice (Xiaolou Duan) was the only that cared about him. After ten years of studying and practicing, the skill of the two individuals had improved a lot, and their classic opera piece, “Farewell My Concubine”, became famous across Beijing. In the opera, Dieyi played a female character that really confused his judgment of his own gender. The film set its background at the time Japan invaded China (Chen 1992). Xiaolou Duan decided

to marry Juxian who is a prostitute, and this hardly hurt Dieyi Cheng. Dieyi got a historical sword from a very powerful man, and she had promised to give it to Xiaolou. When delivering the sword, she promised to cut off Xiaolou relationship. During a performance, Juxian rushed to Dieyi to tell her that Xiaolou was caught by Japanese soldiers since he involved in spreading flyers that were meant to fighting against Japan. In order to save Xiaolou, Juxian agreed to leave him. After that, Dieyi started to perform for Japanese army. However, Xiaolou rebuked Dieyi after he was released, and insisted to marry Juxian. Due to living in such unrested society and breaking up with Dieyi, Xiaolou ended his performance career. Several years had passed, Dieyi became more and more famous, but addicted to smoking. Their teacher got angry about their differences and tried to reconcile them, and, thus, gave them a platform to perform together. After the war of Resistance against Japan, Juxian aborted when she tried to protect Xiaolou during a performance for Nationalist Party, while Dieyi was caught because of traitor conviction. Xiaolou and Juxian tried everything and spent all they had in order to rescue Dieyi. However, Dieyi was acquitted because of interceding from the powerful man. As not knowing the truth, Juxian suspected that it was all a trick implemented by Dieyi and they began to abandon her. Later in 1949, Xiaolou and Dieyi started performance. During the Culture Revolution, Xiaolou agreed to disclose Dieyi's offence. When being persecuted, Dieyi got totally disappointed, so he told the public that Juxian was a prostitute. Under the unbearable pressure, Xiaolou admitted that he didn't love Juxian causing her to committee suicide. After the Culture Revolution, Dieyi and Xiaolou came back to the theatre, in which they used to perform. Although they did not have audiences, they decided to act out their classic opera "Farewell My Concubine." During this last show, Dieyi killed himself by a real sword, which had similar ending

as the female character he was playing (Chen 1992).

Both movies reflected various sections of Chinese history from different angles. "In the Heat of the Sun" depicted a group of kids' cognition towards the society and their personal values that reflected the Culture Revolution. "Farewell My Concubine" reflected Chinese underclass artists' helpless lives by using opera as a career. In general, these two films described the modern history of China from different perspectives: One reflected the social regulation during the Culture Revolution from the view of a naïve child and, on the other hand, they were based on biography, and using Peking Opera as a carrier to document Chinese artists' vicissitudes of life, and it reflected the complexities of Chinese modern history.

Then, I want to analyze characters' personalities in these two films. The leading actor, Xiaojun Ma, from "In the Heat of the Sun", was a sincere but rebellious and restless kid. As it was narrated in the beginning set up a tone of being fantasy, "At that time, it was like summer every day, because the sun was sufficient and bright, which caused my blacked out now and then". Such illusory was like the unreality of the Culture Revolution. The movie was developed sarcastically that helped in describing the growth of Xiaojun Ma, which involved helpless, restless, and uncompromising to the reality. Director Jiang placed explanation of youth on the main character, and we can also conclude that Xiaojun Ma and his friends were representatives of the illusion and impulsion of youth (Paul 2005).

In addition, the roles in "Farewell My Concubine" were much more mature; telling a love story among two men and a woman, as well as the conflicts between homosexuality and heterosexuality. The movie also highlighted the history and the humanity. Dieyi Cheng who was a male actor played the role of female in the operas "Farewell My concubine". Dieyi got obsessed with love in the opera as depicted by

the role played by Xiaolou Duan, and fought against Duan's wife in reality for decades. Such self-perplexity role impresses the audiences. In the original novel "Farewell My Concubine", the author only tells an abnormal love story between two men, however, in the movie, the director broadened and deepened the view, emphasized the history tragedy in such unrested history background. To simplify, the movie was telling about an artist who dedicated himself for the art (Chen 1992). Dieyi was so determined in the drama that he wanted to change the real life and, therefore, his love towards Xiaolou was just an extension from the plots in the opera. He didn't even treat himself as a male, but assimilated his life with the role he played in the drama, and finally generated heterosexual love to his senior fellow apprentice as a gorgeous "woman". Nonetheless, the truth was that Dieyi changed his sexual preference in the real life first, and brought such emotion into the play, which caused his confusion between reality and opera. Even though, Guorong Zhang, the actor of Dieyi, successfully used desperate expression in his eyes, people still felt a distance from the character. Although, his every move was quite touching, it was hard for the audiences to feel the sense of reality.

Even though both movies were based in the same era, the main characters' family background and experiences were great. One of the movies was exploded in the sun, while the other was living in total dark, and anchored his love and life on art. At the same time, the two movies presented the word "lost" but one was lost in extravagant youth, and the other one lost himself in the art causing him to step far from the real life as well as to kill himself on the stage at the end of the movie.

Next, I will discuss the narrative structure in these movies. There is a theory in narratology: not only the narrative texts are described by narrators, but also the narrators themselves are a part of narration. In the narrative process, Director Chen

showed his relentless ironic attitude to Chinese traditional culture, and used main characters' life experiences to present the theme of humanity and the change of society. As a successful tragedy role, Dieyi was a victim of traditional culture, but he was also culturalized thoroughly, what resulted in his desperation about the truth of culture decline. The movie was comprised of three sections and nine key events, and produced narrative theme and humanistic intention by describing the two men grew up. The background was Beijing Opera, a traditional art of China, and all of the characters were dedicated themselves to it. However, the difference of each living environment caused their disparate cognition towards this art, and let them experience different lives. However, in this movie that crossed history, the connection between the two main characters and the traditional art triggered emotional entanglements. Under the background of such history and civilization, the movie presented vivid rhythm, in terms of both the images in the frame and emotional atmosphere. The movie referred the Peking Opera art form while its structure implicated the life journey, and it was fulfilled strength that embodied heroes theme. The reality of character emotion and unrealistic were both completely visualized and harmonized (Paul 2005).

In "In the Heat of the Sun", the narrator hid behind the whole narrative texts, and described the story in a specific angle. The film started with "my" (grown-up Xiaojun Ma) personal off-screen voice to guide the audiences and introduce the early 1970s background and the main characters. The narrator controlled the progress of the story as well as motivated the audiences' emotion. This narrative pattern was quite innovative at that time. Comparing the two movies narrative method, in the "Farewell My Concubine" it used object as carrier to highlight individuality of roles, and utilized characters to manifest history tragedy (Chen 1992). Similarly, the other movie

applied narrative method to help the audiences in understanding the characters' thoughts and relationships. It also reflected another side during the Culture Revolution. These movies shared the same pattern of the accordance between time and space where their stories developed over time (Jiang 1995).

In addition, we can as well examine the cinematography in these two movies in order to observe each director's style. The light and its tone create the image feature modeling, image efforts, sense of style, and the lens' emotion and its emotional intensity. As the aesthete Rudolf Arne Haim said, "the light is the most brilliant and the most spectacular experience that human beings can get". So the illumination, the light's shining and the light's volatility is the ultimate destination of plasticizes. However, to the directors and cameramen, light has a function of conveying emotions. Light plays an important role in building up atmosphere.

In the movie "In the Heat of the Sun", the director was particular about the light, and he mainly used gold and red light to depict the youth generation and the happy times. For instance, on the way to a farm, there was a long boulevard, and the parallel moving camera was quite smooth (low angle) that described a poetic beauty. In Xiaojun Ma's memory, that day is the most beautiful day in his life. The light showed us the love light in Ma's heart. When Ma was upset, the director used the blue light to create a sad atmosphere that successfully delivered the character's bad mood.

In "Farewell My Concubine", the first part of the movie was full of warm color, which was mainly red. The red light, including the beautiful Peking Opera costumes that gave it's audiences a feeling of gorgeous. In contrast, the director also used red tone during the Culture Revolution which represented helplessness and sadness. Different use of the same color showed different emotions and backgrounds, which were quite intense (Chen 1992). The director also used blue color in the movie

to depict the main player's sadness. After being raped, Dieyi was quite upset. So the director combined the blue light with opera drumbeat, so as to set a sad and depressed mood. At the beginning, Dieyi's mother intended to sell him, and that scene was basically in black and white color, which embodied Dieyi's start of his tragedy life. By using black and white, the director pushed the audiences to get to know an unrested era, which was significant. There were three different colors in the movie that were black, red, and blue. Each of the color stressed different periods of history and changes of characters' emotions. Red showed agitation, blue represented loneliness, while black revealed intense of times. The change of the color and lights made the audiences understand the characters' emotional transformation.

At last, the music, which is an important session in movies, is an element of hearing. In "In the Heat of the Sun", the director's memory of that time included not only the shining sun, but also the sounding music. In the film, there were three conditions that played different types of music. Firstly, in very beginning of the movie, when the memory started, the background music was "The Wild Goose Flying Far". The melody drew us back to the era that was filled with sunshine and sweat. Secondly, there were many revolutionary songs interplayed in the movie, which embodied the innocent and kind heart of the people in that times. For instance, such music included "Beautiful Flowers are Open" and "The Golden Furnace". However, there were other types of revolutionary songs such as "Revolution Storm" and "The Internationale" that reflected people's idealism and revolutionary feelings (Jiang 1995). Music could show subjective moods. The song that played the most in the movie was "Cavalleria Rusticana", which came from Pietro Mascagni's opera with similar title. The lyrics were telling about a love story, which ended with tragedy. So it was also a symbolism in the movie that represented Ma's pure and saint love in his

heart. This piece of music accompanied Ma's love from the beginning till the end. The music would start when Ma was looking at Lan Mi's portrait at his home, when he was waiting for Mi, when they were together or even at times they broke up. This music is a portrayal of Ma's heart, or we can say that was Ma's music in his heart, because it belonged to Ma, and that summer when they were together. At the end of the movie, the music for objective environment decayed, when middle-aged Ma was sitting in a luxury car that was driving along the Chang'an Street and suddenly the Tibetan song started. The singer's beautiful voice pulled us to Tibet Plateau with blue sky and white cloud, which was everyone's ideal place. This song was a prospect.

In "Farewell My Concubine", the music was always full of Beijing flavor, and the tragic atmosphere was rendered stronger. There were two themes of music. One of the songs included a string music which had deep voice; another one was percussion music, which was often seen in Peking Opera. When the music began, it was the time when the heroes' life encountered transition (Chen 1992). The string implied that their lives' uncertainty, while the Peking opera showed the main theme of the movie, "Life is Like a Play". When Dieyi was young, he sneaked to the theatre by himself, and the string music delivered message that he should work to fulfill himself. In the end, Dieyi and Xiaolou acted "Farewell My Concubine" for the last time. The Opera music started when Dieyi prepared to kill himself. However, after Dieyi fell off, "Ode to the Motherland" was played, which correlated to the first soundtrack. The coordination showed the movie's space-time narrative method, and also delivered hope that we should believe that our country would become better. The director used Er'hu and percussion instrument from Peking Opera, which complemented with the image. When Xian Ju felt herself being humiliated and she committed a suicide while Duan and Cheng were fighting against each other with roar, the background music sang

“listening to grandma telling me about the revolution...” The whole picture was absurd with the music. The lyric, “I was born in the wind while was grown in the rain”, fully concluded Xian Ju’s life, which added dreariness to the story.

Conclusion

By comparing the similarities and distinctions of the two movies, I get to understand the movies’ background, theme, and narrative methods. Both of the movies were representatives of Chinese film from the last century, and received many awards within and beyond nationwide. They both showed the Chinese filmmakers’ reflection towards humanity and society after the Culture Revolution, which contributed to the development of Chinese film industry.

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