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Between Political Discourse and Classic Inheritance: the State of Chinese Cinema in the 21st Century

Abstract: Since the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese movies have shown a strong tendency towards the adaptation of classics in an attempt to draw audiences. However, of all the productions churned out by the film industry, very few win audience acclaim. One of the main reasons for this is that adaptations, in attempting to weave new themes and plots into the originals, become followers of mainstream values and ideology. While this does contribute to the moral construction of the citizenry, as desired by the Chinese government in the current political context, it is not justified from the perspective of classic inheritance. What means, if any, exist to reconcile the conflict between political discourse and classic inheritance? How to strike a balance between the two? These have become urgent questions which must be addressed.

Keywords: political discourse, classic inheritance, Chinese movie, new century

Since the beginning of the 21st Century, the Chinese movie industry has grown by leaps and bounds. In 2009, the box office income of mainland China reached CNY62.06 billion. After only one year, it exceeded CNY100 billion, with an increase of 60% compared with 2009. That same year, China produced a total of 460 films, making it second only to Hollywood and Bollywood. In 2014, China's box office raked in a total of CNY296 billion, half of which came from domestic movies.

Chinese cinema has not only witnesses a substantial increase in the number of features produced since the dawn of the 21st century, but has also made greater use of cutting-edge technology, serving up incredible audio-visual spectacles to eager audiences. However, all the high-tech imagery can't hide the shallowness of the content. Thus, the gap between the expectations of the audience and their actual evaluation of the films has widened. Further, filmmakers seem to be suffering from waning creative energy, and instead churn out products with almost identical themes. Under such

circumstances, as a last resort directors and playwrights turn to the classics, taking works by classic writers, classic historical figures and events as the subject matter for adaptation, since this material is deeply rooted in the minds of the audience.

With Chinese movies becoming more and more classic-oriented, a question arises: shall the classics be represented faithfully to their true features or is it necessary to sugarcoat them with contemporary and fashionable elements to suit the new epoch? Most of the creators of Chinese movies seem to nod to the latter – classics with a contemporary sheen – and have produced a number of classics-based films including *Se Jie* (*Lust, Caution*, 2007), *Hua Pi 1* (*Painted Skin I*, 2008), *Chi Bi* (*Red Cliff*, 2008–2009), *Mei Lanfang* (*Mei Lanfang*, 2008), *Zhao Shi Gu Er* (*Sacrifice*, 2010), *Da Nao Tian Kong* (*The Monkey King*, 2013), and *Zhi Qu Wei Hu Shan* (*The Taking Of Tiger Mountain*, 2014), etc. However, most of them drew mixed audience reactions, except for *Se Jie* and *Zhi Qu Wei Hu Shan*, which have both earned international acclaim. The reason for this is not just the awkward incorporation of new ideas and plots into the original, but that the films themselves have become active followers of mainstream values and official ideology.

This adherence to mainstream values has become a striking artistic phenomenon since the beginning of the new century, especially in the political context where the moral construction of the public and the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese virtues are much propagated. Each year the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television of China (SARFT) issues new policies regulating the content, scenes and value orientations of films to ensure they stay within approved parameters. As a result, both *Painted Skin I* and *Mei Lanfang* in 2008, to name just a few, reflected the obvious value orientation of the Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) on October 15, 2007, centering around “Holding High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Striving for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects”.

While modern adaptations have to some extent played a positive role in promoting social values, classics are shamelessly altered beyond all recognition. So how to reconcile the conflict between political orientation and the maintenance of the artistic aspect of classics? And how to strike a balance between the two? This paper will take *Painted Skin I* and *Mei Lanfang* as two cases for analysis which includes these aspects: the contents of Chinese movies and government decrees on culture and movies.

Can Mainstream Values of Marriage and Love Rewrite Classics?

Hua Pi (*Painted Skin*) was a classic folk tale in *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* (*Strange Tales of a Lonely Studio*), a Chinese literary classic by Pu Songling.¹ *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi* integrates into a whole the essential beauty of supernatural stories, legends and emotional novels, representing the highest artistic achievement that classical Chinese novels have aspired to for centuries.

The story *Hua Pi* features a lecher named Wang Sheng from Tai Yuan. One day, after having taken home a mistress, he is later informed by a Taoist that he has actually encountered a ghost. Wang Sheng was incredulous, however upon returning home he encounters a phantom with green face and cruel fangs painting on the skin of a beauty before putting it on. Terrified, he hurries back to the Taoist for help, yet there was no escaping the ghost – Wang’s stomach was ripped open and his heart dug out. Later his wife, in an attempt to bring him back to life, followed the instructions of the Taoist who had just conquered the ghost and went to the market. There she asked a mad beggar for a heart, but the beggar spit on the ground for her to swallow. Despite all the humiliation, she ate it and threw up a heart, which fell square into Wang’s open chest, reviving him. The story ends with the commentary of the Chronicler Pu: “How foolish men are! To see nothing but beauty in what is clearly evil! And how benighted to dismiss as absurd what is clearly well intended! It is folly such as this that obliges the lady Chen to steel herself to eat another man’s phlegm, when her husband has fallen prey to lust. Heaven’s Way has its inexorable justice, but some mortals remain foolish and never see the light!”²

In the film version, however, the story is set during the Qin (221-207 B.C.) and Han (202 B.C.-220 A.D.) dynasties. Wang Sheng, now a martial arts master, saved a stunning beauty named Xiao Wei whilst fighting bandits in the western regions. Afterwards, he brought her to Jiang Du Mansion, unaware she is actually a fox from Cloud Nine in human form. The fox then fell in love with her savior and employed black magic to seduce him. However, to maintain her human skin, she was obliged to feed on a human heart offered by her invisible helper and admirer Xiao Yi, a lizard monster. Every few days Xiao Yi killed citizens of Jiang Du or what he needed, throwing the city into chaos. Meanwhile, Pei Rong, Wang’s wife, discovered Xiao Wei’s non-humanity and her secret love for Wang. She turned to her first lover Pang Yong, the wandering knight and master martial artist, and Xia Bing, the monster-killer for

¹ ³ “Pu Songling (1645–1715) was a poor, undistinguished scholar who had an uneventful life. He took the lowest degree, the bachelor’s, before he was twenty, but ten years later, he still had not succeeded in passing the second, the master’s degree, due to his neglect of the standard fields of academic study. His loss of personal status is the world’s gain, however, because his overriding interest was in tales of the supernatural, and his collected works, the bible of Chinese supernatural folktales.” Quoted from the product description of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* on Amazon website (<https://www.amazon.co.jp/exec/obidos/ASIN/0140447407/amanatu-22/ref=nosim>). *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Penguin Classics*), translated into English by John Minford, London, Penguin Books, 2006.

² Pu Songling, op. cit., 52.

help. However, it would require her own drinking of the poison imposed by Xiao Wei to save her husband. Pei steeled herself for it, and was transformed into a monster and died. Knowing this, Wang Sheng denied his love for Xiao Wei and committed suicide. This pricked Xiao Wei's conscience. With her magic accumulated through the course of thousands of years, she revived all the dead while she herself reverted to her original form and returned to her cave with the lizard. The resurrected Wang Sheng and his wife lived happily ever after.

The differences between these two versions are too striking to escape notice. Firstly, the female ghost in the original story is transformed into a fox spirit to conform to SARFT Decree No. 52 of Film Scripts/Abstracts Filing and Film Management which was passed by the executive meeting of SARFT on April 3, 2006 and took effect two months later. According to the decree's rules on Film Inspection (13th regulation, Chapter 3), films are forbidden to feature content (5) violating national religious policy or advocating cults or superstition.³ Such transformation is to be expected, as China, a socialist materialist country, won't allow any superstitious ghost-related movies to contaminate or mislead the general public.

Secondly, the film's narrative shifts focus between satirizing people's blindness caused by their obsession with appearance and their inability to tell good from evil to the battle between the legal wife and the 'home wrecker', currently a hot topic regarding love and marriage in contemporary China. Noticeably, the wife in the film prevented the family from falling apart by her kindness, wisdom and self-sacrifice; the husband prioritized family rather than love while the mistress showed her best nature in going back where she belonged. Thus, the happy ending. All these adaptations embody mainstream values and ideologies, and illustrate the way political discourses function regarding the creation of artworks.

Is It Necessary to Hide Historical Truth to Build the Image of a Patriot?

Mei Lanfang is a biographical movie based on the life of the opera performer of the same name who lived from 1894 to 1961. The film emphasizes his artistic excellence as a master of Beijing Opera and his lofty national integrity and patriotism. In the first part of the movie, Mei exhibits both his innovative will and his audacity in challenging authority. However, the historical twists and turns of his love affair with Meng Xiaodong, the actress known as the Winter Emperor and famous for the role of an old gentleman, are given only a passing mention. In fact, the movie renders it in such a way that Meng, convinced by Fu Zhifang, Mei's wife and Qiu Rubai, his friend-manager that she would destroy Mei since he belonged to no woman but to the audience and the inspiration from deep in his soul, leaves Mei well before their romance blossoms. The second half of the movie tells how Mei splits with Qiu because

³ http://www.gov.cn/ziliao/flfg/2006-06/06/content_301444.htm – The website of The Central People's Government of People's Republic of China.

their choices diverge from each other. Mei puts national interests above art and refuses to perform for the Japanese invaders, thus suspending his artistic life, which Qiu wants him to continue. He is consecrated into both an exquisite artist and a proud, isolated and dignified patriot when he grows a beard to demonstrate his anti-Japanese stance during the Japanese occupation of 1937–1945.

But what was Mei Lanfang like in reality? Instead of having their love nipped in the bud as shown in the film, Mei married Meng in 1927 when he had had a wife and a concubine. He tucked his new bride away in a secluded corner of the house where the couple lived together for more than four years until they divorced in 1931, because Meng felt empty after quitting her job for marriage and felt excluded by both the jealous Fu and Mei's family members for her strong character. Moreover, contrary to the film, history has it that there was no such person called Qiu Rubai. The real figure was Qi Rushan who was not only Mei's manager and behind-the-scene advocate for his success, but a famous playwright and theater critic. And according to Qi's manuscripts, they never became enemies since his son stayed in Mei's house for two or three years when Mei fled to Hong Kong during the Japanese invasion.

The film adaptation of *Mei Lanfang* is undoubtedly in accordance with the value orientation of the CPC's 17th National Congress Report on October 15, 2007. Thus, Mei becomes the advocate of family virtues and patriotism in abandoning Meng and breaking away from his friend for his country. But his love story and marriage life with Meng are erased just as Qui Rubai/Qi Rushan is vilified. These adaptations, despite or because of their political correctness, are open question if considered from the position that biographical movies are obliged to represent the hero as they are, not partially but as a whole, not falsely but truthfully.

How to Make Classic Inheritance Compatible with Mainstream Ideology?

The two cases above demonstrate how Chinese movies in the new century struggle to find balance between mainstream ideology and the inheritance of classics in their artistic integrity. On one hand, they must yield to the political pressure, as proved by the adaptations that reflect the spirit of CPC's 17th National Congress Report⁴, which calls for practices to: "Foster a culture of harmony and cultivate civilized practices. A culture of harmony provides important intellectual support for the unity and progress of all our people. We must step up the development of the press, publishing, radio, film, television, literature and art, give correct guidance to the public and foster healthy social trends. [...] We will promote patriotism, collectivism and socialist ideology. With the emphasis on enhancing people's awareness of integrity, we

⁴ Chinese Communist Party's 17th National Congress (briefly called "CPC's 17th Congress") was held on October 15, 2007 in Beijing with the theme of "Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects". The congress ascertained the General Secretary, Hu Jintao's central position in CPC and put down in the Party's chapters the scientific development view as the mainstream ideological guide.

will promote social ethics, professional codes of conduct, family virtues and individual morality, let paragons of virtue serve as role models for society, and guide people in conscientiously carrying out legal obligations and social and family responsibilities.”⁵

On the other hand, the government made even stronger demands on classic inheritance, regarding it as the priority among priorities of cultural development: “Promote Chinese culture and build the common spiritual home for the Chinese nation. Chinese culture has been an unfailing driving force for the Chinese nation to keep its unity and make progress from generation to generation. We must have a comprehensive understanding of traditional Chinese culture, keep its essence and discard its dross to enable it to fit in with present-day society, stay in harmony with modern civilization, keep its national character and reflect changes of the times. We will further publicize the fine traditions of Chinese culture and use modern means of science and technology to exploit the rich resources of our national culture. We will explore and better protect the cultures of all ethnic groups, attach great importance to the protection of cultural relics and intangible cultural heritage and do a good job collating ancient books and records. We will also strengthen international cultural exchanges to draw on the fine achievements of foreign cultures and enhance the influence of Chinese culture worldwide.”⁶

The question is: are there really contradictions between the sound inheritance of classics and the promotion of mainstream values and ideologies? I think that can be settled into reconciliation because promoting the essence of national culture is the common aspiration of the Party, the nation, and the Chinese people. And this very essence which lies in the moral power of seeking truth, benevolence and beauty while condemning falsehood, evil and ugliness never contradicts the mainstream value orientation since the new century or in any other historical period.

A state perishes without its own technology while the race is wiped out for want of its own culture. Of the two evils, the second is even worse. Traditional Chinese culture is the symbol and identity of the Chinese nation as it sets them apart from other nationalities. It is the origin from which the Chinese nation derives its essence and rich nutrients, which, sought after by our ancestors, continue to feed the whole population of 1.3 billion today. The protection and inheritance of traditional culture entails working it into the hearts of the people as part of China’s advanced culture and integrating it into the whole of world culture. Therefore, the inheritance of Chinese classics, far from going against mainstream ideology, should function as one of its most effective ways to influence people, and should play the role of social instructor and educator and remain as the eternal bearer of mental strength.

⁵ Hu Jintao, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects”, Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on October 15 2007, Beijing, People’s Publishing House, 2007, 35. The English translation: www.xinhuanet.com.

⁶ *Ibid*, 35–36.

Five years after CPC's 17th National Congress Report proposed the goal of "Promoting Chinese culture and building the common spiritual home for the Chinese nation," the CPC held its 18th National Congress in November 2012 and pointed out in the report that core socialist values need to be strengthened. Core socialist values are the soul of the Chinese nation and serve as the guide for building socialism with Chinese characteristics. "We should carry out thorough study of and education in these values and use them to guide social trends of thought and forge public consensus. [...] We should maintain leadership and initiative in theoretical work, provide correct guidance, enhance our ability to guide public opinion, and strengthen the influence of the underlying trend of thought in our country. It also advocated the improvement of civic morality in an all-around way. This is the basic task for strengthening socialist morals. We should integrate the rule of law with the rule of virtue, intensify education in public morality, professional ethics, family virtues, and individual integrity, and advocate traditional Chinese virtues and new trends of the times. We should press ahead with the program for improving civic morality, exalt the true, the good, and the beautiful and reject the false, the evil, and the ugly. We should encourage people to willingly meet their statutory duties and obligations to society and family. We should create a social atmosphere in which work is honored and creation is lauded, and cultivate social trends of recognizing honor and disgrace, practicing integrity, encouraging dedication, and promoting harmony."⁷

As we can see, the Chinese government has been consistent with the concern about the moral construction of its citizens. Under these circumstances, it shouldn't be difficult for the classics full of moral fiber to survive and thrive. But it remains a question for the writers and artists as to how to promote socialist core values without sacrificing the essence of classical culture and how to ensure they complement each other.

In December 2014, *Zhi Qu Wei Hu Shan (The Taking Of Tiger Mountain)* adapted from the 1957 Red Classic *Lin Hai Xue Yuan (Tracks In The Snowy Forest)* debuted in China. It remains faithful to the original work, adhering to the regulation by SARFT that no fictionalizing of Red Classics is allowed. Still it is lavished with praise thanks to its great efforts in creating beautiful background scenes, an exciting plot and fascinating special effects. Above all, the surrealist ending of the martyr having reunion dinner with his family symbolizes the passing of the revolutionary spirit and wins the most acclaim from the audience. Hopefully, this may serve as a good example for the adaptation of classics in the future.

⁷ Hu Jintao, "Firmly March on The Path of the Path of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive to Complete the Building of a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects", Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on November 8, 2012, Beijing, People's Publishing House, 2012, 31-32. The English translation: www.xinhuanet.com.