

Into/Out of the Critical Divide: The Indeterminacy of *Hero*

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Introduction

When Zhang Yimou's *Hero* came out in 2003, it was received with much skepticism and was criticized for its sympathetic portrait of the King of Qin, his empire-building conquests and despotism in third-century BC China. Nonetheless, *Hero* was a record-breaking commercial success in both the domestic and international markets, and has been praised in the popular media for its artistic sophistication and mesmerizing visual qualities. Zhang's film, as part of what one critic calls the "global return of *wuxia*" (K. Chan, 2004) also epitomizes the two-way traffic between Hollywood and Chinese cinema, particularly in terms of the adaptation and transformation of conventions and aesthetics within an export-driven cultural industry. It also demonstrates the emergence of a transnational spectatorship that calls into question the categories of meaning and standards used to demarcate Chinese national cinema and Hollywood. In this article I examine the film *Hero* and the "critical divide" among critics in the context of a transnational dialogue on China's nation-building project, and the way in which this Chinese martial arts film engages in such a dialogue by exaggerating the ideological conflicts that underscore this dialogue itself. It argues that, as a transnational cultural product, the film represents a non-committal engagement with the discourses on Chinese nationalism *and* the global flow of cultural images and identities that necessitate a "suspicious" and ambivalent politics, which in turn facilitate its access to global cultural markets.

The Two Poles of Reception: Ideology, Politics, and Transnational Chinese Cinema

The popularity of recent Chinese martial arts films in the international arena has drawn critical attention to the future of the national cinema of China and the increasingly globalized conditions of the production, marketing, and reception of Chinese cinema. With the phenomenal worldwide success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), Chinese martial arts film has also entered a new phase in film criticism and critical discourse both within and outside academia. The most rigorous and intense discussions usually revolve around the changing facets of the martial arts genre in the context of transnational filmmaking, i.e. the reinvention of a traditional (national) genre and its implications for cultural identity and gender representations in a globalized media and visual culture, which, despite its fluidity and multiplicity, is still dominated by Orientalist perceptions of China and other non-Western "Others". On the other hand, the aesthetics, politics, and economics of local/national Chinese cinemas are usually set against the forces of globalization and the resulting increase in cross-border cultural production. [1] The surging interest in martial arts films across national and regional borders, at both the popular-cultural and critical-analytical levels, has generated a multi-vocal discursive space that is transnational and border-crossing in nature. This enables further reflections on the genre's unique position in the reinvention of

Chinese history and culture through fantasy and multiple negotiations with pre-existing and emerging modes of cultural production and reception.

While the so-called "internationalized" or "Hollywoodized" martial arts films in general are appreciated for their aesthetic merit, there is a sense of uneasiness among academics and critics toward the ambiguous politics and ideology that undermine the films' aesthetic accomplishments. Take, for example, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. While its subtle feminist intervention into stereotyped gender representations (Chan, 2004) and sensitivity toward the complexity of the diasporic imagination of China (Klein, 2004) have been noted by film scholars, some critics are skeptical of its authenticity as a "Chinese" martial arts film. Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (as well as *House of Flying Daggers* [2004]) lends itself to similar critical polemics. A US-based Hong Kong filmmaker, for example, criticized the film's "fascist" tendencies (E. Chan, 2004) and complicity with the ideology of the Chinese state (especially concerning reunification) under the guise of historical drama; on the other hand, some reviewers praise its mythical qualities comparable to the Homeric epics (Alleva, 2004: 22), its visual and narrative ambivalences read as an implicit (self-) critique of ideology, and as an effect of the globalizing production logic of Hollywood (P. Chen, 2004: 40-42).

In mainland China and Hong Kong, the critical debate over *Hero* revolves around the interpretation of the film's politics and aesthetics, or more precisely the ideological subtext of its aesthetics. [2] What distinguishes this more localized debate is the existence of two different (and conflicting) intellectual/ideological positions regarding the film's allegorical reference to unification and the notion of *tianxia* (all under Heaven). [3] One argument cautions against the film's tendency to conflate the desire for universal peace, unity and the ideology of unification, hence the "deconstruction" and dissolution of the humanitarian, non-materialistic spirit of *xia* (knight-errant or swordsman) in the Chinese tradition (Ye, 2003; He, 2003); the other position argues that meaning of unity and unification in the film should be sought *outside* the Chinese national context, i.e. as an allegory of the new and changing sociopolitical order in the age of globalization, an apparently universal force that not only China but "all (peoples) under Heaven" must negotiate with, contend against, and participate in (Zhang, 2003).

Such a critical divide, however, does little to explain the international success of Zhang's film. As one critic has pointed out, films by China's Fifth Generation directors (the first batch of graduates from the Beijing Film Academy after the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976) are always subject to political interpretations. For example, critics, especially critics in the West, are accustomed to mapping China's political realities (past and/or present) onto the film narrative to derive "meanings" that are "conducive to the mass production of an exotic Other in the transnational film market" (X. Chen, 1997: 133). Others are more skeptical of Zhang's "selling out" to the West. Riding the tides of the geopolitics of transnational cinema, *Hero* was the top box-office draw in both the domestic and U.S. markets, grossing \$18 million in its first weekend in the U.S. and set a new box-office record in China in 2003. [4] A report in the *South China Morning Post* shows that younger audiences in China are drawn to *Hero* because of its all-star cast and mesmerizing fight scenes, whereas critics remain skeptical of its "meaningless plot" and pro-unification rhetoric (Jen-Siu, 2002). While a statistical survey of audience responses is beyond the scope of this paper, some indications of viewers' reception can be glimpsed from online commentaries such as the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). While individual responses vary according to personal taste, cultural background and expectations, there is a general dividing line between appreciation of the film's visual beauty (a high frequency of occurrence of adjectives such as "beautiful", "magnificent",

"breathtaking", etc.) and dismay over its propaganda (glorifying a well-known tyrant in history to promote a militant nationalism). The majority of viewers, who prefer to read the film as a pure visual feast, are willing to positively accommodate the perceived plot defects or even ideological flaws, as the following examples from the IMDb show:

[E]ven if this film had absolutely no plot to speak of, I would have considered the money I plunked down yesterday to see *Hero* to be money well-spent, because I have been witness to some of the most achingly beautiful film-making I've ever seen.

[I]t is difficult to ponder these [plot] details when they are made so utterly insignificant when viewing such a spectacle [...] *Hero* is undoubtedly a most beautiful and awe-inspiring film. What it lacks in plot substance, it makes up for with structure and script.

The only troubling thing about *Hero* is the underlying philosophy that the film seems to promote. Nameless comes to believe [...] that the King of Qin's bloody wars and tyrannical rule are justified in that they will unify China [and] allows himself to be killed rather than kill the tyrant [...] In the end, though, *Hero's* philosophy scarcely matters in the long run. It's a visual film, and a great one. I give it 10/10. [\[5\]](#)

As Chen Xiaoming observes, China's Fifth Generation directors consciously adopt an apparently "apolitical" approach to filmmaking, in order to distance themselves from the state-sponsored socialist cinema of the previous decades. Chen characterizes this phenomenon of Chinese cinema as "postpolitics," which means that politics, instead of being absent, turns into a set of abstract codes to encompass controversial and adversarial readings of the Chinese past that at the same time also allude to the sociopolitical realities of the present (Chen, 1997: 133). As a result, instead of a clear-cut, black and white depiction of good and evil, ambiguities and indeterminacies are the privileged mode of representation and cinematic style of these directors. Ironically, this tendency toward abstraction and symbolic multiplicity in cinematic representation has led to more controversy in the critical reception of many Fifth Generation films, especially those directed by Zhang Yimou. On the one hand, the director's penchant for using striking color contrasts and bold imagery wins the applause of audiences and critics who are eager to look for underlying political messages that concur with the dominant intellectual views on China, while remaining skeptical of Zhang's apparent disregard for historical authenticity -- hence the accusation of being "untrue to history" (Tan, 2000: 3-4), as in the case of *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). [\[6\]](#)

In this regard, *Hero* is so far the most controversial film by Zhang, not only because it epitomizes the critical divide in the reception of ideologically suspect yet commercially viable films in academic and popular arenas, but also because of its more explicit engagement with Chinese history and politics that invokes, and provokes, an allegorical reading -- "using the past to criticize the present" (*jie gu feng jin*) -- in the Chinese cultural tradition. Thus, in *Hero*, the story of a failed attempt to assassinate the King of Qin because of a shared notion of *tianxia*, and the assassin's apparent submission to the Emperor's ideology of unification through military conquest *as a means to attaining peace and order* is directly read as apologetic for the Chinese government's "one China" policy toward Taiwan.

Recently, Rey Chow (2004) has taken a different view on Zhang's non-historical pieces, highlighting the nuances in the director's urban films that embrace the "ethics" of everyday life. Nonetheless, as Zhang himself concedes, film merchandisers in the West in general are not interested in these films because they do not conform to what Lu Tonglin (1999) once called the "Zhang Yimou model" that has a guaranteed following in the Western mainstream markets (Tan, 2000: 7-8). According to Lu, Zhang Yimou's "model" is a direct response to the changing landscape of Chinese cinema as China's economy and film industry are increasingly open to transnational capital investment and overseas markets. Mainly focusing on Zhang's 1990s films, in particular *Raise the Red Lantern*, Lu attributes Zhang's international success to his "unusually keen marketing sensibility" (1999: 2), i.e. the ability to tap into a dominant Western imaginary of China as an exotic (usually sexualized/feminized) "Other" in his filmic representations of the Chinese history and culture. In Lu's analysis, the Zhang Yimou model works through three strategies: (1) the foregrounding of a beautiful young woman who is sexually deprived, physically abused, and spatially confined; (2) the creation of "pseudo-traditional Chinese rituals from scratch" using sensually enticing visual designs; and (3) the use of an oppressive, confined setting such as the traditional courtyard associated with death and suffocation. These strategies provide the Western audiences with "visual pleasure while pointing out the oppressive nature of Chinese society" (1999: 13-14). With hindsight, in his more recent films, Zhang has subtly adapted this model to the changing tastes and expectations of audiences outside of China, to whom China is no longer as exotic as it used to be in the 1980s and 1990s.

As my analysis of *Hero* will show, the heavy reliance on visual aesthetics as a means to obscure or undercut overt ideological meanings, [7] while providing visual pleasure, has less to do with the necessity to satisfy an Orientalist gaze than the need to appeal to increasingly diversified international audiences, whose political orientations and tastes reflect the complex, multilayered global cultural flows today. If the Zhang Yimou model still exists today, its significance lies not only in its being a success formula for aspiring Chinese directors, but also in the kinds of changes and adaptations that have taken place to sustain its international marketability. In this connection, we must consider what Yomi Braester (2005) characterizes as the new identity of filmmakers in China in the twenty-first century, i.e. that of the "cultural broker," which must be differentiated from their former status as auteur, committed to a moral mission of rejuvenating the Chinese art film in the post-Mao era. Braester's analysis of the convergence of art and the new realities of economic forces at play in film production sheds much light on the versatility and adaptability of the Zhang Yimou model, understood loosely as a flexible strategy of filmmaking constantly adjusting to the changing ideological, cultural, and economic parameters of the global market. This model also acknowledges and embraces the peril and possibilities for mainland filmmakers to navigate the uncharted waters of Chinese cinema in both the domestic and international milieux. The filmmaker has now become a new kind of cultural entrepreneur, a go-between across different regimes of political and economic powers. Hence, what constitutes the "establishment" nowadays is no longer only a monolithic regime that dictates the terms of cultural production within its own national boundaries. The establishment should instead be understood as a field of competing and conflicting forces where new players, new rules, and new parameters are constantly at play to reinvent the film scene at an unprecedented pace. One important consequence of this phenomenon is the need to negotiate a "common ground" to cater for the often conflicting demands of local authorities, international sponsors, and an increasingly versatile transnational film audienceship and viewing conventions in different local (or "glocal") contexts.

Remapping the Trans/National Cinema

If, from 1949 to 1966, the new Chinese socialist state succeeded in transforming Chinese cinema into a national cinema through a rigorous process of assimilation, reorganization, and ideological reform, the two decades subsequent to the Cultural Revolution saw the emergence of the so-called Fifth Generation who quickly established themselves as "arthouse" directors both in China and the West. In the 1990s, a group of younger directors began to make their way into the same international niche market as China's new rebels, i.e. independent, underground filmmakers who turn their attention away from the epic, pan-historical concerns of the previous generation toward China's dismal present -- the fragmented, piecemeal existence of the disenfranchised urban youth, homosexuals, petty criminals, and women living on the social margins. [8] As Zhang Yingjin has pointed out, there are four major "genres" corresponding with four different positions of the filmmaker in China today: the mainstream, officially approved, ideologically safe, "art film"; the commercial film catering to the domestic market; the propagandistic film; and the underground "independent" film (2003: 13).

Under the complex and continuing realignments of commercial, ideological, and political interests within and outside the nation, and the intercutting of domains of cultural production and consumption, the lines between these categories, with the exception of the propaganda film, are more often overlapped than clearly drawn. As Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar remark, the "rethinking of the nation" works to "undermine the expressive model of national cinemas" because

it is no longer possible to assume that the nation is a fixed and known bundle of characteristics reflected directly in film [...] there is growing awareness of the dependence of nationally based film industries upon export markets, international coproduction practices, and the likelihood that national audiences draw upon foreign films in the process of constructing their own national identity. (2005: 8)

For one thing, the future of building or sustaining a national cinema from the top down, as the Chinese experience has shown, is doomed, or at least limited in its potential to go beyond a state-owned enterprise with little popular appeal, thus defeating its propagandistic purposes. Secondly, there has been a "transmigration" of filmmakers between different genres in the remaining three categories, and this pattern is common to both the Fifth and the Sixth Generations. While many Fifth Generation films were banned in the 1980s and early 1990s due to their political content, this generation has been gradually absorbed into the domestic mainstream (e.g. Zhang Yimou's *Not One Less* [1999], Chen Kaige's *Together* [2002]). This is not only because these directors have learned how to "play the game" with the domestic censors, but also because of the structural changes within the Chinese cinema industry that put pressure on film studios to become financially independent, and the threats posed by an increasing number of Hollywood films allowed to be screened in China as a result of the nation's accession to the WTO.

On the other hand, the Sixth Generation seems to be following the footsteps of their predecessors soon after they have found inroads into the North American and European arthouse cinemas. More and more of the younger directors previously "blacklisted" by Chinese authorities are now making officially approved films (Jia Zhangke, *The World* [2004]; Wang Xiaoshuai, *Beijing Bicycle* [2001]; Zhang Yuan, *Green Tea* [2003]), while

Feng Xiaogang (*Cell Phone* [2003], *A World Without Thieves* [2004]), who has hitherto identified himself as a commercial filmmaker for domestic audiences, has recently launched his latest martial arts-cum-costume drama film, *The Banquet* (2006), featuring Zhang Ziyi almost as his springboard into the now lucrative business of global cinema. Thus, the so-called Zhang Yimou model is no longer the franchise of one individual, but has become an inevitable blueprint for those who aspire to a wider spectrum of film audiences, venues of exhibition, and most importantly, investors across regional and national borders. This pattern of transmigration across the loosening boundaries of domestic *and* international filmmaking practices suggests that national cinema has to be reconceptualized in terms of the transnational, [9] taking into account the mutual implication of the inside and the outside forces operating on film production (at any location) targeting the global market today. As the harbinger and so-far most successful cultural broker of Chinese filmmakers today, Zhang Yimou is worth particular attention not only because he provided the model for imitation, but also for the controversies that his films have stirred up in various critical circles worldwide. I suggest that Zhang's controversial film practice is precisely the reason why his model works, despite the suspicion and criticism that accompany almost all of his international blockbusters.

In what follows, I offer an analysis of one of the latest models of this controversy, *Hero*, by looking at how the cinematic language of this film is used to undercut its overt political message by reintroducing ambivalence and indeterminacy into the narrative that prevents any easy closure to its meanings. Ambivalence and indeterminacy, the twin effects of Zhang's transnational filmmaking entrepreneurship, are directly related to Zhang's way of negotiating his "dual identity" as an auteur of international arthouse cinema and a filmmaker of commercial blockbusters. Zhang is well-known for his ability to predict accurately the taste and preferences of his audiences, and to follow steadfastly a preconceived market formula in production. On the other hand, he is also aware that his popular appeal is inseparable from his auteur status, both domestically and internationally. Thus, in Zhang's case at least, art and commercial instincts have to be carefully proportioned in the creative process. More importantly, the pressure of censorship at home and the expectations among Western critics (and to some extent arthouse audiences) that his films offer ideological or political critique are the two ever-present and contradictory demands he has to weigh carefully. In this light, *Hero* offers an excellent example of how Zhang, as China's foremost cultural broker, skillfully navigates his course through the geopolitics of transnational filmmaking. Given the controversy over its "true" underlying meaning and the general applause for its aesthetic accomplishment, the film itself seems to embody a *Rashomon*-like metatext that it employs at the level of storytelling. It is perhaps the only definitive quality of the film, as a repertoire of audio and visual signs that saturate our sensory perception and cultural-historical consciousness in the process of "making meaning".

The Hero as Absence: Indeterminacy and Self-Parody

Dai Jinhua has pointed out that action films provide an "imaginary space" for the negotiation of identity and resistance in turbulent times by offering imaginary solutions to sociopolitical and existential crises. Dai shows how this imaginary space can be adapted to different modes of identification and adaptation in different Chinese communities (Dai, 2005: 93). This imaginary space could also be extended to a transnational audience with or without background knowledge of Chinese film or history, through a conscious "translation" of the local into the global in the production process, as in the case of *Crouching Tiger*. This brings us to consider the kind of "translation" that has taken place in *Hero*, and its controversial use

of history. Loosely defined, *Hero* is a pseudo-historical piece about a failed assassination attempt against a well-known tyrant in Chinese history, the King of Qin (later the First Emperor of Qin). *Hero's* main action is contained within the "recollections" of Nameless, the swordsman trusted with the mission to assassinate the King. As Nameless tries to convince the King of his loyalty, he is in turn persuaded by the monarch to up his mission. Thus the film hovers between a belief in the righteousness to remove evil from the world, i.e. *tianxia* or "all under Heaven" as it is understood in the Confucian tradition, and the abandonment of the mission by the hero and his ultimate removal by the same evil power, also in the name of *tianxia*, one that borders on Daoist renunciation of action. Thus, instead of an uncomplicated endorsement of the notion of *tianxia* as an ideological justification for unification at all costs, the film narrative draws attention to the instability of meaning and the indeterminacy of such notions as "truth," "peace," and "righteousness" in the discourse of power, i.e. the hero Nameless's audience with the King, the embodiment of absolute power. Read in this light, the film makes use of the inherent ambivalence of the notion to *tianxia* to explore the tensions between individual identity, or more specifically the identity of the intellectual (symbolized by Broken Sword, and to a lesser extent Nameless), and the institutions of power that impose certain codes of conduct to limit the possibility of defining one's identity.

Hero's provocative politics underlines the predicament of the two heroes, Broken Sword (Tony Leung Chiu-wai) and Nameless (Jet Li), who find themselves unable to kill the King due to a shared notion of *tianxia*. In the film, Broken Sword's determination to kill the King vaporizes completely at the moment of their first confrontation inside the Qin palace. At this epiphanic moment he realizes that "the King of Qin should not be killed" (*Qinwang bu neng sha*), a conviction that leads to his break-up with Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung), who insists on pursuing the righteous course. From then on he abandons his mission in favor of practicing calligraphy in a studio in the Zhao state. If Broken Sword's about-turn in his perception of the King's territorial ambitions signals his "enlightenment" to the true meaning of *tianxia* (i.e. that unity and peace to "all under Heaven" is not only a much greater course than individual life and happiness but also necessitates the sacrifice of the lives and happiness of many), his abandonment of action and eventual self-sacrifice seems to suggest a willingness to succumb not to the King but to the idea of the "mandate of heaven" (*tian ming*), a traditional belief that accords legitimacy to a ruler pre-ordained by some mysterious power of the cosmos. Broken Sword's determination not to act, however, is contradicted by his later decision to interfere in Nameless's plot to assassinate the King, because he believes that the King is the only person capable of bringing ultimate peace to *tianxia*. In the figure of Broken Sword, therefore, is enacted the dynamic between Daoist transcendence and inaction and the Confucian ethic of moral and social commitment. Instead of creating tension and conflict, in Broken Sword these two cultural-philosophical forces seem to be complementary, working strategically toward a utopian (imaginary) ideal, i.e. universal peace. Close to the end of the film, Broken Sword apparently manages to convert Nameless to his political and philosophical beliefs by writing words on the ground. We are not shown what exactly has been written, but given the foregrounding of *tianxia* -- through the conflict between Broken Sword and Flying Snow -- as the philosophical base of the actual war of unification, the absence of this word from the mise-en-scene actually reinforces their presence in the minds of the audience, as we are encouraged to imagine Nameless's inner struggle, and anticipate his final action. However, so far Broken Sword has not explained why he believed the King of Qin *is* the pre-ordained monarch to bring about universal peace, nor has he ever had a chance to find out. One can say that his conviction is purely founded upon faith, as a moral force grounded in a certain philosophical worldview and a concomitant utopian vision that may or may not be shared by the King himself. Although the King admits that Broken Sword

is a "true friend" (*zhiji*) after hearing Nameless's story, Nameless is rather tongue-in-cheek as to whether he actually believes in the monarch's grand scheme for peace, or whether *tianxia* means the same thing to the one in power. Nameless's doubt is subtly conveyed in his surprised expression when the King reveals his intention not only to eliminate the six kingdoms, but also to eliminate the different writing systems that he considers cumbersome and unnecessary.

Thus, if the employment of *tianxia* in the film narrative is underscored by an ironic self-reflection on the inherent instabilities of the meaning of such a term, it is not the King's charisma, eloquence or moral character, but an internalized code of morality encompassed in the word *tianxia* that accounts for the self-abandonment and sacrifice of Nameless and Broken Sword. This subtle irony is made more explicit in Zhang's subsequent *wuxia* film, *House of Flying Daggers*, in which history and politics only serve as the backdrop for the unfolding of a romantic tragedy of love and betrayal. The star-crossed lovers, Jin (an undercover government agent) and Mei (a spy for an anti-government secret society), find themselves caught between their own passions and commitment to a greater course that demands the sacrifice of the individual. Unlike *Hero*, this film celebrates the quest for freedom and love despite its tragic ending: Mei dies in an attempt to save Jin from the flying dagger of Leo (Andy Lau). The two films, with their "meaningless plots," seem to be pointing at a different kind of meaninglessness, i.e. loyalty to a grand mission (*tianxia*) is irrelevant and even detrimental to individual happiness and the search for identity. In both films, power and war are ominous, impersonal forces that unfortunately catch all in a web of conflicting interests and beliefs.

The thematic subtext of *Hero* illuminates the kind of translation performed by Zhang Yimou in reworking the *wuxia* as a transnational genre. In this film, and at this stage of Chinese cinema's internationalization, the "exotic" history of China is perhaps too familiar and therefore less important as a selling point to international audiences. Here I propose to look at the use of visual language to encode the local within the global, and the way in which, even in the domestic markets, the global becomes the dominant code that strategically eclipses the more complex and understated critique of ideology to gain approval from the Chinese authorities and win the hearts of younger Chinese audiences amidst the scorn of more politically conscious critics on the mainland (and elsewhere). Both *Hero* and *Flying Daggers* exhibit potency for multiple encodings, both at the level of narrative and visual style. In the case of *Hero*, one immediately notices an obvious translation or transplantation in the Roman-style costume of the Qin soldiers that recalls Hollywood classics (e.g. *Ben Hur* [1959], *Gladiator* [2000]) more than Chinese historical drama. This cross-breeding of visual codes and traditions works well within the film's so-called "empty" or meaningless plot to allow for a free play of fantasy in characterization, set design, and action choreography involving what I would call a symbiotic interaction between humans and objects. Given *Hero*'s ambivalence (and the general audience's indifference) toward the "deeper meanings" mentioned above, it is arguable that these plot elements would only come to life when placed within the imaginary space of *wuxia*, an inherently fantastic and visually dense genre. [\[10\]](#) Secondly, this imaginary space is further extended by the use of digital effects to create a dizzying array of fast-moving bodies and objects. Here I will refer to a key scene in the film to illustrate how these virtual objects create a visual vocabulary that both enriches and detracts from the plot, to the extent that they become the center of gravity and subject of representation.

In an opening scene of *Hero*, Nameless and Sky (Donnie Yen) freeze in action, facing each other in complete stillness, at the moment when the dramatic tension is building up to a fatal combat. What results is a superbly rendered "mind game", in which the two characters contemplate "what might have happened", visually presented in black-and-white. The suspension of "real" action and its continuation in the minds of the combatants creates a caesura in the action's momentum, inviting the viewer to participate in the contemplation of the imaginary action. While this contemplative mood echoes another "mind game" between Nameless and the King that defines the rest of the film's narrative, it also shifts the plane of perception from "what is seen happening" to "what is seen not happening", i.e. the materiality of the event is replaced by the visibility of the non-event, which nonetheless determines the fate of the two heroes. The mind game, the repertoire of significant non-events, reminds us of the computer program in *The Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003) that serves as the interface between the real and the hyperreal, two conceptually different realms that ultimately collide. In fact, most of the action in *Hero* takes place in the minds of the characters, imagined sequences and jarring witnesses to an event that may not have happened as it is visualized through different points of view on screen. In the opening scene just mentioned, the staging of the non-event reveals not only what is not happening, but also what in reality cannot be seen -- the quick flashes of thoughts within the mind. Thus, the entire sequence dramatizes the tension between the stillness of the body and the speed of mental events within the duration of stillness. Nonetheless the stillness is accompanied by a temporal marker, diegetic sound: the musical scores diegetically attributed to the *gu qin* (zither) musician on the far side of the courtyard where the fight takes place, and the resonant sound of water dripping from the roofs.

In this scene, our sensory perception is tuned to the non-narrative elements: the alternate durations of silence and background sound/music, and the *mise-en-scene* of the fight. As the non-event is unfolded, these auditory and visual details take the center stage in constructing what Pauline Chen calls "a stylized musical performance" (2004: 41), almost a dance that resituates the fight within the realm of art. The climax of this non-event is, once again, marked by another caesura -- the music ceases abruptly as the strings of the zither break, signaling a cut back to the "real" action in colour. Sky splashes up a shield of water (not unlike the bullets in slow motion in *The Matrix*) as Nameless leaps and drives -- in bullet-time motion -- his sword into Sky's chest. Instead of focusing on the fighters and their bodies, the camera closes in on the objects that stand between the fighters like a screen. What we see, therefore, is a screen of objects, whose "dance" is dramatized by the orchestration of sound effects, revealed to us like a series of abstract paintings in succession.

While these visual distractions contribute to the aesthetic appeal of the film as a whole, they also constitute a visual subtext that undercuts the overtly ideological -- or politically correct -- message on the surface of the narrative. On several occasions the film alludes to the more subtle forms of violence embedded in the King's unification ambitions. For example, when Flying Snow and Nameless try to defend the calligraphy studio in the Zhao state from the storms of arrows of the invading Qin army, arrows flying through an empty sky seem to take on a life of their own as a formidable force. While our attention is drawn to the breath-taking "fighting dance" of Jet Li and Maggie Cheung in this scene, the action's rhythm is defined by a juxtaposition of the fight outside the studio, and Broken Sword's apparent uninterrupted experimentation with a new style of calligraphy in order to create a new form for the character "sword" (*jian*), as well as the sacrifice of lives inside the studio. While this aesthetically enhanced visualization of violence and brutality may short-circuit any immediate apprehension of horror, it also alludes to the destruction of a cultural space (the calligraphy studio and the language of the Zhao state) by the Qin army and its arrow-

launching war machines. This subtext is made more explicit in a subsequent dialogue between Nameless and the King, who reveals his ambition not only to conquer the six kingdoms, but also to unify the writing system for the sake of bureaucratic efficiency. At the King's mention of his intention, the camera cuts to a close-up of Nameless, apparently stunned and terrified. Given the enormous significance attached to writing and language (*wen*) in the Confucian tradition, it becomes clear that the film is trying to go beyond the immediate horror of the killings to gauge the longer-term implications of unification on cultural diversity and identity, and more importantly, the silencing of dissent that results from the destruction of "minor" languages, symbolized by Nameless's silence in front of the King, and his abandonment of the mission of vengeance as a (previous) subject of the Zhao state.

Thus, in the film, two forces are juxtaposed: the political-bureaucratic rationality and the cultural-moral quest for higher meaning and transcendence. The complexity of the film, however, is not the confrontation of these forces but their co-existence in a tug of war, in the form of a moral dilemma, one that demands men of talent like Nameless to make a choice of conscience. The close association among martial arts, calligraphy, dance and music in the film, moreover, suggests that this dilemma is also an intellectual predicament, embodied in the clashes between Broken Sword and Snow, between a belief in human action to bring peace and justice, and a philosophical awareness of the "emptiness" or futility of human action. As Shelly Kracier remarks in her review of the film, "*Hero's* characters [...] learn progressively to renounce what they have been striving for, and grow to accept that their goals were merely provisional, way-stations on the path to something greater, though less tangible" (2003: 9). Seen in this light, the film's most "offensive" aspect therefore is not its "fascism" or gross distortion of history in the service of power, but its ironic twist in the representation of those in the service of power, i.e. the "chorus," or the King's ministers dressed in a costume that resembles medieval monks. If it is historically "untrue" that the tyrant could ever have any psychological and moral struggle in executing the hero, it is entirely plausible that the King is not alone in making this decision, among others. Here I am proposing a non-allegorical reading of the film, and argue that metaphorically the heroes and the King's ministers embody the moral dilemma, hence intellectual predicament, of Chinese intellectuals whose identity is historically defined by their relationships with the ruler, either as scholar-officials or scholars-in-exile. If the film could be held politically and ideologically suspect, or even guilty in plotting Nameless's abandonment of his moral mission due to his subscription to the King's version of *tianxia*, its ironic subtext, reinforced by carefully designed visual effects, seems to undercut the ideology of *tianxia* through a subtle critique of the role of the man of talent (an intellectual) in lending legitimacy to the King's will to power -- the "mandate of heaven."

The two co-existing forces mentioned above, it follows, should be understood in terms of their mutual implication and entwinement, a relationship that is ultimately emptied of meaning in the film's final play with ambivalence and indeterminacy. Here I would like to end my discussion with two visual clues at the end of the film. When the King, at the promptings of his ministers, orders Nameless to be executed at the gate of the Qin court, the last shot is given exclusively to arrows stuck all over the huge, dark gate. In the middle is an empty space in the shape of what could have been Nameless's body, shot through by arrows. By emptying Nameless's body from the execution stage, *Hero's* visual polemics are more ambivalent and skeptical of the rationale and value of this kind of heroic sacrifice than its "superficial" politics could admit. Another twist that subtly undercuts a straightforward, allegorical reading of the film's overt historical theme occurs in the very end of the film, which shows a static shot of the Great Wall, a monument of the rule of the King (who did

eliminate the six kingdoms and became the First Emperor of Qin) and the heyday of his absolute power. While this shot is complemented by credits apparently documenting the unification of the nation, the final credits are deliberately eulogistic, and therefore obviously false, in saying that the Qin Emperor "protected the country and the people" (*hu guo hu min*).

Anyone who has some knowledge of Chinese history would immediately recognize the gross distortion of history in such an overstatement. The unification of the warring states by the King of Qin (who became the First Emperor of Qin) was followed by the enforcement of stringent ideological control and a legalistic political system, culminating in the so-called *fen shu kang ru*, the burning/banning of classical texts and burying alive of Confucian scholars. While the construction of the Great Wall strengthened China's defense against invaders from the north, this and many other large-scale projects, including the famous Terracotta Army, resulted in the enslavement and deaths of tens of thousands of ordinary people. The reign of the First Emperor of Qin lasted for fifteen years (221-206 BC), and his death was soon followed by the collapse of the Qin dynasty in 202 BC. The question remains: why would Zhang and his co-scriptwriter think that this is necessary at all? Hasn't the film already fulfilled its ideological mission by aestheticizing violence and humanizing an evil monarch and his oppressive regime already? This ideological overkill, in fact, can be read as a double-edged sword. On the one hand it exposes the superficiality of the overt ideological message the film's narrative seems to embody at the most superficial level; on the other hand, the banality of the phrase "*hu guo hu min*" is a cue inviting disbelief, and at the same time a discreet sign of the film's ironic self-consciousness of its own complicity with power.

The final credits are meant to be "historically untrue" -- literally -- just as is the film itself. The moral dilemma, then, is not resolved, and the film refuses to comfort us, especially those who look upon Zhang Yimou and a particular group of directors as a voice of conscience on whom they have pinned high hopes of retrieving a moral high ground in Chinese cinema with a clear-cut, black and white, and psychologically reassuring resolution. I believe this is the moral argument of the film, that there could be no easy resolution to, but an ongoing engagement with, the same dilemma. In this connection, the ironic anti-closure of the film's ending purposely deconstructs the myth of nation-building. As Robert Eng observes, the representation of the Qin "war machine [...] is reminiscent of modern bombardments raining death at a distance" (2004). Thus the grandeur of the Qin kingdom, the epitome of an authoritarian regime buttressed by seemingly invincible military power, is overshadowed by the horror implicit in the film's visual subtext. If, in the end, we see the King of Qin "dwarfed by the trappings of his power," (Taylor, qtd. in Eng, 2004), the film's complex engagement with the discourse of nationalism typifies what Kracier (2003) sees as Zhang's own experience in "speaking to power" throughout his career. Here, I would like to add that power should be understood as plural, a polyglot of overlapping and contending political and economic interests that cut across national and regional boundaries. In *Hero*, the narrative and cinematography combine to produce an ideological ambivalent text that lends itself to multiple readings in various contexts locally and globally; on the other hand, the film also mobilizes cinematic and cultural resources of transnational filmmaking to deliver a mesmerizing spectacle, the greatest source of visual pleasure that contributes to its global currency.

Conclusion

As a transnational cultural product, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* exemplifies the geopolitics of filmmaking in the age of globalization. As a Chinese director on whom a certain cultural

baggage is loaded, making an arthouse-popular film for global consumption necessitates a strategy of ambivalence and indeterminacy that refuses, or at least destabilizes, closure of meaning. As an internationally acclaimed auteur with an unusually popular appeal, Zhang represents a successful model of filmmaking, ineluctably bound up with the interplay of economic and sociopolitical forces in the global cultural terrain that necessitate a remapping of the national in terms of the transnational. As a cultural broker, Zhang has waged his political stakes against contending narratives of the nation and history by inventing an increasingly aestheticized, hybridized, and therefore "universal" visual vocabulary that opens up and problematizes the film narrative (the dialogue and the plot) in favor of multiple and contending significations. Just as for Salman Rushdie's postcolonial subjects in *The Satanic Verses*, turning one's weaknesses into strengths is a survival skill of a cultural (and political) "minor" or deterritorialized subject (*a la* Deleuze) trying to preserve his or her voice to speak to/against power.

Notes

[1] Pauline Chen's review (2004) gives a balanced reading of *Hero's* problematic politics and ideological ambivalences. On *Crouching Tiger* and the diasporic imagination, see Christina Klein (2004); see also Kenneth Chan (2004) on Ang Lee's cultural dilemmas and feminist possibilities in the film.

[2] A profusion of reviews and critical essays in Chinese have been published in academic journals and film magazines between 2003 and 2006. In general, opinions range from praises for the film's artistic innovation and creative reinterpretation of the *wuxia* genre (Gao and Zhang, 2006; A. Chen, 2005), to warnings against the film's overt alignment with and glorification of power (Jia, 2003; Ye, 2003).

[3] The Chinese characters "*tian*" and "*xia*" means "heaven" and "under" respectively. In the Chinese tradition the term "*tianxia*" literally refers to "all under heaven" or "all things under Heaven". The word "*tianxia*" is generally understood as the equivalent of "the world".

[4] *USA Today*, 31 August 2004. In China, *Hero's* performance also surpassed two Hollywood productions (*Saving Private Ryan* [1998] and *Pearl Harbor* [2001]), a rare phenomenon in recent years. "Revenue Exceeds 200 Million: *Hero* Breaks Chinese Film Records" (*Yingxiong piaofang guo er yi, chuang xia zhongguo dianying jilu*), *Shanghai qingnian bao* (*Shanghai Youth Daily*), 10 Jan 2003. Available at: http://www.sinoc.com/news/view_content.asp?id=5800 [Accessed 22 January 2006].

[5] Internet Movie Database (IMDb). User comments for *Ying Xiong* [*Hero*] (2002). Available at: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0299977/usercomments?start=0> [Accessed 16 November 2006].

[6] In *Raise the Red Lantern* Zhang, probably for the sake of visual impact, invents the nightly ritual of raising the red lantern to dramatize the authority of the aging patriarch over his four wives. This detail is Zhang's artistic creation rather than part of the Chinese cultural tradition, and is absent in the original novella by Su Tong.

[7] See, for example, Zhang Yingjin (2005) for a general historical outline of the history of Chinese cinema; for a more detailed account of the Sixth Generation, see Lin Xiaoping

(2002), "The New Chinese Cinema of the Sixth Generation: Distant Cries from Forsaken Children".

[8] This is different from the reliance on bold visual language, including the figuration of woman, to offer cultural/ideological critique.

[9] In this regard, Sheldon Lu's 1997 anthology, *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, is a pioneering collection of essays devoted to the rethinking of the national/transnational in the Chinese context.

[10] Chen Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* (*Jingke ci Qinwang*, 1999), for example, is a more conventional historical epic that pays more attention to the political intrigues within the Qin court, the love triangle between the King, his lover, and the assassin, Jing Ke, and the psychological undercurrents that motivate characters' actions. While the film offers a more complex psychological reading of the young King's character, the barbarism of the Qin court, especially its system and practices of punishment, is still kept in sight. Compared to *Hero*, Chen's film exemplifies the reflective, philosophical style of arthouse cinema characteristic of the Fifth Generation. It was much less of a box office phenomenon than Zhang's film. Neither did it stir up as much critical debate as *Hero* in and outside China.

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