

Communism in the Soviet Union in 1989, China has taken its place as the largest “Communist country” in the world and therefore the greatest threat to the West. It might be true that China is a big and potentially powerful country, but to say China is still a Communist country is against the fact.

Since the early 1980’s when China (re)introduced capitalism in most of its economic sectors, Communism has become an ideology that can no longer hold the society as a whole. So Rey Chow is insightful to notice an “evident split between official Chinese rhetoric, which still remains loyal to the classical themes of Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism, and Chinese social practice, which now includes all kinds of Western and capitalistic ventures and enterprises” (Chow 414). To many contemporary Chinese people, the past is not only the more remote traditional past embodied by the doctrines of Confucianism but also the more recent past, the history of the People Republic of China from 1949 to 1979 before Deng Xiaoping (1904-97) instituted the policy of reform and opening to the outside world and began reintroducing capitalism into China. What Confucianism and Communism both share is, as pointed out by Tan Ye, denial of “freedom, exuberance, and the most primal desires and aspirations” (Tan 3). This post-Communist social system of hybridity was given a new term, i.e., post-socialism, which characterizes not only China but also some Eastern European countries.

As Pickowicz observes, “the postsocialist condition will assume different forms in each country, but what is shared is the broad context of public awareness of the failure of the traditional socialist system and the absence of a socialist identity among ordinary people who live in or have lived in traditional socialist societies” (61). Post-socialist China is indeed a society oscillating between socialism and capitalism. This is a special historical period that deserves more attention. So, to exercise any judgment on a Chinese movie made after the 1980’s, commentators must consider the context of a post-socialist China, i.e., “a hybrid moment of political change,” in Bhabha’s terms (28).

One more reason for Jacob’s dualistic reading of Zhang Yimou’s film is his overlooking of another very important factor in mass media, which has actually played a role in

shaping all Chinese movies, i.e., film censorship. “The China Film Bureau,” according to Sheila Cornelius and Ian Smith,

not only has censorial control and gives “letters of approval” to scripts, which must be submitted before filming begins, but calls annual meetings for studio heads to discuss production quotas, categories of film, policies and regulations, and works out long-term plans for the development of the film industry as well as dealing with foreign exchanges and film agreements abroad. This intimate link with the entire process means that the Bureau may not only ask for changes in scripts as well as in completing films, it can certify a film for release only within China and, if need be, to a limited audience, or it may approve a film for international distribution. (46-47)

The Film Bureau and the Party Committee of any studio will watch out over each movie to make sure that it does not contain “nudity, graphic violence and sexual acts” and, in particular, does not “run counter to government policy,” which means “the portrayal of adverse social conditions, interpreted as criticism of government policy”(47). Punishments for transgressors might be harsher than mandate of re-shooting or reediting: “negatives may be seized, directors forbidden to travel, films blacklisted as part of an official protest against another film, and future permits jeopardized” (47).

Interestingly, state censorship has had a long tradition in China, and to be a writer or artist in China, he or she must learn how to deal with it. Talking about the Qing dynasty playwright Kong Shangren (1648-1718), critic C. H. Wang observes, “A genuine Confucian knows how to survive under the pressure of censorship, to avoid headlong confrontation with the imperial authority, and still to pass on his most critical view of events evanescent and eternal according to a conscience cultivated in the stalwart tradition” (18). Growing up in China, directors like Zhang Yimou have learned to survive the pressure of film censorship through the employment of ambiguity in their cinematic languages, which requires that the director be skillful in negotiating between his pursuance and the censorial norms. Zhang is actually a specialist in this regard. It seems paradoxical that he himself reiterates that he is merely an artist and never thought so theoretically as some critics claim. He even criticized some for imposing their views on his work. But the fact, however, is that Zhang might not be a theoretician, but, as shown

from *Not One Less*, he is a skillful practitioner of negotiation between his conscientious artistic pursuance and governmental censorship. But before we go to more detail, a synopsis of the movie is in order.

A THIRD-SPACE READING ZHANG YIMOU'S *NOT ONE LESS*

Mr. Gao, the sole teacher at a rural Chinese village school, Shuiquan Elementary School, which consists of only one dilapidated classroom, is called to attend his diseased mother. Before letting Gao take his one-month leave, village mayor Tian tries painstakingly to find a substitute teacher, but since the village is so remote and the pay so modest (50 Chinese yuan or roughly 6 US dollars for one month), no one cares to take the position. The “teacher” that Tian eventually recruits is a thirteen-year-old girl named Wei Minzhi, who has barely finished her primary education and is not at all qualified as a teacher. Mr. Gao promises to give Wei another 10 yuan as bonus if she can manage to keep all the 28 students from dropping out (hence the movie’s title *Not One Less*), a problem already plaguing the school. Because the village people are so poor, many families have had their children halted their education to find jobs in cities. When one of her students Zhang Huike, a trouble-maker in the classroom, quits without notice, Wei makes her way to the city to look for him.

Zhang’s father has died, his mother is tied to the sick bed, and the family is in debt; therefore, he has to seek a job. He goes to the city, following Sun Zhimei, an older girl from the same village who works in a factory. However, unfortunately, ever since his arrival at the city, he loses his way and becomes a castaway, roaming in the street, while Wei Minzhi is heading toward the city. Though initially her motivation is to secure the 10-yuan bonus, Wei turns out to be concerned for the fate of Zhang. She finds Sun and asks for her help, but Sun refuses. Only after Wei promises to compensate for her loss of one day’s wage (2 *yuan*) does Sun finally agree to lend a hand. They search the railway station for Zhang but to no avail. After coercing Wei into paying, Sun leaves her helpless. All alone, Wei does not give up and tries all means but fails to find any trace. At the direction of a passerby, she turns to the local TV station for help but is refused an entry.

After two days of sojourning outside the TV station, she finally attracts the attention of the station head. Wei is invited to a special education program, through which the lost Zhang Huike is found. The movie ends with a TV shooting team goes to the village together with Wei and Zhang. Coming together with them are a big load of stationery and a certain amount of fund donated by urbanites. With that, Zhang's family pays off debt, and he returns to school.

The story probably is hard to believe for a Western viewer, but what Zhang presents is actually a realistic picture of rural education in China. To highlight the authenticity of the story, Zhang employed an exclusively non-professional cast and had all the actors play themselves with their original names in the film. Adding to that is a *cinema verité* style, which has further underscored the effect of authenticity. So when Gilles Jacob denounced Zhang for propaganda, he had overlooked the poverty in rural China, the uneven development between the city and the countryside, between the coastal and the landlocked interior areas. He blamed Zhang for making propaganda probably also because Zhang's film seems to conform to the need of the government-launched Project Hope, a national program to curb school dropout in China's rural areas.³ Even though the Project was initiated by the government, its humanistic motivation is unmistakable and unrebukable. However, Jacob arbitrarily related Project Hope to the "Communist" government and saw in it an imagined threat of a Communist China growing stronger with the improvement of rural education. What was acceptable or appealing to him, I suppose, is probably a primitive picture of China with people struggling against poverty and starvation.

It might be true that Zhang's movie aims to help the government to mobilize non-governmental financial resources, to call on all sectors of society to pool fund to help school dropouts in the rural areas. Actually, following Chairman Mao Zedong's advocacy

³ Realizing the urgency of rural education, the Chinese government launched a nationwide campaign named Project Hope (*Xiwang Gongcheng*) in 1989 to mobilize non-governmental financial resources inside and outside China. It is intended to collect and offer financing for the continuing education of children who have dropped out of school in China's rural areas and to guarantee their right to complete all compulsory education courses. Project Hope also contributes towards improving teaching conditions and promoting the development of basic education in China. See <http://www.motorola.com/content>.

of going to the countryside to be (re)educated by the peasantry, Zhang Yimou spent three years in the countryside in northwestern China, the poorest area in the country (Tam and Dissanayake 24). So he must have witnessed the urgent need of rural education in the first place. Based his effort on humanistic love and conscience, Zhang's effort is fundamentally different from propaganda. But it seems that Gilles Jacob saw in Zhang's effort of revitalizing Chinese rural education a dangerous signal of "nationalism" because, as may be inferred from Jacob's vantage point, the improvement of rural education will, in the long term, add to the national strength of China, a Communist "evil empire." Thus *Communist nationalism*, as imagined by Jacob, became the trademark of Zhang's new movie, and that was why it was rejected.

Repudiating some orientalist critics in the West, Rey Chow maintains that "what dominates the understanding of the 'Third World' is [. . .] a masculinist leftism for which 'nationalism' becomes the 'Third World' revenge on 'First World' imperialism." The 'Third World' is attributed an 'outside' position from which criticism can be made about the 'First World.' This outside position is part and parcel of what Gayatri Spivak calls 'the continuing subalternization of Third World materials' by 'First World' critics, who condemn 'Third World' cultural production in the age of postmodernism to a kind of realism with functions of authenticity, didacticism, and deep meaning" (Chow 403). Chow's comment is a powerful critique at the now notorious paradigm of "national allegory" proposed by Fredric Jameson in his 1986 article "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." According to Jameson's assertion that "all third-world texts are necessarily [. . .] to be read as what I will call national allegory,"⁴ any Third-World cultural production is pre-labeled a national discourse avenging the colonial past and backwardness incurred by Western colonialists. As a result, Chinese directors will not only have to deal with film censorship at home, but also go through another censorship launched by Western critics with the "national allegory" presumption imprinted in mind. A close look at the ending of Zhang Yimou's *Not One Less* debunks the ridiculousness of this national-allegory reading.

⁴ Originally published in *Social Text*, No.15 (Fall 1986) 69, and quoted by Chow, p. 402.

At the arrangement of the TV station head, Wei Minzhi is invited to the studio for a special TV program on education. Before the camera is turned to Wei, a female presenter enthusiastically announces that after nearly two decades of joint efforts, the nine-year compulsory education has been successfully implemented in our city. She then changes her voice to a solemn one, admitting that in the countryside the conditions are still poor and many children cannot enjoy basic education they deserve. Therefore, to call more attention to the issue, the TV station has invited a teacher in a rural elementary school to the program. Wei is then encouraged to talk to the TV audience about the status quo of her school in the village. Disoriented under the spotlight, Wei can utter no word before she finally bursts into tears and cries out, “Zhang Huike, where are you now? I have been looking for you for days? Where are you now? Please come back.”

This scene, which seems rather melodramatic, shows Zhang’s effort to negotiate between his pursuance and censorship. Zhang’s movie has shown a good deal of the countryside backwardness, but it had no difficulty getting released. That may be attributed to its conformity to the government’s endeavors to improve rural education. The above episode shows that the TV station, together with the audience representing all walks of life, are joining efforts to help the village children. Therefore, it appeals to the government and the Film Bureau and is welcomed by the censors. However, what we should not overlook is the ironic and probably satiric contrast between the city and the countryside caught by the camera and confirmed by the TV presenter, a quasi-governmental voice. Since the Chinese government is the sole policymaker, who else is to blame for the poor situation in the countryside? From this we can see Zhang’s critique, in the public’s face, at the Party and government for failing to give enough attention to the rural people and rural education.

After Wei Minzhi and Zhang Huike return to school and are joined by the whole class, the film then ends with the following credit:

Thanks to the donation, Zhang Huike was able to return to school after his family paid off their debt. [. . .] Shuiquan Village used the donated fund and built a new

schoolhouse and the school was renamed as “Shuiquan Project Hope Elementary School” ...

Statistics show that in China every year at least one million children on average were forced to drop out of school due to poverty. Thanks to the joint efforts and help from all circles of the society, about fifteen percent of these dropouts are able to return to school.

This is, in the words of Cornelius and Smith, “an unconvincing happy ending that seems more inspired by contemporary Hollywood” (Cornelius and Smith 46). This comment, i.e., the assertion of contemporary Hollywood’s influence on the “happy ending” of *Not One Less*, is itself too imprudent and simplistic to be convincing. However, by this, I do not mean to deny, on the director’s behalf, Hollywood’s influence upon Zhang and his works. There is no possibility of success for such a mission since we all understand we live in a postmodern and globalized world where Hollywood’s hegemonic presence in the cinematic world is already an undeniable truth. However, what we should not overlook is the negotiation in this ambiguous ending.

An ending like this obviously appeals to the censors since it shows the effort and success of the TV station, a semi-governmental institution in China, to mobilize all walks of life to contribute to rural education. By presenting on the screen the fact that fifteen percent of the rural dropouts are able to return to school thanks to donations from the society, it, on the one hand, shows the achievements of the government-launched Project Hope, and on the other hand, invite all the audience, both home and abroad because of Zhang’s international influence, to join their efforts. From this angle, the happy ending is seen as a concession on the side of Zhang. But we have to understand that it was only through this way that the film could pass through state censorship since the movie shows much of the backwardness in the countryside. Actually a close look will reveal the satirical message intimated by Zhang.

The end of the first passage of credit quoted above is followed by an ellipsis, which indicates that there is still a long way to go before the final success of changing the backward status quo of rural education. What will happen is hard to foresee since it depends on many factors. It is interesting that between the two passages there is a vacant

space. It calls our attention to the difference between the two passages: the first passage is fact-telling and the second one statement official statistics. It seems to indicate that between grim reality and governmental propaganda there is always a rupture, and the main body (except the ending) of Zhang's film is to fill in the gap and to restore a true picture of Chinese rural education.

Though at the end of the movie it is with the donation from urbanites that the school is rebuilt and Zhang Huike is able to resume his education, one of the major themes threading the film is a contrasting juxtaposition of the modernity of the city and the backwardness of the countryside. China's policy of reform and opening up has brought see change to cities, but, at the same time, an unevenness in development between the urban and the rural is ubiquitous. While the city has been modernized, the countryside is left intact by modernity. While public compulsory education has been effective, the countryside is still fatigued by lack of education fund, dilapidated school buildings and classrooms, shortage of stationery, and school dropouts. In the film, we are showed that the only classroom in the school is worn with age, all desks and chairs are shaky, and the teacher's desk has one broken leg. While the village mayor asks in class why the broken desk was not fixed since he had given a sum of money for that, the students answer that Mr. Gao, the teacher, had used the money buying chalks. What is conveyed through this scene is the cruel reality of an impotent rural education system, which, seen from another perspective, is a poignant critique at the failure of the Communist government's education policy in the countryside, debunking the government's slogan of "Modernizing" education throughout the country.

During most of the time when Wei Minzhi is trying to locate Zhang Huike in the city, she seems disoriented due to the strangeness of the new environment. But what adds to the alienation is the callousness of urbanites. That explains why she has to stand outside the TV station for two whole days before she can attract any attention from the above—the urbanites. What this episode reveals is a tangible social hierarchy with the peasants at the bottom ruled over by the urbanites. At the end of the movie, when asked by the TV presenter about what is most impressive during his stay in the city, Zhang Huike answers

hesitantly, “[It’s] my experience of begging for food in the street.” Examples like these abound in the movie, which seems to criticize the government’s negligence of people in the countryside, namely, the peasantry who account for the majority of Chinese people and who were the main body of Chinese revolutionists, founders of New China.

All these show Zhang’s reflection on the current national project of reform and opening up which was officially instituted in the early 1980’s by Deng Xiaoping. It demonstrates that far from propaganda for the government, Zhang’s film aims at realistically presenting a picture of China’s rural education. On the other hand, although Zhang’s movie is fraught with implicit criticism at the futile implementation and the vacancy of the government policy, it is not intended to be subversive to the nation-state. Zhang understands that if his movie is explicitly anti-government, he will not be able to have it released in China and his endeavor of revealing (part of) truth will be futile. That is what Zhang, as a socially committed director, does not wish to see.

CONCLUSION: NEGOTIATING FOR A THIRD SPACE

Negotiating between the director’s pursuance and governmental censorship, Zhang’s *Not One Less* spells a Third Space of enunciation between the anti-government and the pro-government. In the chapter titled “The Commitment to Theory” in *Location of Culture*, Bhabha asserts that “the intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenge our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People” (37). Bhabha notes that “it is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture that have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (37). Through the model of the Third Space of enunciation, Bhabha critiques the once-popular national-allegory reading by the West of the Other culture, which is

treated more or less as a monolithic bloc. Such a national-allegory reading often results in a binary interpretation of all cultural productions from the Third World, a prevalent problem that I intend to critique in this paper.

Although Bhabha's theory of the Third Space is more apt for a post-colonial country like India, it is also applicable to a post-socialist China, since both are a hybrid moment of political change. What is observed in the Third Space is a process of negotiation and translation between different discourses. It is at this space of hybridity that we have observed the powerfulness of Zhang Yimou's cinematic representation. Assuming such a hybrid position, Zhang's *Not One Less* is neither an anti-government or anti-Communist movie nor pro-government propaganda. Instead, it opens up a fresh filmic space of hybridity engendered by negotiation between the director's artistic and humanistic pursuance and the state censorship. In hindsight, we can say, it might be unfortunate of Zhang Yimou that though his *Not One Less* had passed China's governmental censorship, it failed the censorship by the jury of the Cannes Film Festival 1999. However, since the cinematic language Zhang constitutes a Third Space of enunciation, it is also empowered by that hybridity. That explains why Zhang's movie was both a commercial and critical success at home and abroad and why, soon after it was pulled out from Cannes, it won the Golden Lion Award for best picture in the Venice Film Festival 1999.

In "The Politics of Recognition," Charles Taylor holds that "real judgments of worth suppose a fused horizon of standards [. . .] [and] suppose that we have been transformed by the study of the other, so that we are not simply judging by our original familiar standards" (Taylor 70). The only location for such a fusion, I believe, is also the Third Space, a public venue where different cultures join and interact. What Taylor envisions is that the interaction of these different cultures or discourses should bring about changes to all sides. That reminds us of Bhabha's highlighting of cultural difference against cultural diversity in *The Location of Culture* because only recognition of cultural difference will generate real changes. Bhabha holds that "the problem of cultural interaction emerges only at the signficatory boundaries of cultures, where meanings and values are (mis)read or signs are misappropriated. Culture only emerges as a problem, or a problematic, at the

point at which there is a loss of meaning in the contestation and articulation of everyday life, between classes, genders, races, nations” (34). What Bhabha has stressed, it seems to me, is that the possibility of misreading and misappropriation of cultures should not stop us from venturing into the Third Space of cultural interaction because that is the only way to a better recognition of cultural difference and a fused horizon. All cultures, *not one less*, should find their voices equally valuable at the Third Space.

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