

Loyalty and betrayal in a political context

Life



Two recent Chinese films, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002), have gained worldwide attention, garnering numerous awards in the process. Although set in very different periods of Chinese history, both films deal with the themes of loyalty and betrayal played out against a vigorously political backdrop. This political philosophy even weaves through out the stories, marking a radical change from previous socialist-realistic Chinese films which mainly had an operatic focus.

In the past, Chinese films were heavily censored and did not appeal to a wide audience. What occurred within the Chinese culture to allow for films which gained international acclaim and dealt freely with controversial concepts, such as the political atmosphere of China?

Both Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou are Chinese fifth generation directors. This genre evolved after Mao's death in 1976, causing film to have the widest international impact of all the Chinese arts reborn since then. Distinguished by a quantum leap from the political and cultural heritage of Mao, and achieving an "aesthetic breakthrough" with radically politicized ideological implications, this movement nevertheless was formed in a crucible (Zhang, 2003).

The 1984 release of Kaige's film *Yellow Earth* revealed the emergence of a major new movement in world cinema, the fifth generation, which gained its name from critics and scholars based upon a retrospective examination of Chinese film history. It is one of the cinema's most important "new waves," along with German expressionism, the French new wave, and Italian neo

realism. The canon is comprised of the works of a group of young film artists with similar aesthetic and ideological motivations.

The fifth generation emerged from the first graduating class of the Beijing Film Academy; students who had encountered tumultuous changes within their own lives, not being allowed to finish their high school educations, (which didn't resume until 1977), but being sent instead to the countryside as " intellectual youth," becoming soldiers or laborers. Although Kaige's father was a well known Beijing film director, Yimou's father had been an officer in Chiang Kai-Shek's nationalist KMT army and Yimou was shut out of most educational, financial and social opportunities available to many of his future classmates at the Film Academy.

However, the arrival of the Cultural Revolution functioned as a great equalizer, as most members of the fifth generation forfeited education, saw their parents publicly criticized, and their lives swept up in turmoil. Yimou took up photography during this time, while Kaige tried to join the communist party. (Ij, 1).

According to Paul Clark in his book *Reinventing China: A Generation and its Film*,

the cultural revolution forever changed the members of the fifth generation. They emerged from it challenged by their experiences, endowing their films with a more critical attitude toward the cultural revolution and a more humane and realistic take on the lives of their fellow Chinese.

While at the Beijing Film Academy the students had a shortage of textbooks from which to work. The professors instead exposed them to foreign films. Thus the students became filmmakers by watching and analyzing these foreign works. After graduation the students were assigned to various urban and rural studios across China, creating works that tried to reconstruct a national cinema after ten years of neglect and oppression. Rejecting rigid formalism, the filmmakers created more realistic lighting, and used better actors and editors. They also created more ambiguous, less didactic stories.

With the catastrophe at Tianamen Square in 1989, and the ensuing crackdown on the fifth generation in the 1990s by authorities who weren't comfortable with many of the politics contained within the films, the restricted filmmakers began looking for international financing. The resulting films brought more international attention to Chinese cinema than ever before (Clark, 205).

The filmmakers' goals were to present themselves as artists with an aesthetic sensibility and to comment on the totality of their culture and history at a metaphorical or allegorical level. By assuming the margins vis a vis the mainstream, the Chinese new wave cinema offers itself as a substitute for and a supplement to, the emerging nationalist cinema. With spectacular visual effects, idiosyncratic and forceful storytelling, the films are a cultural reconstitution of Chinese modernity (Zhang, 276).

Although originally banned in China, which allowed only one public showing because the film showed communism in a bad light, *Farewell My Concubine* is considered to be one of the fifth generation's seminal works in focusing

attention from international audiences toward Chinese films. *Farewell My Concubine* resembles several other fifth generation films in that it is a tale of human lives set against the context of China's turbulent political upheaval during the mid twentieth century.

Because it recalls the collective trauma of the cultural revolution, *Farewell My Concubine* and its engagement in the national memory has frequently been interpreted as an epic national narrative. Yet it also functions as a cataclysmic tale of loyalty and betrayal, an intimate story surrounding two Peking Opera performers, Xiaolou and Dieyi, who bond as the young boys then named Shitou and Douzi. They are severely abused by their training master and experience many hardships.

But their friendship gets them through their difficulties. This bond produces intense and lifelong loyalty between the two boys. They continue to be inseparable, until a prostitute named Juxian comes between them when she marries Xiaolou. Later, the Japanese invasion and cultural revolution intervene in their relationship, provoking various declarations of betrayal.

The story begins in 1934 and spans 53 years until 1977. The two men's lives are viewed against a backdrop of a country in upheaval as the movie's journey through various times in China's history. Each section, which is integral to the plot, shows a different era in the lives of the characters and the historical background from the Warlords through the cultural revolution, including the Japanese invasion of 1937 and the communist takeover ("*Farewell My Concubine*," 1).

As the movie begins, a young Dieyi is abandoned at the opera troupe by his own mother after she cruelly cuts off his extra finger. Even though his mother, a whore, deserts him because he is a burden, he quickly gains a loving replacement in the form of Xiaolou. During the early lives of Dieyi and the other young actor, Xiaolou, the fierce friendship forms as they train and are punished, always looking out for each other.

From the first Xiaolou watches out for his little friend. He finds him a place to sleep and rebukes all the teasers. Later, Dieyi runs away, promising his three coins to Xiaolou. Dieyi tells the master after he returns that Xiaolou was not responsible, just to punish him, even though Xiaolou is punished anyway. At another point, when Dieyi can't remember his lines to say that "I am a girl," and shuts down, Xiaolou punishes him by forcing a stick in his mouth so that Dieyi will stay around and remain in the troupe. Yet this act of pain is also an act of love and Xiaolou cries throughout as he administers this rebuke.

Thirteen years go by and their hardships pay off as the boys grow up to become major stage stars; their loyalty continues even as they are famous performers in Peking. Their bond becomes even stronger as they become more acclaimed. Although they are as close as two men can be, Dieyi yearns for even more. Even though the subject of homosexuality is only once overtly referred to in *Farewell My Concubine*, its presence is never far from the surface. Xiaolou rejects that sort of connection from Dieyi, yet nothing still comes between them; or so it seems.

After Xiaolou saves a prostitute with a fake declaration of engagement, she comes to him and forces him to make good on the public acknowledgement.

They marry, and while Xiaolou makes his stage brother Dieyi, his best man, Dieyi feels betrayed and acts pettishly, refusing even to come to the party until the last minute, then leaving abruptly. With Juxian in the picture, Dieyi has a moral dilemma which becomes confusing to him. From the beginning his sense of identity has been muddled, with the master's continual insistence that he say "I am a girl," in his role as a female within the opera.

Yet role acting and reality have become blurred for him. As a child his mother was a prostitute, he was raped by an old man, his friend was stolen from him by a woman, then he goes to Master Yeun in a sexual relationship ("Farewell My Concubine," 1).

Later, in Dieyi's trial for fraternizing with the Japanese (said fraternizing occurring only because he is trying to save Xiaolou and is promised by Juxian that she will leave her husband and return to the brothel if he helps, but she reneges), all Dieyi's friends try to cover for him, even lying that he had been taken away in handcuffs. Dieyi rebukes them publicly, saying that he sang of his own free will, causing the others to lose face by his betrayal to their loyalty.

As mentioned previously, Farewell My Concubine has been considered to be an epic national epic, but contrary to this popular perception, Kaige focuses on the intimate architectural spaces of his native city Beijing and recalls its past; the pain of betrayal is vividly depicted in the film as the two stage brothers are publicly forced to renounce each other with irreversible consequences. Those unfamiliar with the history of Chinese communism are

in for a shocking crash course as the devastating scenes unfold (“ Chinese Film, 1).

During the cultural revolution, both men, betrayed by a boy Dieyi saved from death, are forced to parade as spectacles in full operatic regalia. Yet they resemble pathetic clowns with mismatched makeup and signs around their necks. Xiaolou and Dieyi are made to kneel with countless others to confess their sins against the people. Touchingly, but to no avail, Dieyi attempts his usual trick of swooping Xiaolou’s makeup up in order to make it look better. However, garish makeup seems to be the least of their worries.

Forced to talk against each other, Xiaolou starts out in euphemistic terms, declaring Dieyi to be one who sang for all, both small and great; a man who is a consummate artist of the people and for the people. Yet this is turned against him and he must betray Dieyi with more vehement declarations. Even though Dieyi sang for the Japanese in order to free him, Xiaolou declares him a traitor and also tells the masses of his illicit homosexual relationship with Master Yeun.

After Dieyi calls Juxian a prostitute in retaliation, Xiaolou also renounces his wife, saying he never loved her. Her pain knows no bounds and as a result of his betrayal, she hangs herself. So much sorrow and damage occurs during these public denunciations which happen to also mirror the filmmaker’s own life. Kaige remains haunted that he was forced to publicly denounce his father during his youth in the cultural revolution (“ Chinese Film,” 1).

The film ends as years later, when the revolution has ended, the stage brothers are once again together in an opera. During the performance
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Xiaolou announces he is too old. Whether intentional or not, Dieyi forgets the lines that say he is a girl; and Xiaolou prompts him. Dieyi continues with the play, only to stab himself and die. The friends are still together: in life and in death.

Although different in style from *Farewell My Concubine*, *Hero* is a film that has caused unprecedented fervor, judging from the response of much of the population of China. So far, it is the most popular Chinese film ever released in the country, making phenomenal money there, only slightly less than *Titanic*.

Despite being regarded by some Chinese as pandering to western tastes, the film also made enough money in the United States alone to cover production costs, providing a portal for many western viewers to begin watching other Chinese films previously unknown in the west.

Like other films of the fifth generation genre, this movie demonstrates a rejection of the socialist-realist tradition worked by the earlier communist Chinese filmmakers. With the ever popular Jet Li as the star, the film is loosely based during the time of the warring states, a period before the unification of China. This story has also been told in other versions, notably Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1998) and Zhou Xiaowen's

The Emperor's Shadow (1996). Yet Yimon chose to develop his own historical story based on the turbulent days leading up to the founding of the Qin dynasty when seven kingdoms struggled for supremacy. This setting contrasts with the mystical "martial worlds" of similar films which exist

somewhere away from reality. (Qin in Wade Giles parlance is the same as Ch'in from which the English word for China probably derived).

With Hero Yimon is working out of the tradition of the wuxia pian: a swordplay or martial arts film. Not to be confused with a kung fu movie, this concepts involves a more idealized realm of legendary heroes living marginalized, carefree lives on the edges of everyday society. Their weapons of choice are swords, spears, and daggers. In the typical wuxian film, some incident draws the swordsman into the everyday world, in order to fight, albeit reluctantly. However, he retains a firm moral compass to defend the helpless against corrupt officials or leaders. The genre has been a regular part of Chinese cinema since the 20s (“ Hero,” 1).

Yet the genre has been reconfigured by Yimon, who addresses the present by looking backwards and sideways; backwards to the 90s postmodern wuxia persona and sideways to Hong Kong commercial cinema. Absorbing the subversive innovations of Hong Kong film directors Tsui Hark and Wong Kar Wai, Yimon also digs back to his roots, and recreates as wuxia pian, the cinema of pure spectacle and philosophical meditation that he as a cinematographer and Chen Kaige created in 1984 with Yellow Earth. Using spectacle rather than storytelling is one way to open up the complex world of Hero to the violent opposing critical reactions (Chinese Cinema, 2).

Also, he no longer uses revenge as the sole element comprising the story. With Hero Yimon attempts to move martial arts beyond the concept of revenge, even as he explores what it means to be a martial hero (Kung Fu Cinema, 1).

As the tale progresses, this film also incorporates themes of loyalty and betrayal, using a series of Rashomon flashbacks. Like the layers of an onion unfolding, each unraveled tale produces additional insights. These accounts shape the story of how one man defeats three assassins who sought to murder the most powerful warlord in reunified China (IMDB, 1)

As the story begins, Jet Li, who is called Nameless, starts to recount his martial victories to the emperor of Qin, telling how he defeated each of the three assassins, all members of a neighboring kingdom, who are sworn to kill the king to avenge their subjugation. Thus the main protagonist is seen defending the cause traditionally attributed to the villain by protecting the thing that causes others to seek revenge.

Yet subsequent flashbacks revisit and reinterpret the same events, elaborating on and changing the story as it continues. However, it is only after the initial setup that the king responds with his own version of events. As a new story unfolds, it is literally painted in a different color. Even as this account unfolds, there appears a third which happens to be the final version of the truth (Kung Fu Cinema, 1).

Through each successive narrative, the viewer sees friendship and loyalty among the assassins, who then appear pained when it seems that they are betrayed. Each story has the characters questioning themselves and others regarding motives, wondering who is their true friend and true love, then going to extreme lengths to prove that love and undying loyalty.

With each version motives are questioned as to whom is the true person and whom is the betrayer. Things are never what they seem. Sky allows himself

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to be killed because he is loyal to a higher cause, while Nameless appears to be loyal to the king when actually he wants to kill him because he destroyed his family and kingdom.

Sky, Broken Sword, Flying Snow and Nameless appear to have differing relationships in each of the three versions. In one version Snow is furious that Broken Sword had a chance to kill the king, then refused; that he appeared to have betrayed their group. He tells Nameless why. His calligraphy showed "our land." Nameless later gives this calligraphy to the king.

It is a Chinese proverb which states, "to suffer yourself when all under heaven suffer, to enjoy only when all under heaven enjoy." This is a concept greater than individual loyalty. Transcending personal vendettas, it calls for the greater good of the masses. Nameless ought to consider what is right for the majority, and not just what is right for himself. As a chivalrous hero of great skill in the wuxia tradition, Nameless is duty bound to do whatever is most righteous, no matter the personal cost to himself ("Hero", 4).

When Nameless gets the chance to kill the king and comes within ten paces of him to do so, telling him of his personal grudge, he too recalls "our land." and allows himself to be executed for a greater good, becoming loyal to a country rather than just his immediate surroundings. Dying a criminal he is buried as a hero.

In the meantime, there is always a relationship between Broken Sword and Flying Snow, one so powerful that it defies betrayal by other relationships. By the end, although Snow is confused whether Broken Sword really loves her, <https://assignbuster.com/loyalty-and-betrayal-in-a-political-context/>

whether he is truly loyal, he shows her by refusing to defend himself in a fight. She kills him, then distraught over the act, kills herself so they will go home together.

As Nameless debates over what to do in his meeting with the king, Yimon actually shows both characters as heroes. Both have causes to which they are loyal. One is a defender with raging inner turmoil, and the other is a unifier with raging outer turmoil as he struggles to bring all the competing kingdoms together. Yet Nameless undergoes a spiritual and emotional transformation as he finds that being a true hero means rising above one's petty loyalties; it also takes trust to find a higher cause.

Both men share insights that aid them to overcome their mutual conflict as they share the ideal that both want what is best for the masses. As Nameless empties himself of his own desires, renouncing what he wants, he becomes invulnerable. Led by Broken Sword, Nameless has grown to accept that his loyalties were merely provisional, way stations on the path to something greater, though less tangible. By doing so, he echoes the philosophical tenets of Daoism with his self emptying. (Cinema Scope, p. 9).

Yet Yimou has been criticized for rewriting history, portraying the King of Qin as rosier than past historical accounts have shown. These accounts demonstrate that the man was a brutal tyrant. Additionally, the film's strong adherence to sacrificing one's individuality for the good of the many as filtered through the state is a concept the pro communist Chinese government was pleased with. However, at a press conference Yimou

insisted that choosing which dynasty to put in the story was an aesthetic choice not preconditioned by any one political slant (Kung Fu, 1).

Many critics deride Yimou over the position in the film, forgetting that this was one of several narratives. Granted, the story can be seen as putting the good of the many over the good of the individual; that loyalty to the masses triumphs individual loyalty.

However, Hero can also be seen as a multiple narrative since the tales by Nameless and the king are mutually contradictory. In this context, tyranny is not simply a means to an end. Although viewers who want to align themselves with the king of Qin will see a paean to Chinese unity and totalitarianism,; the reading is there for the taking. But such a position neglects to take into account the film's clear message of undermining the limited authority of any single individual and the idea of narrative as closure itself.

Cinema Scope Magazine notes that Hero celebrates absence as spectacle, glorifying absolute renunciation and perfect nonviolence as preconditions for peace. Like Nameless, it speaks to power, undermining authority's grip on narrativity. Instead of a struggle within the narrative, Hero puts the control of the narrative into dispute. It is really about who has control of the story: Nameless or the king. As filmed philosophically, it is Yimou's continual challenge to any state or empire.

Hero is allied to Daoism, a set of ideals which finds fullness in absence, transcendence in renunciation, fullness in letting go. The Lao Tzu Dao's primary text was written during the time of the Warring States, the period of <https://assignbuster.com/loyalty-and-betrayal-in-a-political-context/>

turmoil that ended with the unification of China under Qin. In *Hero* he is still years away from this great accomplishment, simply the king of Qin.

Yimou's best recent films *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) and *Not One Less* contain the same concept of speaking stories to power. Yimou has struggled with authorities over who gets to tell the authentic story; how divergent it can be from the official version. He still has movies such as *To Live* that are officially banned in China today because of their recount of the unacceptably critical history of the People's Republic of China from 1945 to the 70s ("*Hero*," 3).

Both *Farewell My Concubine* and *Hero* are marvelous spectacles, demonstrating in differing styles various allegiances, alliances, and betrayals; even renunciation of individual loyalty for the greater good. A glimpse of turbulent Chinese history can be gleaned through the films. The international audience is so much the richer for having these works in their repertoire.

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