

Cambridge University Press

0521448778 - New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics

Edited by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Nick Browne

For a Western audience, the presentation of essays on Chinese cinema of the 1980s implies a distance of both culture and interpretation. This distance for film scholars may have a paradoxical aspect – disclosing a fascinating spectacle of another world under a familiar form of analysis. For scholars of Chinese history and literature, a book that takes Chinese film as a central instance of popular culture – one, moreover, that approaches its object through the languages of Western critical theory – may seem novel and strange. Nonetheless, the critical space created by this necessary crossing of perspectives provides a way to come to terms with the forms and meanings of Chinese filmmaking of the 1980s and to examine the way film occupies, within the sphere of Chinese popular culture, the contested space between art, entertainment, and national politics.

The presumption that Chinese cinema is the monolithic cultural expression of a Chinese nation has been dramatically undercut by history. “China” appears today largely as the consequence of the 1949 Communist revolution, forming an interregional social and economic network defined and sustained by politics. The People’s Republic, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and their cinemas are marked as socialist, capitalist, and colonialist, respectively. Yet to exaggerate these differences would be to overlook a common cultural tradition of social, ideological, and aesthetic forms that stands behind and informs Chinese cinema as a whole. This book locates the Chinese cinemas of the People’s Republic, Taiwan, and Hong Kong between the elements of a common culture and the differences of form and significance wrought by history and political division.

As a technology, of course, film has a Western origin. In this respect, the introduction of film into China is part of the history of “modernization,” that

Cambridge University Press

0521448778 - New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics

Edited by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 NICK BROWNE

large theme of the West's impact on Asia, linked in the contemporary period (in often misleading ways) to the vast transformation of social life in the region. Indeed, with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the dismantling of Maoism in the late 1970s, it was precisely mainland China's relation to the West and its commitment to resume modernization, first inaugurated in the late nineteenth century, that returned to the national agenda. Thus, as an art form, instrument of political communication, and medium of mass entertainment, Chinese film of the 1980s is deeply embedded in the process of political and social change across the region in a period marked by the cultural deconstruction of Mao's socialism and the new recognition of the possibilities and limits of Western-style modernization. Chinese cinema in the 1980s, inevitably caught up in the project of renegotiating China's past, enacts this cultural dilemma in different ways, according to its situation. Contemporary Chinese cinema, in other words, is a part of the continuing and convulsive efforts, ongoing through this century, at remaking China socially and economically.

Thus, the cultural critique of Chinese film in this period must be historical. The challenge is to map the changes of aesthetic form and sensibility upon the resistances and incursions, displacements, and reinscriptions of political power as it seeks to shape the social body. In this way, the critique of film form can register the local perturbations of form and affect, identify the points of discursive condensation around which semantic systems are established and revalued, note the distinctive re-marking of the problem of social and national identity, and recognize the changing significances of setting, style, narration, and genre in the presentation and revision of the culture's present relation to the past. That is, we can trace the changing relation of aesthetic form to political power in modes ranging from cultural reaffirmation to negation. The appended chronologies (see p. 217) seek to embed film in the larger social context. The essays that comprise this volume are analyses of Chinese film's efforts to express and reconsider the complex and long-standing theme of modernization in the post-Cultural Revolution period from both a Western and a Chinese perspective.

Traditionally, the aesthetic instance in Chinese culture has been supported by and derived from ethical precepts. Thus, well before the time of the founding of the People's Republic, the process of politicizing film art depended on recruiting and revising the tenets of traditional Confucian ideology for both reformist and radical aesthetic programs. The dislocations of the Cultural Revolution led at its conclusion in the late 1970s to an interrogation within certain elements of the film circle of the Party's insistence on congruence of art and politics and, by implication and consequence, to efforts to reconceptualize the status of film as an autonomous form distinct not only from politics but also from the other arts, most notably theater. Chinese film theory was one coded locus of the argument that explored the parameters of aesthetic autonomy in relation to the political instance.

The reinterpretation of the past in the major achievements of mainland cinema, as these essays show, took one of two dominant forms. The first reasserted the

Cambridge University Press

0521448778 - New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics

Edited by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION 3

pre-Maoist ethical foundations of social life implicit in the narrative structures and conventions of melodramatic form and its historical retrospective mode of narration (as in the work of Xie Jin); the second adopted a modernist examination of the urban present in a flattened, synchronic mode, as in *The Black Cannon Incident* [*Heipao shijian*, 1986], or, alternatively, examined the rural past in a new light, as in Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* [*Huang tudi*, 1985]. In the first genre, as Ma Ning's essay shows, the conventions of melodrama serve both to critique the Party's role in the Cultural Revolution and to justify or legitimate the terms of the new sociopolitical order. It is a critique, I argue in my essay, that proceeds in the name of a new, depoliticized humanism, drawing on Confucianism for an ethical appraisal of the economic foundations of Maoism and its political program of class struggle. At the semantic center of this melodramatic mode is the in-mixing of the patriarchal order and the system of political economy that regularly installs the human being in a charged and overdetermined place – politically, economically, sexually – within the discourse of reform, private enterprise, and modernization. Post-1949 socialist ideology adopted the traditional figure of the countrywoman as the victim of feudalist patriarchy and sought by her liberation to constitute her as the beneficiary and bearer of the socialist program through narrative proof and visual spectacle. In this way, the relationship of the woman to the Party was inscribed as the setting of a didactic political lesson, and this figure took form as a significant political category. The post-Cultural Revolution cinema of the melodramatic type, however, explored in a number of its notable works the political victimization of men by the regime and dramatized masculine psychology, ranging from passive suffering to cowardice. *Red Sorghum* [*Hong gaoliang*, 1987], by contrast, showed the reverse side of masculine political castration by retrieval and restoration of an idealized masculine virility. Related shifts of form and valence in the writings of the young, Westernized Chinese critics indicate an account of the cultural and historical inscription of gender in Chinese cinema that shows it per se to be incidental to the genealogy, function, and meaning of the 1980s discourse on reform.

Rather, the aesthetic and ethical project of the new, post-Cultural Revolution cinema in the People's Republic is the depoliticization of the rhetoric and modes of signification of socialist cinema by contesting film's relation to official socialist historiography and by renegotiating the relation of film form to this official history by innovations in both modes of narration and style. For example, *Yellow Earth's* reinvention of nature into the coded semiotic system of Chinese film syntax, its reinterpretation of landscape, and its strategy of emptying space constitute, as Esther Yau has shown, the Daoist terms for the political reinstatement of a classical mode of the Chinese aesthetics. Thus, the film's style and form contest the founding myths of socialist political culture. Taken as a figuration of a possible way toward the future, the fate of the old farmer's children, especially the drowning of the daughter, contests the agency of the Party. The film evaluates the changes the Party has (not) worked on the patterns of Chinese

Cambridge University Press

0521448778 - New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics

Edited by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 NICK BROWNE

history. The film's "modernist" form, in particular its silences, its absences, and its suspension of evident causality, stands in a negative relation to the cultural presumptions that had previously governed the correspondence of fictional and historical narratives. Likewise, the metropolitan version of this revisionist project, *The Black Cannon Incident*, treats contemporary Chinese life in that sector where the new industrial order and socialist administration converge and shows it as having reached paralysis, a historical impasse. The film argues that antiquated modes of bureaucratic regulation actively impede economic modernization, giving rise to what Paul Pickowicz calls a "postsocialist" malaise. Pickowicz treats these urban films of Huang Jianxin as documents of socialist disappointment and delegitimation. Like the melodramatic mode, they are meditations on the intractable, cyclical patterns of Chinese history, an acknowledgment of the limitations of Western ways in China, and testimony to the collapse of the utopian vision of the socialist world. Films of this type abandon the retrospective double narrative focalization of now *and* then found in melodrama, in favor of now *or* then, a strategy of flattening and compressing narrative focus in a way that restricts the rhetoric of change and of reform implied by the comparative aspect of temporal distance to the synchronic description and apprehension of a sensibility, an effective mode, marked by the dominant figures of impossibility and confinement. This strategy is not that of apology, justification, or reform, but the articulation of a radical cultural question about the impossibility of imagining a future different from present. As cultural critique, what these two modes of post-Cultural Revolution cinema have in common is a reconceptualization of the person, a historical process of rehumanization intended to invert and negate the victimization imposed by the technologies of political power.

In this regard, the correspondence of "subjectivity" (the technical term for the representation of inner or emotional life by film syntax) and society was a fundamental tenet of "classical" 1950s socialist realist film, linking the affective roots of individual life to the public sphere through socialist doctrine. The new Chinese cinema marks a historical break. What is undergoing renegotiation in the Chinese cinema is the historical reappearance of the "self," an analysis of its historical negation, and the remapping of the relation of public to private in another mode. The critique of the political apparatus of dehumanization results in the loosening of ideological confinement, especially with regard to the terms of social exchange, as well as in the loosening of restraints of physical movement of an increasingly libidinalized body. To be sure, "subjectivity" as an evocation of perception, memory, or fantasy is a classical effect. What is under construction in the contemporary period is the inauguration of the "self" as a new, marked place for the individual in the social network. The Western ideology of the individual ("subjectivity") and its filmic trope, the "cinematic apparatus," is, however, an inadequate summary of this effort. Likewise, the imposition of Western feminist readings of sexual difference and of homosexual narcissism to map the social terrain of post-Cultural Revolution cinema, whatever its value in

Cambridge University Press

0521448778 - New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics

Edited by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION 5

the Western context, misses the immanent terms of Chinese cinema's cultural critique: its analysis and display of the overdetermined figure of the woman in the socialist discourse on reform both as an agency of state control and as the ideological linchpin for the regulation of socialist society. It is evident that the cultural logic of gender in post-Cultural Revolution cinema, in the formation of its deconstructive project, transcends the simple and literal binarism ("sexual difference") of the white Western feminisms. What is at stake in the new Chinese cinema is not an epistemological category of "subjectivity" but its ethical foundations.

In the People's Republic, the mutation of aesthetic and ideological cinematic forms is the consequence of an effort by a range of filmmakers to conceive anew the relation of aesthetics and politics, to create narrative structures capable of reassessing the past and interrogating the present with respect to the possibility of new economic options, and to rethink the status of the individual apart from the technologies of control. New cinema of the People's Republic negotiates an aesthetic form that puts cinematic narrative and the imaginative worlds that it projects in a position between the historical models of the past and an introspective understanding of the experience of the Cultural Revolution. The aesthetic doctrine of Mao Zedong's Yan'an Talks and that of the Cultural Revolution's model operas have been submitted to the revisions of a new film practice.

In Taiwan and Hong Kong, the mutation of cinema's narrative form, its corresponding representation of society, and its address to the audience indicate the contradictory relations of these regions both to mainland China and to the ongoing processes and consequences of Western-style modernization. The aesthetic forms of these regions are complex, syncretic totalities composed of traditional Chinese social and cultural arrangements overlaid with a social formation of a capitalist order characteristic of "advanced" Western consumer societies. That is, they link composite cultural identities to contemporary modes of filmic representation.

Two fundamental aesthetic poles mark the dominant cultural tendencies enacted across the films of this new period in both Taiwan and Hong Kong – the traditional (nostalgic) and the modern (the cynical, the discontinuous). In Taiwan, the traditional mode might be identified with the works of Hou Hsiao-hsien (Hou Xiaoxian), and in Hong Kong, with *Homecoming* [*Sishui liunian*, 1984] by Yim Ho (Yan Hao). In each there is a strong sense of the continuity of Chinese culture and history rooted in an agrarian sensibility. Hou's work, as William Tay points out, is a sustained meditation on the social evolution of Taiwan and the personal and familial meaning of the progressive urbanization of the island. In this work, we see the memory of the loss of the mainland fade, figured by the disruption of affective or marital ties. This loss is then replaced by a second kind of emptiness, a more modern one marked by the dissolution of value and affect under the impact of industrialization to the point where even the young are disoriented. This historical recounting of double loss, told in a mode of sustained

Cambridge University Press

0521448778 - New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics

Edited by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 NICK BROWNE

patience, is haunted by a melancholic nostalgia. In *Homecoming*, this temporal structure of separation is literally spatialized in the border crossing that contrasts the lives of two close friends, one living on the mainland, the other in Hong Kong, and so represents two forms of cultural life as different historical formations. In this sense, the retrospective narrative structure is spatialized, juxtaposing and then evaluating the concrete social grounds of two psychological attitudes, insisting on their difference but also on the continuity and communication between persons of what was once a single nation.

The contemporary, one might almost say “modernist,” mode of Taiwan and Hong Kong cinemas adapts the art film format to the underlying and fundamental cultural trope of the period – cultural and psychological dislocation. Remarkably, this trope is intensified in the more popular Hong Kong genres. In films of this type, set well after the advance of consumer capitalism, traditional Chinese patriarchal social structure and its associated ethical culture have been nearly liquidated. The familial order has been replaced or put in abeyance by a new, largely masculine culture of corporate brotherhood (the syndicate) whose paramount expression in works like *Long Arm of the Law* [*Shenggang qibing*, 1984] is spectacular violence. In Hong Kong cinema, the popular action mode is perhaps the most directly “political.” *Long Arm of the Law* opposes the forces of the Hong Kong police to the savage attack of a mainland gang (of robbers) and explores the opportunism, deceit, and even betrayal within Hong Kong’s “military” culture. Likewise, as Li Cheuk-to insists, the victimization depicted in *The Boat People* [*Touben nuhai*, 1982] allegorizes the abandonment of Saigon by paralleling it with Britain’s return of Hong Kong to the People’s Republic. The spectacular paroxysms of violence produced by this overt clash of territorial interests might be read not only as the displacement of the popular rage over an imminent invasion, but also as the bearer of an ideological refusal, the displacement of political critique altogether into the taut rhythms of sensational action effects.

The Hong Kong art cinema of the late 1980s registers this cultural paralysis and anxiety through its narrative indecision over the past’s relation to the present. This is evident both from the inscription of contemporary references in historical materials and from the deconstruction and suppression of clear markers of temporality. This cynical epistemology that foregrounds the panache of style as a set of explicitly aesthetic effects implies a reading of contemporary Chinese history, namely the eclipse, as Leo Lee underlines, of the promise of the future. The emphasis on the formal character of the surface effects, whether spectacularization in the popular mode or aestheticization in the elite mode, serves as a rhetoric of confinement, diminishing any truly reflexive turn and covering over a cultural critique. The “political unconscious” of the Hong Kong cinema of the late 1980s consists of the equivocation and compromise of Hong Kong between its contradictory nationalist and colonialist interests – and specifically indicates its helplessness before the task of initiating a cultural resolution. Cynicism is the dominant trope of this impasse.

Cambridge University Press

0521448778 - New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics

Edited by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION 7

Narratively speaking, the temporal mode of Hong Kong cinema is not retrospective, but future anterior – a syncretic culture caught in the complexity of an impending return that threatens to be a future undoing of its past achievement. The aesthetics of Hong Kong cinema are produced not by the efforts of neutralization or erasure of politics as in certain sectors of cinema in the People's Republic, but by the figuring of containment of its sovereignty by external powers and its displacement of cultural critique. The failure of the filmmakers to examine the basis of the fantastic wealth produced in the Colony and the attending dissolution of traditional ethical culture (giving way to a substitute, second-order ethic, that of “professionalism”) is covered over by the urgent political problem – Hong Kong's 1997 return to mainland China. This irresolvable problem of contention with overpowering political forces corresponds to an ethical paralysis and an aesthetic stylization.

In Taiwan cinema, the significance of dislocation is another matter. Its central emblem is the aleatory form of metropolitan simultaneity and contingency. In this aesthetic mode, the separation (escape) from China, regarded as a political question, is neither simply displaced nor repressed. In Hou's films, the separation is treated as a memorable loss, recoverable in a sentiment that verges on melodrama. In contrast, as Fredric Jameson argues in “Remapping Taipei,” *Terrorizer* [*Kongbu fenzi*, 1986] adopts a European form – a sustained formal reflexivity for the playing out of a plot that juxtaposes and commingles writer's block, marital dissolution, juvenile delinquency, professional disappointment, prostitution, and murder. In sum, it gives us a kind of modernist picture of total dissolution of the traditional social and ethical complex. The professional world, evidently linked to the larger world of international business, has its own functioning order, remote yet intertwined with the life on the street and in the apartments. Cultural dislocation is figured and acted out as marital discord and delinquency. It is not that the traditional ethical order has been displaced. Rather it has been violated and quite possibly liquidated. The traditional moral network of hierarchical obligations and lateral reciprocity by which the individual takes up a place within the larger social Chinese order – that is, the extended sense of family or clan – has dissolved in this metropolitan setting. Social relations, the sense of totality, lie shattered. This social assault on the individual is registered most evidently in the strata of the population where contemporary acculturation takes place. As the patriarchal order, the support for the old economic system, dissolves, the figure of the mother serves increasingly as the medium by which social change is registered and responsibility situated. The daughter is the vehicle for the depiction of change in the structure of affective life. The authorial cynicism that regulates the telling of the story is less judgmental or condemning than it is a diagnostic of the contemporary professional sensibility staged in the film. What previously were represented by moral categories have been transvalued into affective states and movements and transposed into investments in architectural forms and spaces.

Terrorizer's historical perspective on this social world is a thoroughly syn-

Cambridge University Press

0521448778 - New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics

Edited by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 NICK BROWNE

chronic one – the past is absent and the present strongly marked by the signifiers of the contemporary, imported world. Evocative designations of strangely empty, urban spaces, psychic estrangement, and presentation of professional anomie in a fashionable mode indicate reference to the sensibility behind Antonioni's films of the 1950s and 1960s. The analogy with this European style of emotive abstraction is only partial, however, in that the Italian setting of the 1950s was clearly a transformation of the aesthetics of the city constructed by Italian neo-realism. In *Terrorizer* the historical picture of the economic transformation of Taiwan is compressed and schematized. In form and style, the film is quite self-consciously Western, presenting itself as an “art film.” As in Hong Kong cinema, its style subordinates the reflexive form, deleting the possibility of social critique and historical analysis. The film, in other words, becomes part of the consumer culture that produced it while relaying its underlying contradictions.

Chinese film in the “new period” (roughly from 1979 to 1987) converges around a significant cultural “problematic” that defines a common historical and cultural moment. This problematic, however, is neither unitary nor simple. It consists, we might say, in the cultural transformation that attends the dismantling of Maoism and the reassertion of an alternative, mixed socialist mode of economy in the People's Republic. The Maoist program showed itself in the micro-structure of everyday life, in the workplace, in the changing configuration and status of the family, and in the status of the self in its divided alliance between the work unit, the lineage, the Party, and the nation. Within the territorial subunits of the region, the responses to this economic and cultural de-Maoification vary. In Hong Kong, for example, the “new movement” in film concludes in 1984 with the intervention of a political event – the British–Chinese agreement to reintegrate Hong Kong into China, that is, decolonization. In Taiwan and Hong Kong a related set of social transformations within traditional patriarchal structure were under way, but these evolved under the circumstances of distinctive forms of neocolonial capitalism closely tied to the larger world system. Thus, the reorganization or mutation of the traditional Chinese family and its ethical support, and its articulation with economic and political objectives or consequences, proceeded differently in its larger cultural implications through the region.

In the post-1949 period, the cinema occupied a specific place aesthetically and politically in relation to the matter of identity, both within and of the subunits of the region. However, one common development across Chinese culture in the People's Republic, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in the 1980s was the emergence of a view (if not the fact) of film as an autonomous art with distinctive aesthetic properties and the assertion (if not the reality) of film's independence from the requirements of a given political line whether from the Left or from the Right. In the “new period” it was the task of Chinese film theory in the People's Republic especially to put forward new theses about the character of film realism, matters of filmic ontology, and the basis of a distinctive film language. The reading of André Bazin, the postwar French theoretician of filmic realism, for example, served

Cambridge University Press

0521448778 - New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics

Edited by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION 9

within debates over film to protect “reality” from its subordination to state and party politics. In its insistence on film’s aesthetic autonomy and on the value of filmic realism, film theory in the People’s Republic can be understood as supporting the depoliticization of the Maoist legacy. These debates in the field of theory coincided with the return to Taiwan and Hong Kong of Chinese film directors like Edward Yang (Yang Dechang) and Allen Fong (Fang Yuping) who had attended film schools in the United States and helped to create the support for what might be called the Chinese “art film.” Traditional ethics had provided the moral foundation of the system of the arts, but theory’s claim for filmic autonomy fractured the presumption of a coherent and integrated system of belief that linked aesthetics with politics and ethics. The debate over the relation of form and ideology is an epiphenomenon and symptom of the deeper fracture lines running across and through the culture, one that turns, as it did for the May Fourth intellectuals, on the question of the form and value of Western-style modernization within traditional Chinese culture.

The common feature of Chinese film in this new period of historical transformation is the emergence of a distinctive stylistic and ideological antinomy that serves as an emblem of the deeper dispute over the terms of reproduction, reform, or rejection of traditional culture. The emergence of the forms of an “art film” in the People’s Republic is traceable jointly to innovative work by unorthodox younger filmmakers made possible in small, outlying studios still supported by a socialist budget system and to the availability of major examples of European filmmaking from the 1960s for viewing and discussion. The substantial moderation of the Guomindang cultural policy and the diversification of production circumstances at the nongovernment studios allowed for a parallel change in Taiwan. Chinese art cinema is, therefore, an “event” against the background of the “dominant cinema” – a highly variable critical category across the region. In the People’s Republic, for example, the term “dominant” indicates a socialist mode of explicit ideological legitimation that in the post-Cultural Revolution context serves the process of readjustment, reform, and even struggle, worked out in a version of classical Hollywood style. Thus, the dominant cinema in the People’s Republic seeks a reinvestment of socialist ideology in modernized social and economic circumstances. In Taiwan dominant cinema carries forward the Guomindang belief in a China under Republican principles. Works in this mode adopt a North American style of storytelling with the presumption of a theatrical model of the actors’ performances. Its narrative forms and stylistic treatment provide the evident link between past and present.

The aesthetic “event” of the 1980s throughout the region was the appearance of a distinctive mode of filmmaking that might in a limited sense be called “independent,” one different both from what in the West is called the “avant-garde” and from mainstream entertainment fare. In the People’s Republic it was called the “Fifth Generation.” In Taiwan and Hong Kong it was designated “new cinema.” This mode adopts a new film language of pictorial design, syntax, and

Cambridge University Press

0521448778 - New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics

Edited by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vivian Sobchack and Esther Yau

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 NICK BROWNE

narrative structure to project a re-visioning of Chinese cultural traditions. As social forms, these films are generally identified with the contemporary metropolitan experience (although the astounding and influential *Yellow Earth*, for example, a product of the experience of rustification, is not), separate themselves from traditional and official political culture, and explore in an introspective, or explicitly self-referential, mode the author's relation to the culture, often by taking up a position at the fringe. Autobiography and cultural critique often converge in figures of cultural estrangement or physical dislocation. The sensibility behind a number of the most important works of the new Chinese cinemas explores the condition of cultural paralysis or deterioration attendant upon a particular moment in the history of the "modernization" of East Asia. At this moment, the fact of a surging consumer capitalism coincides with depoliticization that exposes, in unusually explicit ways, both the human and the aesthetic to the shock and stress of jarring historical and ideological change. The central cultural dilemma addressed by these filmmakers is the consequent despair and dystopian vision figured across a region caught between a past nearly impossible to sustain and a dispiriting commodity-oriented future, nearly impossible in traditional ways to imagine or tolerate. The outstanding works of the new period seem closely tied to the outlook and fate of the contemporary Chinese intelligentsia.

The larger import and value of this aesthetic "movement" are the constitution in film of a profound cultural contradiction between a mode of traditional social identity and either socialist or capitalist modernization. In the West, the cultural negotiation between Christianity and capitalism over the status of the individual proceeded progressively over several centuries. In East Asia, the renegotiation of the relation between the status of a person in traditional social structure and ideology and twentieth-century modes of "subjectivity" and economic organization has been radically compressed and foreshortened. Thus, new films of the 1980s are the visible site for both intellectuals and the public at large of this historical mutation and its associated cultural contradictions. Often supported only by the cultural elites, and repudiated by both the public and the political bureaucracy, certain of these films and their reception within the People's Republic, Taiwan, or Hong Kong indicate something of the changing nature of cinema within the larger cultural and public sphere. They indicate both film's elevation as an art and the precipitation within film as a mass medium of a set of aesthetic distinctions that we in the West recognize as "high" or "low." We can observe a new kind of aesthetic stratification across Chinese film. The loud complaint by film circles in the People's Republic in the late 1980s against the rise of the commercial "entertainment film" and the consequent contraction of possibilities for "art film" production is resonant testimony to the new market logic in the People's Republic at the end of this period, as well as to a change in the economic basis of film production, one that aligns the situation in the People's Republic to analogous situations in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States.