**Excerpts from Dai Jinhua Interview: “May 4th Movement and Chinese Films”**

Abstract: The May 4th New Culture Movement was a “Cultural Revolution” in Gramsci’s sense. The newly created Chinese films played an extremely important functional role in this historical process, providing imaginary placements for people undergoing rapid and abrupt social changes. The most important invention of modern China was the invention of “female”, created for the purpose of calling forth and constructing the modern “human”, who was also the historical subject of modern China. The roles of martial heroines, female film stars and New Women in the early film culture were the manifestations of this invention. This constructiveness is embedded in the historical genesis of the concept of Chinese cinema.

Key words: May 4th New Culture Movement, early Chinese films, New Woman, martial art heroines, historical subject

The May 4th Movement has been conventionally regarded as the metanarrative that initiated modern China. Yet it was not merely the opening chapter of modern Chinese history, or simply a domestic event. Rather it was the moment that enabled China to become a modern nation state in the global political, economic and military dynamics. It once again affirmed Gramsci’s concept with regard to ‘cultural revolution’: after a political revolution there has to be a cultural revolution that provides for the re-placement of people, making it possible for the entire society to be re-invented. Modern China was thus initiated amidst collisions, destruction and re-construction.

Recently I have focused on one important and fundamental component of the May 4th New Culture Movement, the Vernacular Movement. The significance of this was of course not simply to be able to write in the vernacular style, but to be able to invest the signifiers: ancient Han characters, with the signified: modern/western thoughts and culture as well as political logics. From ancient Han characters to modern terminologies, it had involved an extremely intrinsic and profound process of shocks and re-inventions. We have paid the price of almost the entire pre-modern Chinese history, culture and memory in order to be able to painfully initiate modern Chinese history. Today, with the “rise of China”, the political and economic fact that provides for cultural space and psychological ampleness, we are now able to retrieve and re-construct pre-modern Chinese history.

Today, reflecting on the May 4th Movement and Chinese films we would see that the history of Chinese films itself has all along manifested two fundamental characteristics: One is the coincidence between films and national destiny: how as a modern industrial system it has and must directly share the destiny of the nation. The other is, interestingly, how the film industry as a mass culture has often been misplaced or has lagged behind the history of thoughts and culture in China. The role it played in the hundred years of modern Chinese history has been extremely important yet tricky, at times awkward.

The May 4th Movement, as narrated in terms of the histories of politics, thoughts and culture, is ultimately a political and cultural revolution. It has created a rift in Chinese culture. Its spirit was first and foremost that of avant-garde and radicalness. In comparison, the Chinese films of the time had seemed so trivial, lagged behind and unqualified. Yet I have always believed that was what made the functional role of Chinese films so intriguing. Because of the existence of films, we are able to look back and have a glance of the grief, misery and perplexity in Chinese history around the turn of the 20th century. That was not an occurrence of logical and linear process, but a bursting forth in search of survival at an apprehensive and desperate moment, with no other way out. Between the social reality and the discourses of political and cultural elites, there had existed many fissures and gaps. In a sense, films had, because of its characteristics as cultural industry and mass culture, recorded or displayed on another dimension the psychological and cultural scratches that the Chinese society and people had experienced at that moment. At the same time it had taken up the functional role of a hanging bridge or a ferry boat that connected the pre-modern and modern cultural logics with everyday lives, albeit not quite equal to the task.

The greatest invention of the May 4th Movement as a cultural revolution was the “female”. Of course, we can also say that the emergence of “human” itself marked the beginning of modern Chinese culture’s “invention”. Yet looking back today at the extremely profound and complex cultural construction process in the Vernacular movement, the character “human”, entering modern Chinese language as a signifier, had not only been replaced by “Human” with a capital H as Subject or supplemented with categories such as “human nature”, “human right” and so on, but also injected or invested with the process of gender distinction. The invention of the new female as a differential image had distinguished and positioned the subject position of modern Chinese male. In a certain sense, the pre-modern Chinese culture did not have a gender system that corresponded to the Christian culture. One proof is that in the construction of modern Chinese characters, the word “she” had been a rather difficult invention, and the last to be affirmed. As such the new female had become the most brilliant image, completely new, full of “modern” connotation because she rejected all shackles of traditional culture. In truth there is no “precedence” that could be quoted from Chinese culture.

The invention of “Human”, the establishment of the new social subject and historical subject, was at the same time tied to a relevant Western concept, the “Individual”. This concept was put to use in the context of pre-modern Chinese clan culture – the relationship network of blood tie, family and relatives – to liberate and call forth the modern “human”, the “individual”. The interesting misplacement was that, on the dimension of mass culture, this proposition’s effective realization had been manifested through martial art fictions and films, the genre in the guise of pre-modern cultural representations. The very first peak in the local Chinese film industry had precisely been the films of ancient costumes. Further, if modern individual at this time had already been presupposed as a “male”, then a second misplacement would be the prevalence of heroines in these early martial art films. The image of heroines in early Chinese films had unconsciously taken the structural position of the cowboy image in American Western films. In a situation of catastrophes and absence of orders, the heroine came with her sword to rescue people in hardship and then left with nothing more than the sword she carried. The heroine had played a similar functional role as the cowboy in the Westerns: the carrier of history as well as the traumatic core that history must exile.

Nevertheless, it would be necessary to add that among the hundred years of Chinese films, the female image that has taken the absolute leading position was not simply a transient structural existence for calling forth the male subject, but a carrier of radicalness in political culture and cultural politics throughout the May 4th era. For this reason, that image become a prominent characteristic of left-wing films.

Reflecting on the last hundred years, we can perhaps say that throughout the construction process of modern Chinese culture there had included three levels of subject invocation: the modern subject, the Chinese subject – referring to the establishment of a modern nation and the inclusion of cultural awareness i.e. the desire to modernize Chinese culture – and the revolutionary subject. It can be said that left-wing films at one time, by means of being invested with class awareness, had effectively superimposed the modern subject with the revolutionary subject. Then during the anti-invasion mobilization, the two had also successfully merged with the Chinese subject. And in the historical structure of the mid and late 20th century, oppressed people and oppressed nation share the homologous position against global capitalism/imperialism. It was in these three levels of subject invocation that the central position of female, and her role that was filled with possibility due to differentiation, had become particularly prominent in Chinese films.