Feng Xiaogang's New Year Celebration Films and Contemporary Chinese Commercial Cinema

Industry, Regulatory Authority and Pop Culture

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Declaration

I, Qi Ai, confirm that the information presented in this thesis is the result of my own work, except where due to reference is made. This thesis has not been previously accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted for any other degree at another university.

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Abstract

Since the 1993 market-oriented reform, the Chinese government has strengthened its role in the domestic film industry's commercialisation. Feng Xiaogang's New Year Celebration Films (*hesui pian,* NYCFs), by virtue of their impressive box-office performance, are a valuable indicator of how commercial imperatives work in tandem with ideological prescriptions and state censorship to shape contemporary Chinese commercial filmmaking. This thesis selects, as case studies, Feng's eight NYCFs of modern urban life across the period from the late 1990s, when he began making films in this mode with governmental support, to the 2000s, when his NYCFs address genre shift in the context of China's entry to the WTO: *Party A, Party B* (*Jiafang yifang*, 1997), *Be There or Be Square* (*Bujian busan*, 1998), *Sorry Baby* (*Meiwan meiliao*, 1999), *Sigh* (*Yisheng tanxi*, 2000), *Big Shot's Funeral* (*Dawan*, 2001), *Cell Phone* (*Shouji*, 2003), *A World Without Thieves* (*Tianxia wuzei*, 2004) and *If You Are The One* (*Feicheng wurao*, 2008). It investigates how the political economy of the Chinese film industry — comprising three interactive aspects in this context, industry commercialisation, government regulation and popular culture — produced Feng's NYCFs as a popular commercial genre. To facilitate this investigation, this thesis merges textual, industrial and cultural-policy analysis, combining film texts with attention to the government's cultural and industrial policies, film regulations and censoring rules, the Party's political philosophies and relevant campaigns in the film sphere, the trend in popular culture of humour from the late

1980s to the 2000s, and interview materials involving Feng and his close collaborators. It argues that Feng's filmmaking, along with the three categories' mutual construction, appropriates popular humorous expression to integrate political promotion and commercial return. This market-approved integration, in turn, promotes the film industry's state-led commercialisation, with regulatory authorities using economic and administrative means to infuse state propaganda into domestic filmmaking and thus, consolidate the Party's cultural hegemony. This thesis contributes to a nuanced understanding of the relationship between state, film industry, and filmmakers. Taking a political economy perspective, it uses Feng's NYCF production as a lens through which to illuminate Chinese cinema's production culture, in the context of state-led commercialisation. In addition, the thesis offers a new model that acknowledges the intersection of popular culture and ideology in constructing cultural hegemony, and further, highlights the role of the popular culture of humour in coordinating state propaganda and social critique in contemporary Chinese commercial cinema.

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“It was in everyone’s eyes, but under no one’s pen.”

——— Feng Xiaogang

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Abbreviations

CEPA	Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement
CFCC	China Film Co-production Corporation
CFG	China Film Group
GAPP	General Administration of Press and Publication
MRFT	Ministry of Radio, Film and Television
NYCFs	New Year Celebration Films
PRC	People's Republic of China
SAPPRFT	State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television
SARFT	State Administration of Radio, Film and Television
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Introduction

Since the 1990s, Feng Xiaogang's New Year Celebration Films (*hesui pian*, hereafter abbreviated as NYCFs) have been a conspicuous film form in Chinese cinema, on account of their impressive commercial success. NYCF refers to a film type named after its release season, which usually lasts from Christmas to Chinese New Year. Compared with other contemporaneous mainland NYCFs, Feng's works advance with the times to represent socially concerned issues and topics — such as institutional restructuring within state-owned enterprises, so-called going-abroad fever, unequal labour relationships, China's entry to the WTO, the rise of product placement in media texts, the increase in house prices, online business, mobile phone penetration and the ethics of technology, the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism as a fashion, the issue of extramarital affairs, and the topic of homosexuality — in a humorous and sometimes even satirical mocking way. Partly due to these up-to-date subjects and humorous representations, Feng's NYCFs are popular among many Chinese people to the extent that watching them at the cinema during New Year holidays has gradually become a fashion over time. Their dialogue has spurred many popular catchphrases that still retain influence years later. Interestingly, most of these film subjects are sensitive, while some of them, such as extramarital affairs, were even forbidden according to the censorship rules which were still in place when the relevant films were released. Nevertheless, far from banning these films, film authorities tacitly approved Feng's filmmaking to circumvent around the scope of film

regulations to represent those subjects. This acquiescent support did not change despite Feng's often open criticisms of censorship as a restraint on creativity and an impediment to the film industry's development. This situation appears paradoxical but reflects the concession and collaboration between state and filmmakers in the context in which the government engages in the film industry's commercialisation to achieve a dual goal of state propaganda and industrial rejuvenation.

When analysing this governmental engagement, Feng's NYCF production is a valuable indicator, since Feng's interaction with the film authorities exhibits how the industry's commercialisation, along with state propaganda, shapes domestic filmmaking. In the early 1990s, the government relinquished political impediments to encourage a market-oriented reform in the film industry, and later proposed a political-economic production project — aka the 9550 project — which aimed to produce 50 commercial films with high characteristics of promoting main melody spirits (*zhuxuanlü jingshen*, which comprise three core values of socialism, collectivism and patriotism to consolidate the Party's legitimacy in the increasingly expanded economic reform since the late 1980s.) during the Ninth Five-Year Plan from 1996 to 2000, around 10 films per year, to 'invigorate national spirit and pride' (Braester, 2011: 181) and strengthen the government's engagement in the reform and subsequent commercialisation since the mid-1990s. At the beginning of the new century, through taking the lead in launching a conglomeration of film sectors, the government further established a dominant position in the commercialisation process.

The appearance and development of Feng's NYCFs respond to these governmental operations for industrial rejuvenation, and further, reflect the agenda that the Party set — using economic development to consolidate its political legitimacy — as of the late 1970s when it initiated economic reform and opening-up policies. Accordingly, starting with his first NYCF, Feng sought a balance between commercial consideration and political promotion to gain opportunities to make films with the government's support and oversight. Thus, it can be seen that Feng's early NYCFs under the 9550 project give priority to the Party's political appeal of promoting main melody spirits with due consideration to market demands and investment return. His NYCFs produced in the 2000s concentrated on commercialising filmmaking and further improving market performance, as promoting main melody spirits has been integrated into the state-led commercialised film production in company with the industrial conglomeration. Feng's NYCFs, as the outcomes of the 9550 project, had already complied with the integration of political and economic appeals in the late 1990s. This compliance brought commercial advantages to his filmmaking, reflected in his use of sensitive and forbidden subjects as selling points, his films' box-office performance and consequent contribution to facilitating the establishment and development of New Year Cinema Season.

These consequences can be regarded as the products of the interaction of Feng's filmmaking with the film industry, with regulatory authorities (consisting of a propaganda apparatus and censorship mechanisms) and with Chinese popular

culture in the process of seeking the political-economic balance. The interaction's outcomes provide indications with which to comprehend the development of domestic filmmaking under the mutual construction of three categories, and also reflect the formation of Feng's filmmaking style which displays sensitive correspondence to the film industry's reform and social transformation in 1990s and 2000s. This thesis investigates how the Chinese film industry's commercialisation in conjunction with regulatory authorities' political consolidation and economic adjustment facilitate the formation of Feng's NYCFs and their emergence as a popular cultural form. Through this investigation, this thesis reveals how regulatory authorities engage in the film industry's commercialisation, propelling it towards a state-led and politically compliant direction. It also indicates how the industry's commercialisation, in turn, influences regulatory authorities to adjust economic directives. The two categories' negotiation consolidates the commerciality of Feng's filmmaking, which creates possibilities for the commercial success of his NYCFs. Meanwhile, this investigation demonstrates how regulatory authorities combine popular culture and become directly involved in its production to deliver softened state propaganda. Amid government appropriation and industry involvement, Feng works in a filmmaking style that uses comic expression to balance commercial and political considerations. The balance is dynamic and becomes influential along with the ongoing commercialisation of the film industry, since it facilitates a genre change in Feng's NYCFs as a result of which he adjusts humorous expression and narrative mode to rebalance the two considerations.

In order to facilitate the investigation, this thesis selects, as case studies, Feng's eight NYCFs of modern urban life from the late 1990s, when he started making them under the 9550 project, to the 2000s, when his NYCFs addressed a genre change in the context of China's entry to the WTO: *Party A, Party B* (*Jiafang yifang*, 1997), *Be There or Be Square* (*Bujian busan*, 1998), *Sorry Baby* (*Meiwan meiliao*, 1999), *Sigh* (*Yisheng tanxi*, 2000), *Big Shot's Funeral* (*Dawan*, 2001), *Cell Phone* (*Shouji*, 2003), *A World Without Thieves* (*Tianxia wuzei*, 2004) and *If You Are The One* (*Feicheng wurao*, 2008). Both industrial and cultural-policy analyses can assist these case studies, from several macroscopic perspectives of political economy, such as from the perspective of industrial structure established under the state-led commercialisation. Nevertheless, separately using them is easy to ignore the interplay between economic and cultural practices happened in the macroscopic economic process, such as the one between the film industry's market-oriented reform and the cultural policies' implementation, which can produces a combined impact on forging the modality of domestic commercial filmmaking; also, separately using them may increase the difficulty in fully discerning the interaction between the macroscopic economic process and the microscopic cultural production, or in this thesis, the interaction between the industry's state-led commercialisation and the production of popular genre in the context of which the government aims to establish cultural hegemony alongside the industry's rejuvenation.

Inspired by John Thornton Caldwell's investigation of the production culture in

Los Angels (2008), this thesis employs an integrated cultural-industrial method of analysis, which merges textual analysis of Feng's NYCFs, cultural policy analysis of film regulations, propaganda campaigns and the government's engagement in the forming of popular culture from the late 1980s to 2000s, industrial analysis of the government's reform measures and the film professionals' commercial practices, and interviews of Feng and relevant personnel such as producers, official supporters and collaborative screenwriters. According to Caldwell, using an integrated method can '[place] the discourses and results of any one register (textual, ethnographic, interviews, and political economy) in critical tension or dialogue with the others' (ibid.: 4); regarding this thesis, in addition to Caldwell's point, using this kind of method can make different researching materials and results support each other, to remedy the defects in the analyses, for example, through linking the interviews of Feng and his crews with other three registers, the method achieves to revel the specific impact of rhetoric regulations, ambiguous review comments and vague policy goals on his NYCF filmmaking and humorous style. In other words, the integrated cultural-industry method of analysis not only allows interrogating the interaction between Feng's NYCF production and the mutual constructed categories of film industry, regulation and popular culture to become possible, but also solves the predicament of analysis caused by such as abstract and vague regulation statements in China's context.

Through these case studies, this thesis argues that Feng's filmmaking, along with the mutual construction of film industry, regulatory authorities and popular culture,

appropriates popular humorous expression to integrate political promotion and commercial pursuit, which, as a market-approved mode, in turn facilitates the forming of the state-led commercial filmmaking framework where regulatory authorities use economic and administrative means to infuse state propaganda into producing culture, and therefore consolidates the Party's cultural hegemony.

This thesis contributes to a nuanced understanding of the relationship between state, film industry, and filmmakers. Taking a political economy perspective, it uses Feng's NYCF production as a lens through which to illuminate Chinese cinema's production culture in the context of state-led commercialisation. Regarding the conception of 'production culture', this thesis develops John Caldwell's idea (2008) and pays attention on the industrial reflexivity in Feng's *Party A, Party B* and *Big Shot's Funeral*, two NYCFs released at the milestones of the industry's commercialisation: the beginning of the 9550 project and China's entry to the WTO, respectively. It follows Caldwell's understanding of reflexivity function, that is, 'reflexivity operates as a creative process involving human agency and critical competence at the local culture level as much as a discursive process establishing power at the broader social level' (ibid.: 34); however, different from attributing film entertainment caused by reflexivity to the alignment of market-approved criticism and sophisticatedly profitable production, as Caldwell does, this thesis adds a consideration of the government, since the mainland NYCF genre is produced for promoting its engagement in the industry's commercialisation. In other words, the

humorously reflexive comments in Feng's NYCFs are also for spreading the Party's policies to particular social issues such as the massive dismissal of redundant employees in state-owned enterprises reflected in *Party A, Party B*. It is worth noting that this propaganda attribute allows using reflexivity to be possible in Feng's NYCFs, through which can detect the characteristics — intertwining state propaganda and economic practice — of the Chinese film production culture in the shifting period.

As for the government's engagement in Feng's NYCF production, this thesis develops Zhang Rui's argument which regards Feng's filmmaking as a compromise of political and commercial pressure (2008), by highlighting the relation between the government's political promotion and the industry's reform, that is, the government initiates the industrial commercialisation to consolidate its cultural hegemony.[1] In this sense, this thesis regards the NYCF genre's humorous expression is not merely for carrying filmmakers' social critique as what Zhang argues, but for commercialising state propaganda. Following this line, this thesis hopes to offer a new model that acknowledges the intersection of popular culture and ideology in constructing cultural hegemony, and further, highlights the role of the popular culture of humour in coordinating state propaganda and social critique in contemporary Chinese commercial cinema. Specifically, it seeks to illuminate the film industry's marketisation process with Chinese characteristics, which across the two decades turns from a state-planned economic mode to a state-led and market-determined

[1] This thesis uses the habit of Chinese expression to denote Chinese names, i.e. putting surname before given name, such as Feng Xiaogang, Kong Shuyu and Zhang Rui.

commercialisation mode. It also sheds light on mechanisms of propaganda and censorship in the film sphere by providing the means to identify the interrelation between the film industry's rejuvenation and state propaganda. This interrelation in Feng's filmmaking exhibits a mode transition from commercialising main melody films (*Zhuxuanlüe dianying*, here mainly referring to his works under the 9550 project) to politicising commercial films. The transition corresponds to the Chinese cinema's development and therefore can help to understand the film industry's state-led commercialisation since the mid 1990s. Meanwhile, from the thesis it can be seen that the popular culture of local humour is the key factor to successfully commercialising political promotion, especially in the context of implementing WTO agreements in the industry. Appropriating this local popular culture not only neutralises the cultural impact caused by globalisation but also facilitates the combination with foreign investment due to popular culture's market appeal. In other words, domestic film professionals make effective use of Chinese popular culture to collaborate with their foreign partners, localising their production for the Chinese film market. Now that I have laid out the thesis's research scope and questions, arguments and contributions, I will specify the thesis structure in tandem with critical methods for the chapters ahead.

Thesis Structure

Moving from critical context to case studies informed by a range of primary

evidence, this thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 provides working definitions of the three key categories — the Chinese film industry's commercialisation, regulatory authority and Chinese popular culture — that comprise its research framework. Chapters 2-5 employ textual analysis in conjunction with cultural policy and industry analyses in the rest of the chapters to identify the negotiated impact of the three categories on Feng's making of NYCFs from industrial, political and cultural points of emphasis, respectively.

Chapter 1 reviews the development of Feng's NYCFs along the film industry's commercialisation process from the 1990s to 2000s, investigating the mechanisms of both regulatory authorities and Chinese popular culture, including attention to popular culture's inherently political attributes. The chapter reveals the motives for the negotiation among the three categories, and indicates the conditions that facilitate the process. The motives and conditions lead Feng's filmmaking to be sensitive to the variations in the negotiation, making his NYCFs suitable references through which to study the film industry's commercialisation with Chinese characteristics.

Chapter 2 focuses on the industrial perspective, with case studies of *Party A, Party B* and *Big Shot's Funeral*, NYCFs that were made and released at crucial points in the film industry's commercialisation process. Their releases coincide with the government's proactive involvement in the industry's market-oriented reform with the 9550 project in the mid 1990s, and with China joining the WTO in the early 2000s, and

acceleration of the industry's commercialisation. Both films narrate domestic film professionals' experiences, including their dealings with film authorities, investors and sponsors at home and abroad. Both use a self-reflexive mode to comment on transformations in the film industry and their impact on domestic filmmaking, Feng's own filmmaking in particular. The chapter analyses the conditions of self-employment in the two films, e.g. the characters' principles and business methods, the relationship between the fictitious Chinese film professionals and their foreign partners, and the use of product placement. Overall, Chapter 2 analyses the films' reflexive commentaries alongside actual cultural and industrial policies, to understand the interaction between Feng's filmmaking and the film industry.

Next, Chapter 3 turns its attention to *Sorry Baby* and *If You Are The One*, two late 1990s films in which Feng's filmmaking creatively involved taboo subject matter with regulatory authorities' tacit permission. Both films proactively use sensitive subject matter soon after regulatory authorities unbanned certain commercially viable categories of social issues and topics such as by removing detailed explanation clauses from censoring rules in 2006. From political and commercial perspectives, the chapter combines social contexts, the adjustments in state propaganda and the changes in the censoring rules and regulations to the two films to analyse their representation of particular taboo and sensitive subjects. The chapter further indicates Feng's creative and sanctioned techniques to represent these subjects for achieving state propaganda, commercial consideration and social concern, therefore

revealing the functions of regulatory authorities in the industry's commercialisation.

To examine how popular culture shapes NYCFs, Chapter 4 focuses on *Be There or Be Square* and *If You Are The One.* These cases show, respectively, how Feng's adoption of Wang Shuo's *tiaokan* (a word can be used as verb and noun, with a similar meaning of the word 'banter', emphasising a playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks) style in the late 1990s, and his introduction of Liu Zhenyun's narrative approaches in the early 2000s construct the humorous style of his NYCFs. Considering political contexts and the cultural policies for rejuvenating and developing the film industry, this chapter first analyses the economic and political factors that trigger the emergence and popularity of Wang Shuo's *tiaokan* style. Following this line of reasoning, it addresses the considerations that the regulatory authorities encouraged Feng's filmmaking to continually use this humorous style, but in a softened version. The chapter then investigates the commercial motivations for the introduction of Liu's narrative style, and examines this style's impact on the rebalancing of political promotion and social concern in Feng's filmmaking in the 2000s, when the film industry accelerated its globalisation. By indicating the development and function of humorous expression in Feng's NYCFs, this chapter demonstrates the entanglement of state propaganda with popular culture in domestic commercial filmmaking.

Chapter 5 investigates the genre change in Feng's NYCFs which turn from

comedy in the late 1990s to multiple and hybridised genres in the 2000s. It also explores the relationship between the genre change and the Chinese film professionals' new understanding of NYCFs, to examine the dynamic negotiation among the three categories and their combined impact on Feng's NYCF production. The chapter offers case studies of *Sigh* and *A World Without Thieves*, two films that indicate a generic shift in Feng's NYCFs. This shift is associated with the film industry's deepened commercialisation, relevant policy changes and the new trend in popular culture in the 2000s. Therefore, this chapter initially identifies the impacts of the film industry's globalisation, the government's proposal to transform domestic filmmaking into a state-supported industry and the regulatory authorities' concession of film regulations, in the making of the two films. It then combines these impacts to analyse the conditions that inform the generic shift in Feng's NYCFs, and thus, it reveals the features of his film style's transformation as well as the approaches that he achieved the change. In doing so, this chapter illuminates the mutual reshaping of the film industry, regulatory authorities and popular culture. Consequently, it reveals how the reshaping leads Feng's filmmaking to rebalance political and commercial considerations. To understand Feng's strategies of balance more clearly, we turn now to the first chapter, to outline the negotiations of the three categories in the 1990s as well as the role of Feng's NYCFs in the process.

Chapter 1 Film Industry, Regulatory Authority and Popular Culture in the Post-1989 China

Introduction

Since 1997 when *Party A, Party B* was released, Feng's NYCFs have consistently attracted film audiences in China. The general concept of the NYCF was introduced to Mainland Chinese cinema through Hong Kong imports in the mid-1990s. Similar to these Hong Kong films such as *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) and *All's Well End's Well* (1992,1993 and 1997), Feng's NYCFs mainly focus on local subjects, representing ordinary people's urban life experiences. As Feng's films, particular the NYCFs, performed well at the box office under fierce competition from foreign film imports, film authorities regarded them as an important force to revive the domestic film industry and facilitate its commercialisation (Yin and Tang, 2006: 50). Partly due to institutional restructuring and market-oriented reform, partly due to the film authorities' rigid administration, the Chinese film industry was in a financial predicament in the 1990s. The government intended to change this situation by strongly supporting the production of main melody films. However, this genre, as its names suggests, is made for promoting main melody spirits, and this distinctly poltical attratibute leads the actual production of these films to prioritise state propaganda above the box-office performance, which aggravates rather relieves the industry's fund shortage.

Under such circumstances, the commercial success of Feng's NYCFs was impressive. His films subtly coordinate commercial imperatives and state propaganda, whilst at the same time, use popular expressions of humour such as Wang Shuo's *tiaokan* to address widely discussed social issues. Following the film industry's globalisation and further commercialisation in the 2000s, private funding sources become substantially involved in the film domain in various forms, such as direct investment as well as advertising sponsorship. The film authorities accordingly loosen control over filmmaking, revising regulations and limiting restrictions on certain taboo subjects that were socially sensitive but commercially viable. These new factors develop Feng's filmmaking into a mode which gives priority to market performance within the framework of political compliance. In this mode, Feng's filmmaking appropriates Liu Zhenyun's *rao* (means 'roundabout') narrative approach to reconstruct the *tiaokan* style of his NYCFs. With the new version of *tiaokan*, Feng's NYCFs thread together market expansion, social critique and state propaganda, achieving a rebalance between the commercial and political appeal of the film industry's state-led commercialisation.

The formation and adjustment of Feng's filmmaking of NYCFs correspond to the film industry's commercialisation, the involvement of regulatory authorities (propaganda and censorship) therein, and the intersection of popular culture and ideological promotion. In this sense, when investigating the impact of correspondence

on Feng's filmmaking, it is necessary to first clarify the mainland film industry's process of commercialisation, the functions of propaganda and censorship in the process, and the popular humour styles' simultaneous commerciality and potential compatibility with state propaganda. Considering these categories, this chapter comprises a combined focus on the film industry's development and Feng's career trajectory, in order to see how the development drives Feng towards NYCF production and how it fosters the adjustment of Feng's filmmaking from the 1990s to 2000s. The overall impact of the industry's transformations on Feng's filmmaking, such as their production patterns and narrative techniques, may be identified, in a period in which the government played the role of guide and supervisor throughout these transformations. Government oversight improved the apparatuses of propaganda and censorship and strengthened their functions in the film sphere, in order to complete political promotion of main melody spirits in conjunction with the commercial revival of domestic films. As aforementioned, the thesis uses 'regulatory authority' to denote propaganda and censorship institutions and activities, highlighting their interrelated mechanisms and responsibilities in the Chinese context. The second part of this chapter pays attention to the functions of regulatory authority in consolidating the Party's cultural authority and constructing its cultural hegemony. The use of popular humour styles is the crucial strategy that allows a merger of commercial and political appeal. The third part of this chapter therefore works to identify the 'popular culture' scrutinised in this thesis, revealing the factors that engender and facilitate the collusion of cultural and political power. This collusive

relationship creates a condition for Feng's filmmaking to involve and update popular humour style in order to maintain a dynamic balance between an increasingly commercialised film industry and continuously adjusted regulatory authority. Subsequent chapters will further investigate and show the engagement of the film industry, regulatory authority and popular humour in the production of Feng's NYCFs, demonstrating the combined effect of the three factors and eventually resulting in a new generic position for Feng's works.

The Progress of Feng's NYCFs along with the Chinese Film Industry's Commercialisation

Feng's NYCFs correspond to the Chinese film industry's four development phases: the market-oriented reform in 1993, the state-led commercialisation since the mid-1990s, the globalisation in conjunction with China's entry to the WTO at the turn of the new century, and the industrialisation launched in the early 2000s. The changes happened in Feng's filmmaking carrer of this period, for example, he turned to produce government-sponorsed NYCFs in 1997 and expanded the collaborative scope of NYCF production with private film companies at home and abroad in 2001, inform his NYCFs such as *Party A, Party B* and *Big Shot's Funeral*. The two films self-reflexively display the impact of the film industry's advancement on domestic film production by telling the stories of film-industry professionals who work freelance after losing their jobs at state-owned studios, which this thesis will investigate with detailed analyses in Chapter 2. The films' correspondence with the social tendency of institutional restructuring and self-employment in the 1990s reveals that Feng's filmmaking is market-oriented, or, in a further sense, that market consideration is the overriding factor that leads Feng's filmmaking to keep negotiating with regulatory authorities and popular culture.

Regarding the market-oriented feature of Feng's NYCFs, it may be seen from the meatcinematic plots of the aforementioned two NYCFs, which are 'the ludic variety, a

“playful self-referentiality”, rather than an aggressive aesthetic modernism or a didactic political radicalism’ (McGrath, 2008:179), namely, the reflexive comments mainly work for producing humorous effect for commercial purposes, since the films’ entertainment effect is caused by building a close association between the film stories and audiences’ everyday lives. For Robert Stam, ‘reflexivity’ can be understood as ‘the process by which texts, both literary and filmic, foreground their own production, their authorship, their intertextual influences, their reception or their enunciation’ (1992: xiii). In this sense, the metacinematic plots represent the influence of the film industry’s commercialisation on domestic filmmaking as well as on film professionals themselves. A similar influence simultaneously occurred in other industries, thanks to government promotion of the ‘socialist market economy’ policy after Deng Xiaoping’s making of the so-called ‘Talk on the Southern Tour’ speech in 1992, and since the government encouraged domestic industries to strengthen international cooperation in response to competition within the WTO framework. Just as Feng stated, through his films, people can see an epitome of China’s reform from the 1990s to 2000s (2006: 43). In other words, apart from market considerations, the correspondence between his films and China’s development reveals his concern about society’s changes.

The market consideration and social concern facilitate forming the principle in his early filmmaking, which aims to ‘express how life touches upon a certain kind of individual’ (Keane and Tao, 1999:194). According to this principle, Feng’s early filmmaking represents ‘how the realities of life change a person’s desires’ and ‘how

desires can change a person's life, how desire can destroy a person'; and during these representations, it forms a marketing strategy that gave consideration to officialdom (*laoganbu*), investors (*laoban*) and audience (*laobaixing*) (ibid.:195-6). This strategy lays the groundwork for the subsequent negotiation among the film industry, regulatory authority and popular culture in his making of the NYCFs. Therefore, in order to comprehend the formation and development of Feng's commercial filmmaking, we should first address the causes of the film industry's market-oriented reform, the characteristics of the industry's commercialisation and the measures of implementation.

POLITICAL-ECONOMIC REFORM BEFORE FENG'S PRODUCTION OF NYCFS

In 1993, a market-oriented reform was initiated in the film field, just as in other areas of the mainland economy and industries. The film authorities proposed a series of reform measures which were usually packaged with political purposes such as the one of consolidating the government's leadership in the reform. These measures, on the one hand, give Feng opportunities to establish a production company, starting his career as a film director; on the other hand, they hinder Feng's early filmmaking, and these obstacles propell him toward producing NYCFs since the mid-1990s. The main cause of this reform is the governemnt's failure of using main melody films to revitalise and develop the film industry. These state-funded films merely completed the government's political mission of restoring the Party's image eroded during the 1989 Tian'anmen crisis, since they serve as 'one of the most important parts of the state ideological apparatus, helping to convince people of the inevitability and validity of a socialist China, maintain the legitimacy of the ruling party, and eventually contribute to the establishment of an enduring national identity that is in the best interest of the ruling party' (Su, 2014:101). Regarding the commercial performance, this genre indeed facilitates the industry's development in the early 1990s but to a limited extend, as its commercial success is built on the industry's monopolistic distribution system such as the one centred on China Film Corporation (CFC) and the government's administrative support such as organising state-owned enterprises to

watch particular film in the name of patriotic education. In fact, sometimes, although people gain free tickects from their work units, ‘many [are] still uninterested in going to the theatre to watch [main melody films generally]’ (Zhang, 2008:38); at that time, CFC exclusively purchased all the film works produced by state-owned studios with fixed price of 0.7 million RMB (0.1 million USD) each, and then sold film prints to local distributors according to their requirements (Luo, 2009:109). This planned purchase in conjunction with low attendance lead to the inevitable failure of main melody films at the box-office

Worse still, this profitable pattern results in a governmentally repeated procurement of political promotion, which ‘drained the industry of already limited state sponsorship in filmmaking and brought the state-owned studios more financial troubles’ (Zhang, 2008:40). This situation attracts social funds to participate in producing films, through founding media companies and purchasing the production quota of state-owned studios. It triggers Feng to change his roles from screenwriter and television director to film director, by co-founding the Good Dream Film and Television Consulting Company, a private media firm specialising in making the outsourcing films of Beijing Film Studio, with the bestselling author Wang Shuo in 1994. From the economic perspective, this collaboration is an inevitable choice for Feng, since he expressed little interest in making the state-sponsored film but simultaneously, unlike other contemporaneous directors such as the ones belonging to the Fifth and Sixth Genretion Group, could not get overseas investment as a

newbie who just began directing films.

Seeking social funds for film production indeed forges Feng's filmmaking principle that put market demands and investment return first, which influences his narrative style as well as his attitude towards commercial collaboration with such as the investors and sponsors outside the film field either during the period of Good Dream Company or during the period of producing NYCFs. The films produced by the Good Dream Company continue Wang's humour style of *tiaokan*, partly because they are adapted from Wang's stories, partly because of Wang's influence on Feng's writing style which happened in their early collaboration especially in the period of the Seahorse studio, a script studio established along with the wave of adapting Wang's stories to the screen at the turn of the 1990s. Wang's stories, labeled as 'hooligan literature' (*pizi wenxue*), usually use postmodern irony to mock intellectual pretensions (Wang, 1996:268) and to delegitimise political and cultural authority (McGrath, 2008: 174). These writing features respond to the cultural confusion caused by the co-existing value systems of socialism and capitalism happened in China's social transition period (Tang, 1993:294 and McGrath, 2008:172). Consequently, these stories were very popular among urban readers in their twenties and thirties in the late 1980s to the early 1990s, which therefore attracted film professionals to adapt them and caused a 'Wang Shuo Fever' (Barmé, 1999:67) The adaption wave suggests that Wang's humour style had been proved commercially viable in the Chinese film market, while using this style indicates the company's

market consideration, and Wang and Feng's emphasis on investment return. This commercial pursuit parallels with the government's market-oriented requirement to domestic filmmaking and its goal of engaging in producing popular culture for culture hegemony, which therefore plants the seed for Feng's NYCF production with the film authorities and the state-sponsored Forbidden City Film Company from 1997.

Meanwhile, depending on Wang's stories also involves Feng's filmmaking into a political predicmane, since Wang's *tiaokan* is usually packaged with poignant social criticisms and political mockery. For the government, it tacitly encourages this outsourcing between private media companies and state-owned studios, but simultaneously stays vigilant in the collaborative works' political inclination and regards certain elements of them such as obscene scenes, gratuitous violence and immoral subjects as 'spiritual pollution' (Zhu and Nakajima, 2010:30). This vigilance ultimately develops into the government's direct engagement in the industry's commercialisation through launching the 9550 project after Changsha Film Work Conference in 1996 when the industry's state fund shortage had gained alleviation via sharing the revenue of the imported foreign films since 1994. Accompanying the project's implementation is the enactment of film regulations and establishment of film censorship, which means that the government restarts political supervision on film production and drives it towards state propaganda. Under this circumstance, the Good Dream Company meets several setbacks, for example, the censorship banned its two films, *I'm Your Father* (*Wo shi ni baba*, dir. Wang Shuo) and *Living a Miserable*

Life (*Guo zhe langbei bukan de shenghuo*, dir. Feng Xiaogang, aborted) in 1996, since they are 'all more or less focused on dark subjects such as social problems, the depravity of human beings, and inequality between classes' (Zhang, 2008:74). This ban brings the company into a financial crisis, as no one is willing to continue investing Feng's further projects (Feng, 2003: 91). Therefore, participating in the 9550 project becomes the only practicable way for Feng to resume filmmaking at that time.

For the film authorities, the more important factor resulting in their collaboration with Feng is his willingness to cooperate. For example, when participating in producing the situation comedy *Stories From the Editiorial Office* (*Bianjianbu de gushi*) in 1992, he had shown an inclination of moderating the critical edge of Wang's *tiaokan* style and turned its mockery into well-meaning criticism, for praising China's development under the Party's leadership (Feng, 2003). In other words, Feng advocates a more poltically neutral *tiaokan* compared with Wang's. This softeness remains in his works produced by the Good Dream Company, such as *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* (*Yi di jimao, 1995*), the television drama based on Liu Zhenyun's story, and is manifested as an implicit expression of mockery and teasing. It is hard to say to what extent Liu's humour style embedded in his *rao* narrative influences Feng's version of *tiaokan*; however, the common point of neutral and implicit expression leads their collaboration to be smooth and the television drama to be successful commercially and critically. Furthermore, through releasing the situation comedy's sequel *All's Well* (*Wanshiruyi*) in the Chinese New Year's Eve in 1997,

Feng tested the idea of NYCF making before the film authorities encouraged filmmakers to do so. Thanks to the sequel's high audience rating of 25%, the government-sponsored Forddien City Film Company and the Beijing Film Stuido express interested in Feng's production, which conduces their collaboration of making NYCFs under the 9550 project.[2]

[2] The data comes from Chun Li, 2017.

COLLABORATION WITH THE FORBIDDEN CITY COMPANY FOR NYCF PRODUCTION

Working with the Forbidden City initiates the era of Feng's NYCFs, which infuses a dual consideration of market demand and political promotion into his filmmaking. The company was established by the Beijing Radio and Television Bureau and Culture Bureau in 1996 soon after the government proposed the 9550 project.[3] At that time, certain main melody films, such as *Red Cherry* (*Hongyingtao*; dir. Ye Daying, 1995), achieved commercial success comparable with the contemporaneous film imports' box-office performance in the domestic market. The success of these main melody films confirmed the government's plan to encourage 'official partners into new "private" (*minying)* companies' (Zhang, 2004: 282), that is, to use state funding to establish and run companies based on commercial rules. This sponsorship encouraged companies to consider both investment return and state propaganda. This consideration was explicitly stated in the objectives of setting up the Forbidden City, which Wang Zhu, the head of Beijing Culture Bureau, talked about at the seminar of NYCFs in 2009:

> Making main melody films is our original intention for the establishment of the Forbidden City Company; meanwhile, as a company, it definitely needs to rely on producing profitable works to survive (2009).[4]

[3] After the '0995 project' was proposed at the Changsha Conference in 1996, the Beijing Municipal Propaganda Department planned to set up the Forbidden City Company (Dai, 2002:469). There are four shareholders of the company, including the Beijing Television Station, the Beijing Television Art Centre, the Beijing Film Company and the Beijing Culture and Art Audio-Visual Press (Zhang, 2004:284).

[4] According to Wang Zhu's talk, these two purposes were also the reasons used to persuade the Beijing municipal government to support the making of *Party A, Party B* (1997), Feng's first NYCF. See Gan Wenjin, 2009, 4.

Wang's consideration was totally reflected in the company's first film, *The Days Without My Comrade* (*Likai Lei Feng de rizi*, dir. Kang Ning and Lei Xianhe, 1996). The film promotes the 'Lei Feng Spirit' (*Lei Feng jingshen*), an example of ideological rectitude, but from the perspective of Lei's comrade Qiao Anshan, an ordinary person rather than the hero.[5] *The Days Without My Comrade* therefore works to consolidate the Party's cultural hegemony and ideological legitimacy. The film 'attributes moral decline to capitalism, appropriates and reinvents moral superiority as the socialist spirit, and reiterates Lei Feng's spirit as a form of cultural resistance to encroachment and threats of capitalism' (Ho, 2015:38). Meanwhile, the film performed strongly at the box office, with receipts of 8 million RMB (1.16 million USD), double its production cost (Fei, 1998:16). The success confirmed the possibility of satisfying both political and commercial requirements in main melody films. This possibility was built on downplaying 'political conflicts while foregrounding ordinary people's vicissitudes and destiny, in order to ensure a more neutral and humanistic narrative' (Su, 2010: 319). Thus, humanised narratives were seen as an effective way to complete the commercialisation of main melody films. Therefore, this narrative mode became the main means used by the Forbidden City Company in its filmmaking, which set an example for Feng's NYCFs to promote main melody spirits in conjunction with accomplishing marketing objectives.

[5] Lei Feng was a solder in the People's Liberation Army, who was set as a proletarian role model due to his spirit of selfless public service (Jefferys and Su, 2016: 30). In 1963, one year after Lei's death, Chairman Mao made a call, 'Learn from Comrade Lei Feng'; and Lei therefore 'became the subject of a nationwide, posthumous propaganda campaign' (Liu, 2015: 251). In the film, Qiao Anshan inherits the 'Lei Feng Spirit' and keeps helping others with no strings attached.

The NYCFs initially refer to the film comedies that were made and exhibited for the New Year period from Christmas to Chinese New Year in the mainland from the late 1990s. This idea was derived from the Hong Kong Lunar New Year Film, which was introduced to the mainland film industry along with the 1994 project of importing 10 foreign films per year. The Hong Kong film industry has a tradition of making comedy to correspond to the festival ambience of Chinese New Year. For example, early in 1937, it produced *Bloom and Prosper* (dir. Tang Xiaodan), depicting a happy story of a family winning a lottery and celebrating the Chinese New Year.[6] Hong Kong NYCFs in the 1950s to 1960s followed, with similar plot structures, representing stories of homecoming and family reunion at the New Year Festival. According to Fiona Yuk-Wa Law, the Hong Kong NYCFs at this stage had formed 'generic images', a series of distinguishable and intertextual narrative and expressions, such as the intertitle of new year greeting before the films start and the mass greetings of characters at the end of the films (2010: 110). These generic images continued to be used in the Hong Kong film industry in the 1980s and 1990s, a period that saw the release of two main types of NYCF: family comedies such as the trilogies *It's a Mad Mad World* (1987, 1988 and 1989), *All's Well End's Well* and *Fight Back to School* (1991, 1992 and 1993), and action comedies, such as Jackie Chan's film series.[7] Partly due to the popularity of Jackie Chan's films, partly because of the cultural and

[6] Based on the studies of Yu Mu-yun (1997) and Fiona Yuk-Wa Law (2010), this Cantonese comedy is regarded as the first *hesui pian* in Hong Kong. From the film's advertisement as well as a film review from the local magazine *Artland*, it is noticeable that the film intentionally emphasises 'the temporal motif of Chinese New Year' and 'the festive atmosphere and New Year celebration rituals' (Law, 2010: 109). In fact, many Hong Kong NYCFs produced in the 1980s continue to uses this narrative structure, such as *It's a Mad Mad World* (dir. Clifton Ko, 1987).

[7] Partly due to the early-1970s rise and popularity of Bruce Lee's martial arts films, the Hong Kong film industry slowed down the production of family NYCFs at that time. It incorporated the elements of action genre into making NYCFs, which later developed into a subtype of action comedy in the 1980s.

linguistic obstacle in understanding the humour (e.g. mo-lei-tou) of Hong Kong family NYCFs, the mainland film authorities imported the Hong Kong action NYCFs, such as the Jackie Chan vehicle *Rumble in the Bronx* and *Police Story 4: First Strike* (1996). These action NYCFs received strong performance at the box office in the mainland market, e.g. *First Strike* topped the 1996 mainland box office with receipts of 80 million RMB (11.63 million USD). Their commercial success encouraged mainland film authorities to produce NYCFs themselves to help grow the Chinese film industry.

Although the mainland film authorities did not introduce Hong Kong family NYCFs, these films still set examples for mainland filmmakers to make their own NYCFs with similar themes. Filmmakers including Feng used dialects and local humour styles to make comedies representing ordinary people's daily experiences. These comedies also set the stories during New Year holiday period, while some of them add greetings at the beginning or the end scene. For example, Feng's *Party A, Party B* starts with a scene of a cartoon tiger and a New Year greeting line (Figure 1.1), since 1998 is the year of the tiger in traditional Chinese culture. In this sense, the mainland filmmakers' appropriation and innovation may be considered as a localisation of Hong Kong NYCFs, especially the type of family comedy (localisation's progress and mechanisms in conjunction with the mainland film industry's commercialisation is investigated in more detail in Chapter 5.) Comparing with other mainland filmmakers, Feng's localisation is commercially successful, which can be seen from the box-office performance of his NYCFs as well as the film authorities'

citation and administrative support. Feng's NYCFs regularly occupied the top position at the mainland box office in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The government-supported association of directors, the China Film Directors' Guild, even held a meeting to celebrate the strong box-office performance of *Party A, Party B*.



Figure 1.1: The opening scene of cartoon tiger and greeting line ('Happy Year of the Tiger to Everyone') in Party A Party B (Forbidden City), 1997.

Thanks to its official recognition, Feng's filmmaking gained more financial and administrative support, while at the same time assumed more political missions. For example, his third NYCF, *Sorry Baby* (1999), received private investment from Huayi Brothers, and was based entirely on the film authorities' politico-economic consideration for the 9550 project. Thus, it can be seen that the official recognition shaped Feng's filmmaking into a mode that paralleled the film industry's state-led commercialisation. Meanwhile, the official recognition and the commercial success of Feng's NYCFs attracted many other filmmakers to join in with producing this type of film in the late 1990s. Although these other NYCFs did not receive a box-office performance that equaled Feng's works, they warmed the market, which gradually formed the New Year cinema season along with the government's prescription of 'holiday economy'. Accompanying the formation, many films with less obvious

comedic elements were released in the cinema season, such as Zhang Yimou's *Happy Times* (2000). Feng also made *Sigh*, a family drama, in 2000, which he intended to release in the New Year cinema season but changed this to September on the advice of the film authorities. Based on these phenomena, it is evident that the mainland NYCFs displayed a symptom of genre change at the turn of the new century, i.e. filmmakers started to introduce other genres into NYCF production. In 2002, Zhang Yimou's action film *Hero* was released in the New Year cinema season, while its great box-office success upset domestic film professionals' established limited view of NYCF's genre as comedy. From then, domestic film professionals became accustomed to using 'the film for New Year cinema' to refer to NYCFs.

FURTHER INDUSTRIALISING OF THE PRODUCTION OF NYCFS IN THE 2000S

This change in understanding of NYCFs happened along with the mainland film industry's further commercialisation and globalisation in the 2000s, which turned domestic filmmaking into an industry. From 2000, the film authorities began to open the film industry's sectors of production, distribution and exhibition to non-state funding. A document, 'Opinions on the Further Reform of Chinese Cinema', was issued in the same year, which suggested establishing film corporations and trying out a shareholding system in the industry. Thus, through building joint ventures with state capital, domestic private and foreign funding engaged in the production of a single film project. After China joined the WTO in 2001, the film industry accelerated its commercialising pace in response to the increasing competition from foreign film imports, especially Hollywood films. The new 'Regulations on Administration of Films' (2001) allowed entities outside the film production sector to apply one-off license to produce films, which gave non-state capital more opportunities to participate in filmmaking. Furthermore, the film authorities encouraged the combination among film production enterprises, distribution companies and other related organizations, which gradually formed several conglomerates. The phenomenon of conglomeration first appeared in state-own film enterprises, e.g. the China Film Group founded in 1999, then expanded to joint ventures, e.g. with the Shanghai Film Group in 2001, and then

with privately-held companies, e.g. Huayi Brothers corporation in 2004.[8]

Following the tendency to regard filmmaking as an industry became a common view among film authorities and film professionals. At the beginning of 2003, this common view developed into a government policy. The Vice Director of the Film Bureau, Zhao Shi, gave a talk at the National Conference of Film Production, which corresponded with the cultural policy issued at the 16th National Congress in 2002 and indicated the need for industrialisation in the film domain.[9] Her talk cited the Congress' resolution, 'developing culture industry is a major way of letting the socialist advantaged culture prosper and satisfying people's spiritual and cultural needs', and quoted the speech of Li Changchun, the Minister of SARFT in 2002, 'Film and TV productions and art-related work-units should accelerate their paces toward marketization, as facing the needs of market, industrialization and enterprise are the basic paths to developing culture. The film industry is the most promising pillar-industry among culture industries...'. [10] The citation and quote obviously reflect the film industry's dual attribute in the Party's understanding: the industry is an indispensable tool for spreading cultural soft power and also a sustainable revenue-producing apparatus for revitalising domestic filmmaking.

[8] For more details about the tendency of conglomeration, see Chapter 5.
[9] The talk entitled *To Fully Implement the Essence of the Sixteen National Congress and to Forster and Promote the Film Industry's Reform, Development and Innovation* (Quanmian guanche shiliu da jingsheng jiakuai tuijin dianying shengchanye de gaige fazhan chuangxin). At the conference, she also reviewed Chinese cinema in 2002 and further proposed guidelines for its process of industrialization in 2003. See *Chinese Film Yearbook, 2003*, pp.25-32.
[10] The translation of Zhao's exposition is based on Zhang Rui's *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang: Commercialization and Censorship in Chinese Cinema after 1989*, 2008, pp.118.

The dual attribute leads the film authorities to continue to open up the industry to non-state capital, but simultaneously allows them to dominate the industry's commercialsiation. This complication is reflected in and further shapes Feng's making of NYCFs. Following the commercialisation, more and more investments flooded into the film industry, which propelled the investment components of Feng's NYCFs in more diverse directions. In addition to China Film Group, Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures, his filmmaking attracted funding from Media Asia Group, a Hong Kong-based film production company, and many advertising sponsors, such as BMW automobile, Motorola, Nokia and China Mobile Group. This investment structure commercialised Feng's filmmaking pattern, which introduced an integrated marketing strategy, such as using product placement, and implemented high-concept mode.[11] Under this circumstance, Feng's narrative style changed accordingly, by expanding the acceptability of *tiaokan* style, integrating product placement into the storytelling, bringing in other genre elements and even making other genre films. For example, with *Sorry Baby*, Feng's filmmaking began to use product placement and from *Big Shot's Funeral*, the amount of product placement was increasing. In *Cell Phone* (2003) and *A World Without Thieves* (2004), Feng's filmmaking integrated product placement into the narrative, as a part of stories.[12] After 2004, Feng's NYCFs showed a tendency to genre change. Based on a comedic structure, *A World Without Thieves* absorbed elements of gangster films and action films, while his next films *The*

[11] Since the success of Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, making blockbusters had become an aim of many film production companies (Luo, 2009:112). Feng also expressed interest in blockbuster production. He intended to 'prove his ability as a maker of profitable blockbuster films that could compete with those of other Fifth Generation directors' (Zhang, 2008:147).
[12] See the detailed analyses in Chapter 4 and 5.

Banquet (2006) and *Assembly* (2007), a kung fu costume drama and a war film, respectively, were popular subjects in the mid-2000s since many similar films appeared in the same period such as Chen Kaige's *The Promise* (2005) Zhang Yimou's *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) and *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). Although these films changed in narrative and genre form, they always paralleled the political promotion of main melody spirits, such as advocating adherence to morality in *Cell Phone* and publicizing patriotism and socialism in *Assembly*, and therefore assisted the construction of the Party's cultural hegemony.

Feng's NYCF Production in the Shadow of Cultural Authority

Since Feng engaged in NYCF production, his films reactively paralleled the promotion of main melody spirits according to the 9550 project's political requirements. In the 2000s, his works proactively participated in state propaganda, advancing with the Party's cultural policies and political philosophy, such as representing China's cultural soft power through martial arts in *The Banquet* and introducing the Party's policy of a building harmonious society in *If You Are The One* (2008). This attitude change was in company with the Party's construction of cultural hegemony. Taking the film sphere for example, the construction is reflected in the approaches that the film authorities implemented political promotion and regulated filmmaking. They humanised state propaganda and employed administrative organisations to supervise filmmaking based on laws and regulations. Thus, a sanctioned framework of production was formed in the industry, which allowed and encouraged film professionals to commercialise their filmmaking and explore their artistic styles on the premise of supporting the consolidation of the Party's cultural authority. Within the film administrative system with Chinese characteristics, there usually exists an overlap between the Party's propaganda apparatus and the government's film administrative institutions either in terms of organisational structure or of distribution of responsibility. The overlap leads the mechanisms of propaganda apparatus and censorship to become intertwined and complicated. For example, SARFT takes the tasks of both propaganda and censorship. It proposed the 9550 project to promote main melody

spirits and implement the Party's policy of commercialising the film industry.[13] Meanwhile, in order to ensure the project's implementation, SARFT renewed original regulations, issued new censoring rules and established the specialised Film Review Committee, an agency to oversee film projects and filmmaking. Some other government organisations outside the film domain can also participate in censoring films as a member of the Film Review Committee, e.g. the all-China Women's Federation is allowed to join in reviewing film projects that are relevant to teenagers.

In view of the complicated mechanisms, I use the term 'regulatory authority' to refer to both propaganda apparatus and censorship, embodied in the film sphere as SAPPRFT, its subsidiaries and other relevant official entities, which is explained further in Chapter 3.[14] Before that, it is necessary to understand cultural hegemony and identify its relationship with cultural authority, in order to comprehend the function of regulatory authority as a manifestation of cultural authority in the Chinese film industry's development, and also the consequent impact on Feng's making of NYCFs. The idea of 'cultural hegemony' builds on Antonio Gramsci's theorisation of hegemony, as 'the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production' (1971:12). Based on this, Toks Oyedemi summarises the

[13] Its predecessor MRFT proposed the project, to be more exactly.
[14] In 2013, SARFT merged with General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) into SAPPRFT.

conception of cultural hegemony as ‘a situation where in a culturally diverse society a social class rules and dominates over the rest of the society’ (2016:11). The domination is established by the manipulation of making the worldview of ruling social class an acceptable cultural norm (Aly, 2015:352). From Gramsci’s arguments, it can be seen that the construction of cultural hegemony is a process, which the public accepts spontaneously and unintentionally.

The effective way to achieve such acceptance is to combine economic and political appeal, which may ‘[blur] the distinction between political authority and everyday life’ to disseminate meanings and values (Jones, 2006:48). Therefore, it can be said that the process of constructing cultural hegemony is soft, moderate and lasting, which is different from what Gramsci called ‘domination’ in political society. For him, political society can be understood as ‘the apparatus of state coercive power which “legally” enforces discipline on those groups who do not “consent” either actively or passively’ (1971:12). It is easy to associate this idea with the Party’s management during the period of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Within the film sector, socialist domination was coercive, with strict censorship and rigid propaganda. During the decade, only eight film operas called ‘model plays’ (*yangbanxi*) were allowed to exhibited across China, with all of their subjects celebrating China’s revolution under the Party’s leadership. Since the economic reform starting in the late 1970s, the Party turned to depend on making China rich as the principal mission for its political legitimation (Rosen, 2012:199). The new

economic structure, i.e. the ‘socialist market economy’, erodes the grand narrative of socialism; and at the same time, proceeds with the already established socialist ideology to move into civil society. Reflected in the film sphere, this economic imperative led the Party’s regulation of the film industry from authoritarian to hegemonic mode.

Eroding but not erasing the grand narrative of socialism becomes a feature of the socialism with Chinese characteristics which gives priority to economic reform and development. Arif Dirlik’s conception of postsocialism helps to explain the situation, in which ‘socialism has lost its coherence as a metatheory of politics because of the attenuation of the socialist vision in its historical unfolding’ (2005: 231). According to Liu Kui, cultural authority is the discourses of truth that have received rationality and recognition from their grand narrative; it is ‘a dominated culture, which is shaped by economic level, geographical condition and cultural type, and decides the other cultures’ legality, rationality and development, monopolising the interpretation about universe, society, human and religion’ (2005: 55). Based on his ideas, the function of establishing cultural authority in postsocialist China may be understood as maintaining socialism by economic and cultural means. From this point, the idea of cultural authority is similar to that of cultural hegemony. Many scholars such as Anthony Lemelle (2010) regard them as the same. In fact, there still exists nuance between cultural authority and cultural hegemony: ‘[cultural] hegemony designates a process wherein cultural authority is negotiated and contested’ (Fraser, 2013: 142).

This idea suggests that cultural hegemony is the final product of cultural authority, or in Kathryn Woolard's parlance, cultural hegemony is 'the legitimation of the cultural authority of the dominant group' (1985:739). Thus, if cultural hegemony is a process, as Gramsci and Fraser suggest, cultural authority may be regarded as a manifestation of cultural hegemony at a particular stage, i.e. cultural authority is an immediate expression of cultural hegemony.

Constructing and restoring cultural authority consolidates the Party's cultural domination in the postsocialist period. According to Nancy Reichman, this consolidation is achieved by what she calls 'regulatory authority', a manifestation of cultural authority to assign legal significance to activities (1998: 245). Through associating the two ideas of regulatory authority and cultural authority, Michael Keane (2003) further discusses the regulatory condition in the Chinese television industry under the circumstance of economic reform. He points out that regulations and the regulated are trapped in a game, in which the regulated intend to gain creative freedom without breaking regulations, while regulatory authority plays a role as an interpreter 'involved in the negotiation of the "rules of the game" and the interpretation of the behaviour of the regulated' (2003:171). In other words, regulatory authority is both constitutor and adjudicator of regulations. 'It is the (regulatory) authority to set the rules, to define the winners and losers, and to change the definitions of the regulation game' (Reichman, 1998: 245). Similarly, in the film domain, regulatory authority also uses regulations to encourage or limit domestic filmmaking

circumstantially. Considering that China is in the transformation from authoritarian to hegemonic government, its construction of hegemony involves consent with coercive traits. In cinema, the coercive trails take the form of censorship, the adjudicator part of regulatory authority that implements regulations and rules to oversee film projects and ban those against main melody spirits, such as the Film Review Committee.

In Feng's filmmaking, censorship's function as adjudicator is explicit and influential — the Film Review Committee banned two of his three early works and engendered the Good Dream Company's bankruptcy — leading him to turn to the Forbidden City Company to produce NYCFs. Since Feng had been involved in the 9550 project and paralleled the promotion of main melody spirits, regulatory authorities relinquished a bit of control over his filmmaking. Consequently, we can see that his NYCFs in the late 1990s maintained *tiaokan* elements with political discourses, such as the farcical bureaucracy speech in *Party A, Party B* and the humorous conversation based on the lines of classic revolutionary film in *Be There or Be Square*, and creatively used the current taboo subject matter, such as violent and sexual descriptions, for commercial reasons. This relaxed enforcement of regulations is not only because of Feng's participation in the project but also related to the regulatory authorities' concession for facilitating the film industry's commercialisation.

The concession actually became more obvious in the 2000s, along with the government's strategies of globalising and industrialising the film industry. SARFT

issued a new directive of censorship in 2003, 'Regulations of Film Script Approval and Film Censorship (Tentative)', which requires licensed film enterprises to submit a 1000-word synopsis to SARFT before beginning shooting and also shifts censorship to the provincial level. These measures increased the opportunities for completed films to pass the Film Review Committee, while they also strengthened the authority of censorship, now granting oversight over film projects at source. In other words, the measures are government-led, commercially-driven and arguably hegemonic, giving economic benefit such as distribution permission in exchange for political approval. One more indication of this technique is the commercialised use of taboo subjects in Feng's films in the early 2000s, such as the subject of extramarital affair in *Sigh* and *Cell Phone*, and the criminal subject in *A World Without Thieves*. These subjects were still prohibited until SARFT renewed the censoring rule in 2006. The new rule adds clauses of ideological appeal and removes the explanation of server subjects of social topics such as homosexuality, which can be read as a deregulation of the subjects. Correspondingly, in 2008, Feng's NYCF *If You Are The One* briefly represents an explicitly gay character, the first explicit depiction of homosexuality in commercial Chinese film.

In company with the censorship's transformation, Feng's filmmaking also changed, pivoting on the government's consistent propaganda. His films not only involved many accepted subjects, but also kept adjusting to a new way to adhere to requirements to promote main melody spirits. Taking the ending designs for example,

at the early stage of his NYCF production, the characters who exhibit morality are rewarded with happy endings, while the violators of morals and ethics gain criticisms with goodwill such as the boss who intentionally delays paying salary in Sorry *Baby*. This ending arrangement corresponds to the 9550 project's political requirements which was clearly reflected in the suggestions of Han Sanping, the head of Beijing Film Studio in 1997 who supported Feng to make *Party A, Party B*. The suggestions indicate that 'the film must show characters learning from their experiences, and that lessons must not be "negative", but rather "positive" and "full of sincerity"'(Feng, 2003:102-04). Further, based on these suggestions, Feng's subsequent NYCFs involve many widely discussed social issues such as demanding salary in *Sorry Baby*, and correspondingly offer imaginary solutions. These solutions are based on socialist values, reflecting a passion for socialist ideals of fairness and equality. In this case, the films' representation of social issues and solutions works to restore the grand narrative of socialism. Following the film industry's commericalisation and the regulatory authorities' engagement, Feng's films paid more attention to social issues in the first half of the 2000s, and used grand perspective of the history of China to tell stories in conjunction with political promotion in the second half as well as the early 2010s, e.g. the angel of Chinese Civil War and Korean War in company with the promotion of patriotism and collectivism in *Assembly*. In this decade, the endings of his films no longer highlight a victory of ordinary people who adhere to morality; instead, they turn to represent a victory of main melody spirits. The film characters are not limited to ordinary people, e.g. the television host in *Cell Phone*, the PLA

commander in *Assembly*, the overseas returnee in *If You Are One*, while the films' endings cannot be simply classified as portraying happiness or tragedy, e.g. although the stories of both the host in *Cell Phone* and the goodhearted thief in *A World Without Thieves* end unhappily for them, the main melody spirits gains maintenance and promotion through mocking and punishing the characters' deeds.[15] Therefore, the transformation of the NYCFs' resolution magnifies the effect of political promotion, since these films offer moral critiques in entertainment form, i.e. the promotion gains achieved by Feng's *tiaokan* style, a humorous style which he absorbs from popular culture and develops into his own signature style for both commercial and political considerations.

[15] Due to his moral decline, the television host loses everything at the end of the film. In order to get the victim's money back, the goodhearted thief dies in a gang battle.

The Construction of Feng's Humour Style with Popular Culture

Chinese popular culture plays a significant role in coordinating political appeal and commercial consideration in Feng's filmmaking. Using popular humour enables his NYCFs to fulfill the requirements of propaganda and censorship simultaneously, e.g. the films use *tiaokan* discourse to represent taboo or socially sensitive subjects to advocate moral order (also containing Feng's social concern) in an entertaining way. Admittedly, this operation's success can be attributed to the comic discourse, which has ability to ease the tension between political compliance and rebellion, but more importantly, it is the political nature of Chinese popular culture that makes the operation feasible. With a long-term interaction with political campaigns, the popular culture has been formed to correspond to the Party's propaganda. This cultural inertia has become more pronounced since the mid-1990s, when the government began to be involved in the film industry's commercialisation and sought domination in the process. State propaganda intersected with popular culture, using its appealing form to subtly promote the Party's political philosophy. To understand popular culture's compatibility with dominant political forces, it is necessary first to identify the connotations of popular culture in the Chinese context and then to unpack the Party's use of popular culture in propaganda campaigns.

The Party has a long tradition of using popular culture to disseminate policies. 'Culture, in Mao's view, must always serve the revolution and the masses' (Calkins,

1998: 246). In his speech 'Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art' (1942), Mao points out that culture is political and ideological and works for the masses with their lively language such as colloquial expressions. Accordingly, cultural workers use the artistic forms that are familiar and popular among the masses, such as folk literature and music, and therefore achieve the goal of propaganda. For example, the film *The White-haired Girl* (*Baimao nü*, 1950) is adapted from a folk story circulating around the border area of Shanxi, Chahar and Heibei. The story was firstly adapted for an opera in 1945, describing a misery of a peasant girl who suffers a series of abuses at the hands of the landlord of her village.[16] After the opera's first show at Yan'an, the Party's leaders suggested the writers adjust the ending to one where peasants openly judge the landlord and condemn him to death, under the support of the Party's army. This adjustment corresponded to the Party's land-reform policy at that time, i.e. with the adjustment, the opera turned to supporting the implementation of the policy. The effect of the opera's publicity was significant. According to Kang Qingzhong and Li Tiancan (2011), staging a performance of the opera was more effective than holding ten sessions of ideological education to promote land-reform policy.

Combining the Party's campaigns with popular culture became common after the PRC was founded in 1949 and more intensive during the Cultural Revolution. According to the terms of Chinese Communism, a cultural form's 'artistic value is

[16] The girl cannot bear the abuse and escapes into mountains, living in fear, causing her hair turns white.

dependent on how well it “serves the masses”’, while ‘the more popular the art work, the higher its artistic achievement’ (Mittler, 2008: 483), i.e. the popularity of art form is an important factor that decides the effect of propaganda. When initiating economic reform after the Cultural Revolution, the Party continually used popular culture to disseminate policies and make state propaganda, but emphasised ‘pragmatism and modernization rather than political messages’ (Calkins, 1998: 249). In the film sphere in the 1980s, the Party’s leader Deng Xiaoping had stated that ‘any ideological use of film presupposed an audience, but audiences would only go to see films that were entertaining’ (ibid.). Since then, regulatory authorities encouraged domestic filmmaking to absorb new forms of popular culture to improve entertainment quality, in response to the public’s growing cultural consumption along with China’s economic reform and globalisation. Nevertheless, this does not mean that regulatory authorities abandon the idea that regards film as a propaganda tool. For instance, in the 1990s, China imported foreign popular cultural works such as Hollywood films, but at the same time introduced foreign production strategies that facilitated the government’s political promotion — the discipline and strictness that Hollywood producers emphasised in filmmaking, since they ‘sound comfortably like political correctness’ to the authorities (Calkins, 1998: 250). This attitude reflects that regulatory authorities endowed the introduction of popular cultural elements with propaganda purpose.

From the progress of using popular culture in political activities, it can be seen that the relation between popular culture and state propaganda is not one of straight

combination. Instead, state propaganda proactively engages in the development of popular culture, which sometimes even propels it towards particular directions, such as the example of *The White-haired Girl*. As the whole development is subject to state ideology especially after 1949, serving political promotion becomes an attribute of Chinese popular culture, which therefore forms a cultural inertia to retain an indelible trail of socialism in the era when China is in commercialisation and globalisation. Thus, Chinese popular culture cannot be mechanically regarded as the 'unofficial' form which 'consists of ideas, beliefs and practices that have origins at least partially independent of the state' (Link, Madsen and Pickowicz, 1989: 5). Its formation and development are not independent from the dominant political forces. It shares the process with the construction and consolidation of state ideology, or borrowing Kevin Latham's words, 'popular culture does not exist outside of or in contrast to the state but very often in a constant and evolving dialogue with it' (2007:32). Therefore, popular culture's trail of state propaganda cannot be left acknowledged. The trail actually leads the progress of popular culture, since the state works in 'creating, co-opting, and encouraging the popular culture that its citizens consume' (Ho, 2012: 8). In this way, one can say, it is this official involvement that facilitates the compatible combination between popular culture and state propaganda, which gives consideration to both political and commercial appeals.

A model provided by Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson is drawn upon herein to conceptualise popular culture in the Chinese context. They regard popular

culture as 'the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are wildly shared among population. This includes folk beliefs, practices, and objects rooted in local traditions, mass beliefs, practices and objects generated in political and commercial centers' (1991:3). This idea not only represents the commercial and ideological attributes of popular culture, but also highlights the impact of local and folk traditional cultures. This thesis extends to Mukerji and Schudson's model the element of public reaction to the political promotion embedded in popular culture, recognizing that no public passively accepts state propaganda, even when packaged in popular cultural forms. Perry Link, Richard Madsen and Paul Pickowicz (1989 and 2002) offer the concept of 'unofficial culture', regarding popular culture in China as wholly a site of resistance. In comparison, this thesis suggests that the progress of Chinese popular culture is a negotiation of commercial consideration and political promotion. In terms of the public's reaction, the negotiation is reflected as a phenomenon that the Chinese use cultural forms to express rebellious responses to particular issues in a politically sanctioned way.

This phenomenon may be further understood by drawing on Robert Baldwin and Martin Cave's notion of 'creative compliance': 'a process whereby those regulated avoid having to break the rules and do so by circumventing the scope of a rule while still breaching the spirit of the rule' (1999:103). A vivid metaphor describes this phenomenon in China: 'playing edge ball' (*da ca-bianqiu*), a term used in table tennis, metaphorically referring to an action that intends to avoid punishment to challenge the

existing rules for benefit. In table tennis game, when a player hits the ball against the edge of the table of the receiver's side, it usually leaves little time for the receiver to react. The player therefore gains the point. However, hitting the edge is in itself a challenge for the player, since it is dependent on the receiver's reaction, despite the fact that the player can use their experience to seize opportunities to influence this action. This description actually suggests the role of the receiver in the game, or in the Chinese context of cultural industries, metaphorically reveals the role of regulatory authorities in filmmaking and other cultural productions. They can allow some representations of rebellious elements and criticisms according to their own purposes such as improving the Party's style of work and promoting the film industry's rejuvenation and state-led commercialisation.

Accordingly, it is easy to understand the regulatory authorities' toleration and even encouragement of Wang Shuo's *tiaokan* style, Feng's appropriation of the style in NYCFs in the late 1990s and his subsequent adjustment with Liu Zhenyun's narrative style in the 2000s. Granted, Wang's *tiaokan* discourse is rebelliously ironic, using political utterances such as official rhetoric to make mockery and satire. The *tiaokan* discourse erodes the authority of the utterances, which is similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of 'parodic stylization', in which 'the intentions of the representing discourse are at odds with the intentions of the represented discourse' (1981:364). However, the issues that Wang's *tiaokan* represents are also what the Party intended to repair along with its promotion of economic reform in the 1980s, such as its work

style of bureaucracy. Wang's *tiaokan* thus conforms to the time when the Party adjusted its political appeals. Further, for similar reason, when the political atmosphere changed in the late 1980s, regulatory authorities suppressed Wang's works, which affected Feng's early films in collaboration with Wang to be banned in the early 1990s. When the government initiated the film industry's commercialisation in the mid 1990s, Wang Shuo-esque *tiaokan* was reused in Feng's NYCFs due to its popularity and wide audience base. This reuse is an outcome caused by the coordination and compromise between state propaganda and economic benefit. It does not mean Feng's NYCFs function solely as entertainment. They still contain social criticisms and concerns but are guided by regulatory authorities, since the government provided financial and administrative support to Feng's filmmaking, especially at the early stage. Accordingly, these criticisms mainly work to release people's sentiment of depression caused by daily predicament (Zhou and Ji, 2009: 39, and Yin and Tang, 2006: 52), in order to sustain social stability. In this way, one can see Feng's *tiaokan* proactively corresponds to state propaganda compared with Wang's expression. In fact, this interaction become both subtler and more active in the 2000s, when Feng introduced Liu Zhenyun's narrative style in response to the commercial pressure from multiple investment, which this thesis will discuss further in Chapter 4.

Conclusion

The Chinese film industry, regulatory authorities and popular culture are mutually constitutive, propelling the development of Feng's filmmaking towards commercially viable and politically approved mode, and therefore shaping his NYCFs into their respective forms in the late 1990s and 2000s. The compromise among the three categories pivots on the film industry's commercialisation. The regulatory authorities' involvement in the film industry served to promoting the industry's economic development and to gain domination to lead the process. Therefore, authorities opened the industry to non-state capital gradually beginning in the 1990s, and have subsequently adjusted regulations, directives and censorship enforcement according to the state of the film industry's commercialisation. The purpose of this opening is to make the film industry achieve self-sufficiency, under the political framework of socialism with Chinese characteristics. A booming film industry facilitates not only effective promotion of main melody spirits but also the government's implementation of cultural soft power. In order to accelerate the industry's commercial rejuvenation, regulatory authorities use popular cultural forms or participate in creating popular culture, merging state propaganda and commercial considerations. In this way, we can understand regulatory authorities' support for Feng's reuse of Wang Shuo's *tiaokan* style in NYCFs. A similar commercial reason can also explain the tacit agreement between regulatory authorities and Feng's filmmaking in the use of sensitive and even taboo subjects. The next chapter focuses on *Party A, Party B* and

Big Shot's Funeral, the two NYCFs that were made at crucial points in the film industry's commercialisation, to thoroughly investigate how the economic consideration impacts aspects of Feng's filmmaking as well as the broader shape of his NYCFs.

Chapter 2 *Party A, Party B* and *Big Shot's Funeral*: State-led Commercialisation and Industrial Reflexivity

Introduction

The state-led commercialisation of the Chinese film industry since the early 1990s propells Feng's filmmaking towards comedic NYCFs and shapes it into a market-oriented form that combined closely with investors' demands. Landmark events in the commercialisation progress, such as the state-owned studios' restructuring and the industry's opening-up to private capital under the WTO agreements, become the subjects of Feng's filmmaking in *Party A, Party B* and *Big Shot's Funeral*. Alongside the 1993 market-oriented reform, the film industry welcomes non-state capital by inviting social entities and individuals to participate in film production, distribution and exhibition, and implements an institutional restructuring for reducing the expenditure of state-owned studios. This situation promotes the combination of the redundant film professionals of state-owned stuidos and social funds, triggering a wave of self-employment in the film area. Through implemating the 9550 project, the government further approves the commerciality of this outscourcing collaboration but sets a political framework for strengthening its leadership in this commercialsiation. Feng's NYCF production is born under the political-economic filmmaking framework and gains development along with its consolidation.

In the early 2000s, in response to the increasing additional competition under the WTO agreements, the government enacted new policies and regulations to boost the Chinese film industry's commercialisation, which further expanded Feng's filmmaking mode from domestic to international cooperation. The directives, such as the 'Opinions on the Further Reform of Chinese Cinema' (2000) and the 'Regulation on Administration of Films' (2001), legally allow for domestic, private and foreign capital sources to invest in the production of a single film project. The new capital resources increase Feng's film subject options, while simultaneously connecting his filmmaking closely with investors and sponsors' demands. Feng's cooperative partners are no longer limited to state-held entities. He begins to work with private companies such as Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures Film Production Asia (henceforth Columbia Pictures). Integral to this cooperation, using product placement becomes increasingly common and direct in his NYCFs in the 2000s especially after *Big Shot's Funeral*. In contrast to the previous Sino-foreign film coproduction mode of the 1980s, Feng has creative control of the cooperation with Columbia Pictures, which allows Feng to maintain his narrative style which centers on common people's everyday lives and therefore leads to the continued commercial success of his NYCFs, particularly in Mainland China.

By telling the self-employment stories of two groups of film professionals respectively, *Party A, Party B* and *Big Shot's Funeral* self-reflexively indicate changes in Feng's filmmaking style under the influence of Chinese film industry reform and

commercialisation. This chapter focuses on analysis of the self-reflexive comments in the two films, to explore both the engagement of the Chinese film industry's market-oriented reform and its commercialisation under the WTO agreements in Feng's filmmaking of NYCFs. It identifies how the film industry's reform and consequently different types of investment sources shapes the format of Feng's NYCFs. In addition, the chapter reveals Feng's creative responses to the demands of investors and sponsors, which not only enrich his narrative style but also contribute to the Chinese film industry's commercialisation.

Through a symptomatic reading of the main characters against the background of a changing film industry, this chapter interprets the self-reflexive comments and suggests that Feng's filmmaking corresponds to the film industry's state-led commercialisation. It further argues that the correspondence sets the style of his filmmaking, combining state propaganda and commercial consideration. During the correspondence, Feng develops his own narrative pattern, such as depicting socially pertinent topics from the perspective of ordinary people and offering happy endings to those characters who adhere to the politically approved morals. Meanwhile, this correspondence enables Feng's film projects to attract new types of investment when the industry opened up the film production sector to non-state capital funding, which strengthens the bond between Feng's filmmaking and the capital, thus accelerating the commercialisation of Feng's filmmaking. One manifestation is the use of integrated marketing strategies in the NYCFs made with Huayi Brothers. Since *Big*

Short's Funeral, such strategies, for example, the use of product placement have become characteristic of Feng's filmmaking and even evolved into a narrative style. Within the Chinese film industry, partly inspired by the commercial success of Feng' NYCFs, incorporating sponsors' merchandising into films became a tendency in the 2000s. As regards Feng, this incorporation expands the income source of his works, which, in turn, reduces the pressure on their box-office revenue. This situation, on the one hand, gives Feng more space to explore narrative styles; on the other hand, it increases the difficulty of Feng's filmmaking in terms of balancing sponsors' merchandising and the films' box office performances. Consequently, it engenders the tendency for Feng to integrate products into his storytelling, using them to develop stories.

The story of *Party A* reflects the Chinese film industry's market-oriented reform and state-led commercialisation in the 1990s. It tells of the self-employment experience of four previous employees of a state-owned studio, who found a company named Good Dream Factory which specialises in fulfilling their consumers' dreams for one day. Both from its personnel structure and business mode, the company is like a mini film studio. Through describing this experience, the film reflects how the Chinese film industry's reform shaped Feng's filmmaking into a market-oriented and politically approved mode. The fictional company's business principle is to serve the people (*wei renming fuwu*), satisfying their demands that accord with main melody spirits. Correspondingly, the topics of Feng's NYCFs revolve

around ordinary people and the issues that concern them. Meanwhile, under this mode, Feng's filmmaking presents many characteristics of the production pattern of the 'central producer system'. Unlike his colleagues who received payment before their works were released, Feng's income was linked to the receipts of *Party A*. This led Feng to participate actively in the film's promotion and positively revise the film according to the feedback from cinema managers following its preview screenings. The film also represents these characteristics of the central producer production pattern through the depiction of the four characters' specific occupations. None of them were previously a director, while the dismissed screenwriter leads the company.

These characteristics indicate that Feng's filmmaking does not follow the director-unit system, used in the Chinese film industry for a long time, at least after 1949. This change can be regarded as an outcome of his collaboration with the government-sponsored Forbidden City Company which gives priority to investment return. When working with Huayi Brothers in the 2000s, the transition of Feng's filmmaking to the central producer pattern became more evident. *Big Shot's Funeral* represents this transition in the sequence in which the freelance cinematographer Yoyo asks his former colleague Louis Wang, the boss of a company which specializes in organising commercial shows, to plan the fake funeral for Tyler, a fictional Hollywood famous director. In fact, the whole film story revolves around the funeral planning and describes how Yoyo and Wang seek investments and balance the requirements among advertising sponsors. Similar to the role of the character Wang,

in reality, Huayi Brothers also takes the responsibility as producer to raise money for Feng's projects. This collaboration disassociates Feng from the situation in which he held concurrent posts as director and producer. Further, it allows him to focus on filmmaking, which forms a production pattern that Qiu Yuan named the 'configuration of popular directors plus film production' (2011). Accompanying the pattern is the use of integrated marketing strategies and the involvement of foreign capital, which complicates Feng's filmmaking, as it requires consideration to be given to investors, sponsors and markets. Therefore, it is clear to see that this progress of Feng's filmmaking corresponds with the film industry's commercialisation and globalisation. In order to address the film industry's engagement in Feng's filmmaking, initial investigation is needed into the industry's progress from the 1993 reform to 2001, when Huayi Brothers produced *Big Shot's Funeral*, Feng's first NYCF of the 2000s.

The Chinese Film Industry's State-led Commercialisation and Opening-up from the 1990s to Early 2000s

THE 1993 MARKET-ORIENTED REFORM AND THE 9550 PROJECT

In 1993, the state initiated a market-oriented reform within the Chinese film industry in order to recover the industry from an economic slump. The reform set a requirement for domestic filmmaking that required film professionals to put market demands as a priority. This situation led Feng to found the Good Dream Counseling Company with Wang Shuo and to begin his career as a director. After the Changsha Conference in 1996, this requirement was extended to include equal attention to both market appeal and political promotion. The films that offended main melody spirits, such as the dramas produced by the Good Dream Company, were banned. This situation led directly to bankruptcy for the Good Dream Company. Feng therefore turned to the Forbidden City Company in 1997, and to making comedic NYCFs based on the amended filmmaking requirements.

The 1993-reform was a response to the film industry's funding predicament caused by the government's comprehensive sponsorship of main melody films from the late 1980s to early 1990s; it aimed partly to restore the Party's image at the beginning of the 1990s, partly to assist the government supported state-owned studios in launching a significant number of main melody films which glorified the

Chinese Revolution led by the Party, films such as the *Great Decisive Campaign Trilogy* (*Da juezhan*, 1991). The government issued administrative instructions, within the documents with red titles (*hongtou wenjian*) as referred to by film professionals, to increase the attendance of these films. However, this only temporarily stimulated the film industry's development, since its monopolistic mechanism of distribution did not change. Meanwhile, the whole industry paid more attention to political promotion, which resulted in a neglect of market demands. Under these circumstances, state-owned studios often barely covered the cost of film production and found themselves in a financial predicament. In 1992, after a transitory boom, the film industry fell into an economic slump. Compared with 1991, the total box-office receipts declined rapidly from 2.36 (350 million US dollar) to 1.99 billion RMB (300 million US dollar) and additionally, the audience figures of 1992 decreased by 3.84 billion (Rao, 2008). In response to this situation, the government initiated the 1993 reform, which diverted the core mission of film production from state propaganda to industry revitalisation.

The reform promoted the commercialisation of domestic film production, distribution and exhibition. It attracted non-state capital into the film industry and loosened the lifelong labour relations between film professionals and state-owned studios. With the prescription 'Suggestions on the Deepening of the Film Industry's Institutional Reform' (1993, aka No.3 document), state-owned studios carried out institutional restructuring and made employees redundant. As a result of this

combination of redundant labour resources and influx of non-state capital, many private media companies emerged and engaged in the film industry, such as Feng's Good Dream Company. Since the prescription did not expressly allow non-state capital to be involved in the film production sector, these media companies claimed that they only offered related services of film planning and consultancy. In fact, they made films independently and produced them by purchasing state-owned studios' production quota. This collaboration was generally built on the previous affiliation between the self-employed film professionals and the studios. In essence, this represented the outsourcing of film production from state-owned studios to private film enterprises, which helped those studios under financial pressure to complete production missions. It corresponded to the purpose of the reform and led the development of domestic filmmaking in a market-oriented direction.

Although the outsourcing strategy contributed to the film industry's commercialisation, the films made in this mode manifested many problems, often lacking artistic merit, and offending morality and political ideology. Confronting this situation, the government re-emphasised the political function of films, which evolved domestic filmmaking into a politically sanctioned commercial mode. In the No.3 document, the government had already stipulated that state-owned studios and film authorities reject film projects that had the potential to erode socialist values and present obscenity. In August 1993, several months after the reform began, the Film Bureau released a report on film censorship which criticised the political incorrectness

existing in the outsourcing of film works.[17] Partly due to the economic benefit brought by the outsourcing, the state-owned studios did not pay enough attention to the report. Circumstances changed after 1994 when the government allowed the importation of foreign films. These imports received a warm response in Mainland China, bringing audiences back to theatres (Dai, 2002: 425). Their commercial success greatly influenced the Chinese film industry's development and aroused the debate about 'protecting national cinema' (Rosen, 2002: 92). Meanwhile, the Party pushed harder to build the system of socialist spiritual civilisation, through events such as President Jiang Zeming's talk at the National Conference on Publicity and Ideological Work in 1994, which announced the guidelines for political promotion activities.[18] One year later, the Party issued specific political guidelines for filmmaking. At the celebration of the Ninetieth Anniversary of Chinese Film, the President Jiang remarked that film professionals should make films that served the people and accorded with socialist values. Further, that film professionals should expressly indicate their works' political preference towards socialism, improve the works' artistic merit and give consideration to the works' profitability.[19] Two specific factors, foreign imports and the Party's political guidelines, led the government and film authorities to interfere in domestic filmmaking and put forward the '9550' project at the Changsha Conference.

[17] See, Rao Shuoguang's chronicle of the Chinese film industry's development in the 1990s (2001). As Rao mentions, these ideological problems include untruthfully representing the Chinese society and people's daily life, spreading immoral values and distorting political policies.

[18] Building the system of socialist spiritual civilisation can be considered as a response to the rapid social changes in China. It consolidated the legitimacy of socialism under the economic reform. According to Stefan Landsberger, socialist spiritual civilisation 'was to create a superior moral civilisation that would raise the people's political consciousness and morality by fostering revolutionary ideals and discipline without giving in to 'bourgeois liberalising influences' (2004:31).

[19] See Jiang's talk at the celebration of the Ninetieth Anniversary of Chinese Film in 1995.

At the conference, the film authorities proposed a 'strategy of excellent films' (*jingpin zhanlüe*) and subsequently initiated the '9550' project, in order to respond to the establishment of the system of socialist spiritual civilisation, in other words, to promote main melody spirits. Ding Guangen, the Minister for Propaganda, remarked that domestic films should represent the Party's fine style of work, promote ideological rectitude, morality and Chinese traditional virtues, and spread patriotism, collectivism and socialism; the films should also function as both political education and entertainment.[20] From Ding's words, it can be seen that the essence of the strategy and the project was to ask film professionals to consider both commercial pursuit and political promotion in their filmmaking, specifically, the film authorities enabled/encouraged film professionals to make commercial films, however, the filmmaking should be based on the premise of praise for post-socialist China. In this sense, the 'excellent films' would be, in effect, politicised entertainment/commercial films or marketised main melody films.

After the conference, in the case of supporting the project's implementation, the government promulgated film regulations and censoring rules, such as the 'Regulations on Administration of Films', set up the Film Review Committee for censorship, and established state-held film companies in the late 1990s. Based on these film regulations, the Film Review Committee banned many private media companies' films, which made investors hesitate in funding these companies' film

[20] See Ding's talk at the conference, 1996.

projects. Accordingly, certain state-held film companies emerged, such as the Forbidden City Company which was jointly founded by Beijing Radio and the Television Bureau and Beijing Culture Bureau in 1996, several months after the Changsha Conference.[21] Although state-sponsored, these companies still operate independently in accordance with market demands and hold their own responsibilities as regards gains and losses. This production mode and the established time suggested that the companies worked to put the 9550 project into practice. Taking the Forbidden City as an example, its first film, *The Days Without My Comrade* (*Likai Lei Feng de rizi*, dir. Kang Ning and Lei Xianhe, 1996), concerned the experience of Lei Feng, a soldier in the People's Liberation Army, who was regarded as the incarnation of communist morality and ideological rectitude. Different from previous main melody films, this film does not directly praise Lei Feng's deeds, rather, it promotes Lei's spirits by describing other people's experiences in which they follow his example. Since the film performed strongly at the box office, it further encouraged the company to continually use this narrative in making films under the project.

Due to its close cooperative relations with the Beijing Film Studio, the Forbidden City accepted the recommendation of Han Sanping, the studio's director, and invested in Feng's *Party A, Party B*. This collaboration set the basic pattern of Feng's filmmaking from 1997 onwards. Considering the commercial success of Hong Kong NYCFs, Han, and Zhang Heping, the general manager of the Forbidden City

[21] See, Chen Chengxing, 1998.

Company, intended to introduce the NYCF idea into mainland filmmaking. With experience in making New Year Celebration television series Feng did not reject commercial film production.[22] The two conditions facilitated the collaboration between him and the company. As a state-sponsored company, the Forbidden City received not only financial assistance but also administrative support, which reflect that 'political power combines with and further transforms into business capital' (Dai, 2000: 470). Dai's idea reveals the company's political attribute, however, she does not give attention to the function of state investment as an anchor in the company's operation. The direct participation of state investment indicates more clearly the dominant role of the government in the film industry's marketisation and commercialisation. Given this state investment, the Forbidden City's film production is designed to achieve commercial return that works in tandem with the state propaganda of main melody spirits. Consequently, this sets the style for Feng's first three NYCFs produced by the company, which also shaped his subsequent filmmaking with Huayi Brothers in the 2000s. These Huayi-Brothers' films incorporate political promotion within commercial operation, which rebalance business capital against political power.

[22] See, Feng's autobiography, *I Dedicate My Youth to You*, 2003.

CHINA'S ENTRY TO THE WTO AND THE CHINESE FILM INDUSTRY'S COMMERCIALISATION IN THE EARLY 2000s

Since the '9550' project was launched, the government regarded the Chinese film industry rather as a collection of commercial enterprises than a system of political promotion. It emphasised the industry's economic function and gradually opened up the industry's film production sector to non-state capital. Meanwhile, partly in response to the forthcoming foreign competition under the WTO agreements, the government propelled the film industry toward conglomeration in the late 1990s. The conglomeration tendency began with state-owned film enterprises, then expanded to state-held film enterprises and to private film companies. The opening-up brought sufficient capital to domestic filmmaking, while the government-dominated conglomeration set a political framework for the filmmaking by tethering film production, distribution and exhibition sectors together. The conglomeration combined the three sectors into a whole in order to enhance the film industry's competitiveness. Furthermore, it helped the government to fully oversee the film industry. Regarding the film production sector, the oversight sets a precondition that films need to accord with main melody spirits; otherwise, the films could not be distributed and exhibited even if they had already been made. This precondition and non-state investment led to Feng's internalisation of political promotion into commercial pursuit in the 2000s. Within the political framework, Feng and Huayi Brothers gained more creative freedom, to, for example, introduce product placement

and other commercial approaches into making NYCFs. The foreign investment and subsequent competition also promoted Huayi Brothers to cooperate with state-owned film enterprises to establish its own industrial chain.

The film industry's conglomeration is one manifestation of the government's policy of industrialising cultural enterprises (*wenhua chanyehua*) in the early 2000s. In the Chinese film industry, there had existed a long-standing debate about whether films worked for commercial pursuit or for propaganda. The debate was ended to some extent when the film industry carried out the government-dominated industrialisation in order to meet the challenge of foreign film imports after 1994. Early in the late 1980s, film professionals had already debated the significance of domestic entertainment films (*yuele pian*). For example, in 1987, the editors of the journal *Contemporary Cinema* (*Dangdai dianying*) interviewed many film professionals and film scholars to learn their attitudes towards entertainment films, discussing their definition, aesthetic characteristics and contributions to the film industry.[23] The following year, the journal organised a conference of entertainment films to identify their significance to the film industry's market-oriented transformation.[24] Due to the political issue happened in 1989, the film industry's marketisation stagnated until 1993 when the government launched the market-oriented reform. The reform expressly identified the film industry's economic function and underlined the profitability of

[23] The journal published the interviews with a same title 'Dialogue: Entertainment Films' in three issues from the first to third ones of 1987.
[24] See, Zhang Wei's review of the conference, The Review of the Chinese Contemporary Entertainment Films Conference, 1989.

domestic filmmaking, thus, it led to the commercialisation and industrialisation of the industry. The Changsha Conference further confirmed the government's predominance in commercialisation and industrialisation. For example, the government supported Feng's NYCFs, although film critics regarded them as lacking critical intelligence, the same comments that made about the entertainment films. In 1999, with the government's encouragement, six state-owned film enterprises merged into a group, known as the China Film Group (*Zhongying jituan*). This group of companies was an initial test of the Chinese film industry's conglomeration, as it contained production, distribution and exhibitions operations.[25]

In the years that followed, the government continued to promulgate directives and regulations to promote the conglomeration. The 'Opinions on the Further Reform of Chinese Film Industry' (2000) proposes establishing film conglomerates and carrying out reform of the film industry's shareholding system.[26] Based on President Jiang's report at the 16th National Congress of the Communist Party (2002), the government expressly defined cinema as a commercial cultural industry. In this context, many provincial-level, state-held film conglomerates appeared, such as Shanghai Film Group, Changchun Film Group and Xibu Film Group (Shanxi). In 2004, Huayi Brothers also established its own film conglomerate; through working with Xibu

[25] The six companies are Beijing Film Studio, China Film, China Children's Film Studio, China Film Co-production Corporation, china Film Equipment Corporation and Beijing Film Processing Studio.
[26] After promulgated the directive in 2000, SARFT later issued the 'Suggestions on Trying the Conglomeration of Radio, Film and Television Industries'. In 2001, it issued the 'Suggestions on Further Promoting the Conglomeration of Film Industry' and the 'Detailed Rules on Positive Promoting the Conglomeration Reform of Radio, Film and Television Industries'. These successive directives indicated the government's determination to promote the film industry's conglomeration and industrialisation.

Film Group, to build Xiying Huayi Film Distribution Company. Compared with decentralized, relatively small-scale enterprises, the conglomerates not only unify different sectors to respond foreign competition but also become more easily managed by the government in promoting the industry's commercialisation.

As the conglomerates cover all sectors of film industry, the government's management actually sets a framework for filmmaking, in that film authorities ask film professionals to make films that correspond to main melody spirits. They also encourage cooperation between domestic film enterprises and foreign ones, attracting investments and introducing technology and management experiences. This encouragement resulted in a gradually opening-up of the film industry. In 1997, MRFT, the predecessor of SARFT, issued the 'Notices on Trying the Permit for Film Production for Single Feature Film', which allows provincial-level and city-level stated-owned film enterprises to apply for a production permit for a single feature film. Three years later, the directive, 'Opinions on the Further Reform of Chinese Film Industry', enabled non-state capital to invest in a single film project. The new 'Regulations on Administration of Films' (2001) further allows the enterprises outside the film production sector to make films. This opening-up contributes to film professionals' collaboration with domestic private and foreign capital, such as the one comprising Feng, Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures. As for Huayi Brothers, this collaboration brought the importance of film distribution to its attention, which prompted the company to seek its own conglomeration (Qiu, 2011). Both the

conglomeration and the collaboration shaped Feng's filmmaking into a more commercial form.

Meanwhile, the government-set filmmaking framework works to maintain Feng's predominance in the collaboration. It helps to change the Sino-foreign collaboration form from a mode in which Chinese film professionals only offer assistance to one in which they hold joint management and ownership rights of coproduced films. Since film regulations prohibit foreign enterprises from independently making films in China, the enterprises generally participate in film production by offering funds. In the early 2000s, the government allowed foreign capital to invest in the exhibition sector and established state holding companies or joint-stock theatres. In this circumstance, foreign film companies have to rely on Chinese film enterprises to complete filmmaking, which also raises the importance of Chinese film professionals in the Sino-foreign collaboration. In addition, the huge potential of China's film market becomes another factor that makes the collaboration centre on Chinese film professionals in order to achieve the film coproduction's localisation.

The collaboration between Feng (Huayi Brothers) and Columbia Pictures corresponds to the new mode of Sino-foreign film coproduction. Taking *Big Shot's Funeral* as example, Feng was in charge of the filmmaking, while Huayi Brothers shared the film's ownership with Columbia Pictures. Partly due to lack of distribution license and operating experience of this business, Huayi Brothers yielded the film's

international distribution rights to Columbia Pictures and received only 30 percent ownership of the film (Qiu, 2011). Interestingly, this collaborative experience is immediately represented in *Big Shot Funeral* in which an American director adopts a Chinese cinematographer's idea of a funeral show to make his own film. The sequence suggests that while the cinematographer (the symbol of Chinese film professionals) takes responsibility in making the film, the fictional film is distributed in the name of the director (the symbol of their foreign partners). It becomes a self-reflexive comment on the condition in the initial stage of the Sino-foreign coproduction when China has just joined the WTO.

The self-reflexive comments in *Big Shot's Funeral* correspond to the Chinese film industry's opening-up under the WTO agreements, a milestone in the industry's progress, and reflect its impact on domestic filmmaking. Regarding this point, the filmmaking mode of *Big Shot's Funeral* is similar to that of *Party A Party B* which focuses on another milestone, the market-oriented reform. Whether the result of marketisation or entry to the WTO, these milestones aroused the attention of society as a whole with every industry in China confronted with similar situations, such as conducting institutional restructuring and dismissing employees in the late 1990s, and seeking cooperation and coping with foreign counterparts in the early 2000s. In this sense, the two films reflect the social transformation by representing the changes in the film industry. The strategy of representing people's common concerns apparently contributed to the films' success, since they performed quite well at the box office.

The strategy also indicates Feng's effort to integrate aesthetic exploration and commercial pursuit. Approaches used in his films, such as self-mockery, reflect his reactions to the film industry's reform and opening-up. Some of the approaches evolve into Feng's signature style in his subsequent films and contribute to the film industry's commercialisation, such as by using product placement and attracting other film professionals to follow. In order to comprehend how the integration started, *Party A Party B* should first be examined. As Feng's first NYCF, the film manifests the initial interaction between Feng's filmmaking and the film industry's development. Investigating the interaction will help to understand how Feng's self-reflexive comments are made and how the basic pattern of his filmmaking is formed.

Party A, Party B: State-sanctioned Market-oriented Template of Feng's NYCF Making

As a product of the '9550 project', *Party A* presents the government's political oversight of the film industry's marketisation. The film regulations, along with the project's implementation, interrupted Feng's filmmaking of dramas in 1996. However, the film authorities did not deny the marketability of his filmmaking, leaving room for their further collaboration which become reality after Feng's *Stories From The Editorial Board: All's Well* achieved commercial success. The Beijing Film Studio and the Forbidden City encourage Feng to make NYCFs and promise to offer investment and support for film production, and absorb his filmmaking into the state-led framework. Correspondingly, Feng's NYCFs of this period usually retain the discussions of socially concerned issues but represent them in a sanctioned way, for both commercial and political consideration. In fact, some subjects of Feng's NYCFs such as sexual description and extramarital affairs also appear in his banned dramas such as *Living a Miserable Life*, which Han Sanping attributes to the social context in which the Film Bureau strictly rectified domestic filmmaking for promoting the 9550 project in 1996 (Feng, 2003). In other words, film professionals' political compliance decides whether their involvement of commercially viable but socially sensitive subjects can be permitted.

Regarding Feng's filmmaking, its political compliance with main melody spirits in

company with its social concern transform his NYCFs into a comedy format in which Feng can expose these issue on a premise of conveying positively political understandings of them. Taking *Party A* as an example, the film depicts the issue of mass redundancies in state-owned enterprises but from a perspective of self-employment, suggesting that the future of laid-offs is also promising. The dismissed workers can still gain happiness and serve the people as they did when they were once staff of state-owned enterprises. That is to say, Feng's NYCFs address the social issues first and then provide happy endings in which the issues can be overcome according to main melody spirits. Therefore, moderate representations of social issues and appropriate criticisms become the considerations of Feng's filmmaking, which shape his NYCFs as comedies. As Han Sanping mentioned at the meeting where he mobilised Feng to make NYCFs, '[comedy] is easier to reach an agreement among film authorities, audiences and filmmakers, satisfying their demands at the same time' (cited in Feng, 2003). Han's words indicate the necessity of using comedy form, since the genre enables Feng's filmmaking to integrate the government's political missions, investors' commercial considerations, and filmmakers' social concerns. Meanwhile, these words further reveal that the government's engagement is at the core of the integration. The film authorities undertook a dual role of regulator and investor, or to be more specific, the Beijing Film Studio and the Forbidden City Company invested in Feng's filmmaking in addition to taking responsibility for supervising it.

Party A metaphorically represents the government's engagement in the Chinese film industry's marketisation, by demonstrating the impact of community committee (*juwei hui*, a grassroots government organisation) on the fictional Good Dream Factory's development. As aforementioned, the film depicts how four film professionals, including a screenwriter Qi Kang (played by Feng himself), an actor Yao Yuan (played by Ge You), an assistant director (played by Liu Bei) and a property man (played by He Bing), run a media company and achieve self-employment after they are dismissed from a particular state-owned studio. Their business is going well at first, but later gains a warning from Aunt Qi (played by Li Bing), the chief of the community committee, since some people deem the company's parody of such as main melody films relating to revolutionary heroes vulgar and report their services. In order to learn lessons from this event, Qi Kang holds a meeting to adjust their working principle to serve the people rather than merely the market. Since then, the company actively undertakes the community committee's promotion missions and sometimes voluntarily helps people to fulfill their dreams. This series of actions win praise from people and the community committee but leads the company to fall into a finacial predicament. The film ends with a sequence in which the four employees discuss how to revitalise the company.

The film displays seven projects which can be divided into three groups based on the level of the community committee's involvement. In chronological order, the three groups correspond to the film industry's progress in the 1990s, from the 1993

market-oriented reform to the political adjustment after Changsha Conference (1996) and then, to the situation during the 9550 project's implementation (after 1996). The first group includes two projects, a bookseller's dream of being a general like the one portrayed in the Hollywood film *Patton* (dir. Franklin Schaffner, 1970), and a cook's dream of being a revolutionary hero like the ones described in the Chinese main melody films. After the two projects, the community committee intervenes in the company's business, and suggests the company offers a service based on main melody spirits. Accordingly, the subsequent projects display the characteristics of political education. Taking the second group as an example, its two dream projects — a grumpy husband's hope of experiencing his wife's life in which he always loses his temper, and a rich businessman's wish of living a poor life again — persuade people to cherish their happy lives brought about by China's economic reform. In contrast, the political characteristics of the third group's projects are more obvious. In these projects, the four employees actively serve the people, by, for example, assisting the community committee to draw a young man out of lovesickness, warmly helping a celebrity return to ordinary life and generously lending a flat to a stranger whose wife is dying.

Based on the division, this section of the chapter analyses the self-reflexive comments on the film industry's development in *Party A*. Further, it investigates the impact of the film industry's state-led marketisation on Feng's filmmaking. Additionally, it explores the factors engendering the correspondence between Feng's filmmaking

and the industry's ongoing marketisation in the 1990s. Thus, this section argues that the correspondence established the template for Feng's filmmaking as one of market-orientedness and politically approval. Factors, such as the government's involvement, propel the format of Feng's NYCFs towards comedy. During the interaction with the film industry, Feng's filmmaking gradually formed its own narrative features of what Feng named 'the affinity to ordinary people' and 'the fantasy for ordinary people' (*chuanqi xing*). More specifically, the themes of Feng's NYCFs are closely linked to daily life, describing social issues that ordinary people care about or are interested in. With the descriptions, the films aim to satisfy audiences' desires to experience a life beyond their reach in reality, such as the dream of being heroes or celebrities, and the wish of owning flats in *Party A*. Further, the films intend to use descriptions to correct people's negative understanding of the social issues, such as the kindness among characters in *Party A* easily solves their housing problem. The two narrative features work in harmony with the template of Feng's filmmaking and embody the influence of the government's investment. Due to this influence, Feng's filmmaking presents the characteristics of the central producer system, for example, increasing the importance of film scripts and film promotion. These characteristics also become the materials that Feng uses to construct the story of *Party A*, creating a series of self-reflexive scenes, such as the one that describes the fictional company's personnel structure which will be discussed in the next section.

MARKET-ORIENTED REFORM AND PROFIT-DRIVEN FILMMAKING

At the beginning of the Chinese film industry's marketisation, domestic film production gave priority to economic efficiency. After 1993, this economic imperative engendered the rise of entertainment films again by imitating Hollywood genres or pastiching main melody films. Regarding *Party A*, the establishment of the fictional Good Dream Factory and its first two projects, reflexively represent the situation and consequent phenomena, such as the emergence of private media companies engaged in film production. These phenomena reflect the domestic film professionals' positive responses to marketisation. They paralleled the economic imperative and used the government policy support to produce films. Feng is one of those, who founded the Good Dream Company and started directing films at this period. *Party A* presents a company with a similar name to the Good Dream Company to display the dismissed film professionals' responses to the market-oriented reform, which are likely based on Feng's own experience of self-employment. From the perspectives of personnel structure and methods of operation, it is evident that the fictional company prioritises probability. This design reflects Feng's understanding and acceptance of commercial filmmaking based on his early career, which lays the foundation for his collaboration with the Forbidden City Company.

The film starts with a voiceover of the character Yao Yuan, introducing the fictional company's basic information, such as its reasons for establishment and

business scope. Yao's monologue represents the state of the Chinese film industry in reality since the market-oriented reform began in 1993. He states:

> I'm an actor but have little chance to act. In the summer of 1997, I work with Zhou Beiyan, an assistant director who stays idle at home, Liang Zi, a property man, and Qiang Kang, a screenwriter, to found a company named Good Dream Factory. We offer a service called 'One-Day Dream Trip' which aims to help consumers to experience the life they dream of for one day. This business is quite new to the service industry and fills a gap in the market. We still run it on a trial basis.

These words indicate the four founders' identities and the company's methods of operation. Based on the information, this company is more like a private film studio as its name 'Dream Factory' suggests. Qiang undertakes the task of writing concrete proposals (scripts) according to clients' requirements, while the other three work as a mini film crew to put the proposals into practice. This plot, namely, building a company to take on a business that resembles filmmaking, may be regarded as a dramatised representation of the film industry's institutional restructuring under the market-oriented reform. The restructuring and subsequent mass redundancies loosened the attachment between the labour and state-owned film enterprises, which aimed to reduce the enterprises' expenditure and encourage self-employment to facilitate the film industry's marketisation. As the film is set in Beijing, the Beijing Film Studio may be taken as an example: according to Zhu Ying, the studio 'released its acting talents' loyalty obligation to the studio and, hence, the studio's financial obligation to the talent, encouraging them to branch out and look for other means of income' (2003: 79). This release boosted the collaboration rather than distanced the relation between film professionals and studios. As aforementioned, many dismissed

film professionals actually purchased the production quotas of the studios in which they used to work to complete their filmmaking. From this perspective, this collaboration is a form of the studios' outsourcing of film production. It helps studios alleviate the shortage of funding and accomplish the filmmaking plan, in order to answer the government's call of marketising the film industry.

Yao's monologue also reflects the goal that the state-owned studios' outsourcing aimed to achieve, namely, by describing the fictional business's market positioning as emerging and targeting the masses. This design corresponds to the essentials of the market-oriented reform. The aforementioned No. 3 document that triggered the reform, emphasises the importance of market and the function of audience reception to the domestic film production. It suggests that the Film Bureau should support those film enterprises which are good at business operation. In addition, this design reveals the principles of Feng's filmmaking in the context of marketisation, in its affinity with ordinary people and their fantasies. As Yao mentions in the monologue, the business seeks to fulfill consumers' dreams. This description is quite similar to Feng's explanation of the style of his first three NYCFs in his interview with Tan Zhen. Feng claimed that these films 'focus directly on people's daily experiences and represent their sweetness and bitterness of life'; based on these experiences, the films 'fabricate dreams and create empathy to satisfy audiences' desire' (Tan, 1999:45). Market demand is at the core of the two principles, in that Feng's filmmaking develops in accordance with the film industry's market-oriented reform; not only does it follow

the tendency of marketisation but also forms narrative features to positively adapt to the situation. This may reveal some reasons why his first three NYCFs are commercially successful.

Demonstrating the interaction between Feng's filmmaking and the film industry's marketisation, the film makes further meta-comments in depicting the implementation of the first two dream projects. Compared with Yao's introduction, the two projects represent more details about the collaboration between private media companies and state-owned studios, the formation of Feng's filmmaking principles and the domestic film professionals' explorations of film production at the marketisation's initial stage. Regarding the first dream project 'being General George Patton for one day', the film designs it with many similar scenes of *Patton*, such as inspecting troops and tanks, visiting a field hospital, kicking a cowardly soldier, and prohibiting soldiers from putting up posters of actresses.[27] Meanwhile, the film integrates many Chinese elements into the project, thus interrupting the narrative and creating humorous effect. For example, as the four film professionals fail to find a map of Germany, the bookseller, the 'General Patton' in the project, has to use a map of Nanjing to deploy military actions, commanding his tanks to defeat Nazi troops at Yuhuatai, Nanjing, China (Figure 2.1). Therefore, these designs can be considered as pastiches of the Hollywood film *Patton,* which embody the influence of Hollywood on Chinese filmmaking in the 1990s,

[27] There is an obvious difference in Schaffner's *Patton*. In the film, the General slaps rather than kick the coward solider. As to *Party A*, this change probably considers that Chinese audiences may not accept the 'slap' action. Meanwhile, the film does not represent all of these scenes in detail. It makes the character Yao retell most of the plots to the bookseller, and combines the rest and intensively display them. For example, it combines the scene of kicking the coward soldier and that of prohibiting soldiers from putting up posters together.

especially after 1994 when MRFT opened up the market to foreign films. At that time, imitating Hollywood modes of narrative and characterisation became an exploration direction for many domestic film professionals.[28]

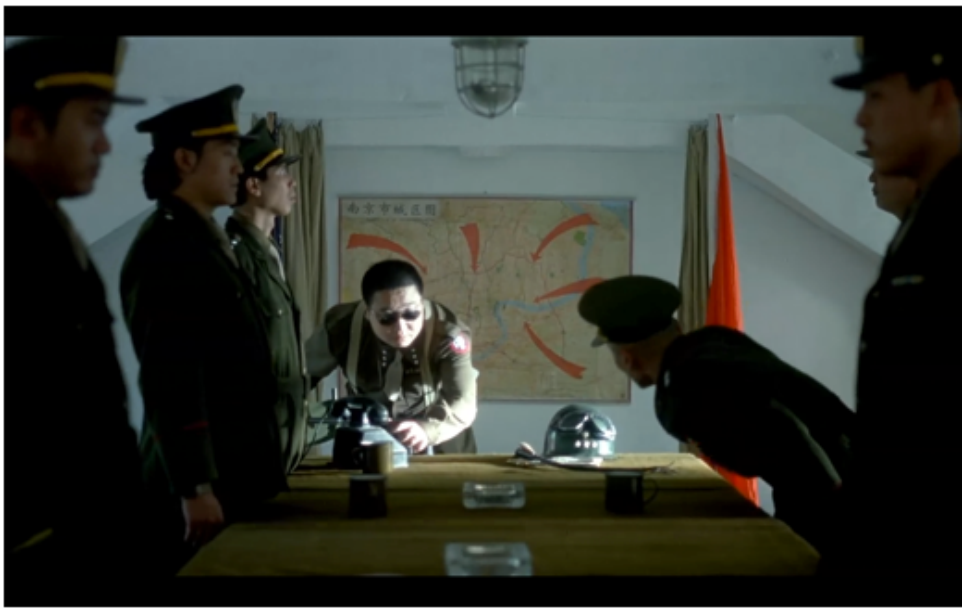


Figure 2.1: the bookseller who dreams of being General Patton uses Nanjing map to deploy his army to defeat Nazi troops in Party A, Party B (Forbidden City), 1997.

This exploration gained official support since MRFT regarded the emulation as a way to '[revive] interest in film and [revitalise] domestic production' (Braester, 2011: 176). Therefore, in the dream project, many meta-comments can be seen about the collaboration between private media companies and state-owned studios, for example, the studios lend extras, provide properties and costumes and even offer the training ground for tanks as the project's setting. The conversation between tank soldiers at the training ground, 'they are shooting a film', further indicates the studios'

[28] According to Yomi Braester, the import of foreign films made Chinese filmmakers adopt new business models. 'The far larger portion imitated Hollywood by integrating the audiovisual industry, establishing joint ventures, setting up a lobby for promoting protective quotas and stimuli, and focusing on churning out genre films' (2011: 176-177).

reasons for support and implies the four dismissed film professionals' creative response to the film industry's marketisation. As they are not legally allowed to make films independently, the four characters work with studios to do something similar, such as making dream projects based on market demands. As part of *Party A*, this dream project actually corresponds to Feng's early experience in which his Good Dream Company worked with the Beijing Film Studio, and reflexively represents his collaboration with the studio and the Forbidden City Company when making the NYCF.

The second dream project, 'being a revolutionary hero like the ones in Chinese main melody films', metaphorically indicates another exploration direction of domestic film professionals in the 1990s, which combined the production of entertainment films and main melody films. The combination displays two tendencies: marketising main melody films and politicalising entertainment films. The first tendency was particularly obvious after the 1993 market-oriented reform. In the market there emerged many films which followed the tendency, such as *Red Cherry* (*Hong yingtao*, dir. Ye Daying, 1995) and *The Days Without My Comrade*. These films accorded with the reform's requirement which attached importance to film production's economic efficiency, or according to Zhu Ying's explanation, 'studios concern for box-office return has pushed propaganda films towards adopting a commercial formula in film packaging and promotion' (2002: 196). As to the tendency of politicalising entertainment films, this became more obvious after the Changsha Conference which required domestic

filmmaking to pursue economic benefits based on promoting main melody spirits. The films produced with this tendency, including Feng's NYCFs, can be classified as the 'excellent films' of the 9550 project. Most of them focus on ordinary people's daily lives and carry out a soft promotion of main melody spirits. Wendy Su describes this phenomenon as the humanistic trend in main melody films (2010: 319), while further noting, at the same time, that this trend of humanising political promotion also appeared in the entertainment films under the 9550 project. From here it can be found that there is no distinct line between the two tendencies. Many films produced in the mid-1990s actually present characteristics of both tendencies.

Returning to the dream project in the film, it subtly represents the intermediate or transitional form between the two tendencies of filmmaking. Further, this representation indicates that Feng was beginning to implement the 9550 project under the collaboration with the Forbidden City Company. The dream project contains nearly all the elements of the main melody films about Chinese revolution, such as arresting Communist secret agents, passing intelligence, tortures and interrogations, and seduction traps. Unlike the main melody films, the project does not present heroes' great deeds. Instead, the hero played by the cook lacks the strong will for revolution. His behaviours create comedic effect: he regrets ordering the service due to the 'frightening' torture prank, but is glad to walk into the trap of seduction (Figure 2.2). However, the project ends with the cook and the four employees' glorification of revolutionary heroes: 'being heroes is not that easy, we hold them in high esteem'.

From this design, the borrowing of the main melody films' elements can be regarded as a pastiche, aimed at making entertainment. In its light-hearted atmosphere, it praises rather than erodes the images of revolutionary heroes, therefore, this dream project shows Feng's filmmaking in compliance with the Changsha Conference's requirements. He retained the two marketised principles of his filmmaking, namely, representing ordinary people's desire and fulfilling their fantasies, and began to integrate the promotion of main melody spirits into film narratives.



Figure 2.2: in his dream of being a revolutionary hero, the cook is glad to walk into the trap of seduction in Party A, Party B (Forbidden City), 1997.

CHANGSHA CONFERENCE AND POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

The second dream project displays the correspondence between Feng's filmmaking and state propaganda. This correspondence highlights the government's interference in domestic, market-oriented film production since the Changsha Conference. Accordingly, after the dream project sequence, the film represents another one of Qian Kang's meetings for reshaping ideological rectitude, which metaphorically reflects the role of the Changsha Conference and the function of government interference in the industry's commercialisation. This interference revised domestic filmmaking, including Feng's, to give equal attention to both box-office performance and political promotion. With a focus on the competition from foreign films, the political property of domestic entertainment films and the profitability of main melody films, the government encouraged film professionals to integrate the production of entertainment films and main melody films. For pushing this integration, the government also takes many other means into account such as fancial support and administrative convenience; this means that the government's engagement is no longer limited to creating development plans, as was the practice at the beginning of the film industry's marketisation, rather, it more actively participates in implementing the plans. Meanwhile, private capital developed a more passive attitude towards financing films since 'only a few of the films achieved investment return from 1993' (Rao b, 2001:18). The film regulations expressly state the ways in which private capital participates in domestic filmmaking, breaking down the ambiguity of the

collaboration between private media companies and state-owned studios. Many works under the collaboration were in fact banned as a result of the film regulations. These three conditions reduced private investors' enthusiasm, which pushed film professionals to approach the government-sponsored film companies. Therefore, the government becomes the film professionals' new boss and achieves its goal of strengthening control of the film industry's marketisation.

Through presenting Qian's talk and representing the four employees' flattering attitudes towards the community committee's chief Aunt Qi, the sequence shows the effect of the community committee on the fictional company's business operation, which suggests the influence of the government's interference on the film industry. Either from the form or the content, Qian's meeting is analogous to the actual events of the Changsha Conference. At the conference, film authorities and film professionals summarised the mistakes they made and the problems they encountered since the 1993 reform, and further adjusted the filmmaking principles, making a production plan (the 9550 project) for the film industry's development in the future. In the sequence, Qian's talk mentions similar issues which correspond with the conference agenda.

> Qian: We got a good performance during the trial operation; but our service also exposed a big problem, that is, 'whom we actually serve and what kinds of consumers' tastes we cater to'. Comrades, do not ignore the problem; otherwise, we would be in trouble.
> Zhou: But you had said that we treated all the people in the same way, and our company was glad to provide any service to consumers, no matter what requirements they made.

> Qian: Yes. However, we need to adjust our methods of operation and correct our attitude towards consumers. The Good Dream Factory must say no to some of them; otherwise, our affair could not develop, and the company would fall into a predicament. Hope your guys have a clear cognition and judgment of the problem... (Suddenly, Aunt Qi comes in and interrupts Qian's speaking).

These words indicate the direction in which the fictional company adjusts its operation and selectively accepts dream projects. This sequence happens right after the dream project of being a revolutionary hero. Considering the film's narrative line, the adjustment is political. According to an interview with the film crew of *Party A*, they had intended to insert a scene in which the company was ordered to be suspended since other people were suspicious of its purpose of running the political pastiche project and reported it to related institutions (Zou, 1998: 52). Although the interview does not indicate the reasons for not doing so, it confirms the causality between the dream project and Qian's meeting, in that it suggests that political concerns compel the company to adjust its operation, since the dream project has potential to disparage revolutionary heroes' images.

Political concerns also animate the Changsha Conference. Qian's talk closely resembles the director of MRFT Sun Jiazheng's speech at the actual conference. In his speech, Sun pointed out that Chinese film production went off track as regards socialist promotion as 'some films weakened the promotion of patriotism, heroism and collectivism, some simply pandered to domestic audiences' vulgar tastes and foreigners' exotic imaginations' (Cao, 1996: 31). Based on these problems, he further suggested that Chinese film professionals ascertain 'what kinds of consumers they

should serve', 'what kind of culture they need to diffuse' and 'what kinds of films they must make' (ibid.). From Sun's words, it is clear to see the uniformity between the conference's agenda and the reasons why the Film Bureau halted Feng's project *Living a Miserable Life*. The halt engendered the suspension of Feng's Good Dream Counseling Company, bringing him 'parallel with the condition in which mainstream political culture incorporated popular culture' (Gui, 2009: 18). As a result, this compliance led to the production of Feng's NYCFs under the 9550 project.

The political compliance is a result of interaction between Feng's filmmaking and the government's interference. The government offered investment and administrative support whereby it could supervise the domestic film production. By describing the four characters' interaction with Aunt Qi, the sequence of Qian's meetings adds further self-reflexive comments on the interference and its effect on Feng's filmmaking. In this sequence, when Qian is speaking, Aunt Qi interrupts, holding shopping baskets of vegetables. None of the four characters feel offended by this interruption; instead they scramble to please her. The film uses a static long shot to give a view of the full group, displaying the hierarchy among the characters of the four employees who crowd Aunt Qi (Figure 2.3). The character Liang Zi holds a chair, waiting for her to sit. Zhou waves a fan for her, while Yao immediately brings her a glass of water. Qian repeatedly claims that they will complete the promotion mission for celebrating Hong Kong's return to China based on the community committee's requirements. When Aunt Qi leaves, all characters send her off, with a bow of heads

as she leaves. These behaviours reflect the four characters' respect for Aunt Qi, indicating the community committee's importance to the company.



Figure 2.3: The four employees crowd Aunt Qi and scramble to please her in Party A, Party B (Forbidden City), 1997.

This design was related to the film's context of the 1990s. At that time, when establishing companies in communities, people needed to provide an agreement from the community committee they belonged to. The community committees had the duty to supervise the operation of the companies in their areas, therefore, in the film, the importance of Aunt Qi (the community committee) is that she has the right to guide and support the fictional company's development. She labels the company as representative of promoting socialist spiritual civilisation (*Wenming zhuanye hu*), encouraging the four employees to participate in the political promotion for Hong Kong's return. In response to this, Qian asks all employees to take to the streets to praise good people and good deeds, an embodiment of main melody spirits.

Consideration of the point at which Aunt Qi appears and her requirements of the four employees, her deeds may be seen as a metaphor for the government's interference after the Changsha Conference. Likewise, the community committee is an incarnation of the regulatory authority which propels domestic film production toward paralleling main melody spirits. In the case of Feng's filmmaking, the role of Han Sanping resembles that of Aunt Qi in the film. Under his auspices, Feng gains Zhang Heping's investment and recommences making films. During the preparation for *Party A*, Han stated principles and assigned tasks to guide Feng's filmmaking, 'to make a profitable film with educational significance, representing daily life positively and sincerely' (Feng, 2003: 104). This is virtually identical to Aunt Qi's promotion mission in the sequence. Meanwhile, a parallel exists between the community committee's recognition of the company in the film and the official support for Feng in making it a reality. Under Han and Zhang's instruction, the Beijing Film Studio and the Forbidden City facilitated Feng's filmmaking of *Party A*, simplifying the film's censoring process and accelerating its production within forty-five days (Ma, 1998; Feng, 2003). Therefore, the government's interference was based on its resource advantage and accomplished through politicising entertainment films.

Party A makes self-reflexive comments on the politicisation of entertainment films through describing the four characters' adjustment of business operations in the subsequent two dream projects after Qian's meeting. In the choice of subjects, the two dream projects focus on social issues, the family conflict between husband and

wife, and a rich businessman's nostalgia for the past. The film makes adherence to main melody spirits the only solution to the two social problems. Through the dream projects, the grumpy husband empathises with his wife, and the rich business begins to cherish his current life. When representing the dream projects' implementation, the film makes the four employees change their approaches. In contrast with their compliance in the previous dream projects, the four characters clearly express their disapproval of the clients' deeds from the outset. The assistant director Zhou impatiently takes notes about the husband's requirements, while Yao wears a blank face when listening to the rich businessman's complaints about life. The characters also involve the textual elements of propaganda films such as *The White-haired Girl* (*Baimao nü*, 1950) in the two dream projects, but mainly use them to make *tiaokan* to educate the clients in a humorous way. With these elements, the employees set similar contexts to those of the propaganda films, where they put the clients into subordinate positions: the husband who usually needs his wife's care becomes a servant, an exploited labourer who resembles the character Yang Bailao in *The White-haired Girl*; the superior rich businessman becomes a miserable and repellent chicken thief. This role reversal humorously punishes the husband and the rich businessman, which accords with the agendas of propaganda films. Therefore, in the two dream projects, the borrowing of the propaganda films' elements not only maintains the film's entertainment property but also emphasises its function of political promotion. This operation corresponds to the Changsha Conference's theme, which required domestic filmmaking to coordinate social impact with economic benefit.

COMMERCIALISED POLITICAL PROMOTION AND SANCTIONED FILMMAKING PATTERN

Following the government's interference after the conference, a framework of domestic film production gradually took shape. It encouraged film professionals to make films that gave consideration to both commercial viability and political promotion. However, in practice, the domestic filmmaking presented a condition in which film professionals gave preference to political mission. One manifestation is that the main melody films (including revolutionary films and the 'excellent films') again became the main genre on the market in spite of the film industry's declining productivity after the Changsha Conference. Only 85 films were released in 1997, and output further declined in 1998 with 82 films released that year (Zhang, 2004: 281). In the two-year limited production period, the amount of entertainment films was a small proportion of the industry's total output. Most films produced in 1998 were main melody films; the amount of entertainment films continued to reduce significantly compared to the situation in 1997 (Yin, 1999: 23). The situation changed in late 1998 when the government started to merge state-owned and state-held film enterprises into conglomerates. Since the business of these conglomerates contains all film industry links, this meant that they actually consolidated the commercial and political framework that the government set for domestic filmmaking. This quasi-monopoly created the conditions for the government to open up the film industry further. The investment intention of private capital became active again, for example, Huayi Brothers funded Feng's filmmaking since *Sorry Baby*. The film industry's production

rose to 99 in 1999 of which the proportion of revolutionary films declined and films that portrayed social development and ordinary people's daily experiences rose rapidly (Zhang, 2004: 281; Wang, 2000: 5). These films such as *Crash Landing* (*Jinji pojing*, 1999) represent a tendency that infuses political promotion into commercial subjects.[29] As for Feng, the collaboration with the Forbidden City Company made him work within the filmmaking framework early in the making of *Party A*. This allowed Feng to pay more attention to commercial exploration, which gave his NYCFs competitive advantages and therefore made them become part of the few domestic films with strong box-office performance in the late 1990s.

In *Party A*, the last three dream projects make self-reflexive comments on the reemphasis of political promotion within the film industry after the Changsha Conference. They also metaphorically represent film professionals' compliance with the filmmaking framework. In this section of the film, neither the consumers nor Aunt Qi demands the company's service. They simply casually mention their problems. The four employees overhear and then offer dream projects, such as creating a dating project for a young man. These three dream projects indicate more about the employees' political views than their personal aspiration. In contrast to their prior performance, the employees' deeds in the three projects gradually reach an extreme in terms of implementing Aunt Qi's political requirements. For example, in the last

[29] *Crash Landing* describes a story that a pilot uses his skills to land a plane with a malfunction to save passengers' lives. It is the pilot's idelogical rectitude that keeps him going. *Crash Landing* is the first domestic film that uses lots of computer graphics in the 1990s. Either from the aspect of film subject or film technology, the film is a new try to the film industry.

dream project, Yao voluntarily lends his wedding flat to a man whose wife is dying of cancer. From this behaviour of devotion, it can be seen how the company's attribute is changed to be representative of political promotion, set by Aunt Qi at Qian's meeting. This change corresponds to the aforementioned situation in the film industry after the Changsha Conference. Many film professionals participated in the 9550 project and returned to enhance the political merit of their works. Since 1997, the film industry raised a production phenomenon that combined the subjects of ordinary people's daily trifles with the promotion agenda of main melody spirits. It was a tendency of marketising or commercialising main melody films.

In the film, the employees' overemphasis of 'serving the people' leads the company into financial crisis. Similarly, in reality, as a result of re-emphasing the political merit of film production from 1997 onwards, domestic films did not perform well at the box office and slowed the industry's progression (Wang, 1999: 6). *Party A* visually represents the dilemma in its final scene, in which red silk banners cover the company office's walls (Figure 2.4). The red silk banner in China is a symbol of social recognition, which people usually give official institutions as thanks for their support. However, in this scene, such recognition does not solve the company's operational predicament since the four employees still have to seek measures to avoid its closure. The motivation that sustains the employees is that 'people need us so much', that is, to serve the people. It self-reflexively indicates the filmmaking framework under Feng's collaboration with the Forbidden City Company, which sets his NYCFs to

balance against market demands and state propaganda. Within the framework, Feng's filmmaking can concentrate on commercial exploration, since it inherently works to promote main melody spirits.



Figure 2.4: The four employees discuss how save the company's financial crisis despite it gaining many red silk banners that cover the office's walls in Party A, Party B (Forbidden City), 1997.

The measures mentioned by the characters in the scene, including reducing salary, finding sponsorship and cooperating with real estate companies, represent Feng's ideas of commercial exploration. These were actually used in making *Party A* and the subsequent NYCFs, such as binding his income with the films' box-office receipts, introducing advertising sponsorship and product placement to cover production cost and working with Taihe Property Company.[30] This profit distribution and collaborative relationship led Feng's filmmaking towards the mode of the central producers system, which returned to consider market demands. Before shooting

[30] Feng accepted Zhang Heping and Han Sanping's advice, linking his income with the box-office receipts of *Party A*.

Party A, the Forbidden City and the Beijing Film Studio arranged seminars to discuss the film's script with cinema managers and film distributors, in order to fit its story to market demands (Feng, 2003). This pattern remained and developed in such a way as to affect Feng's subsequent filmmaking alongside the increased investment. For example, the estimation of market demands forced the film crew to change the script of *Be There or Be Square* twice, which directly led them to set the film in the USA (Fei, 1998: 17). After completing *Party A,* the company and the studio also arranged test screenings for the film in order to revise it to adapt to the market. According to Gao Jun, the test screenings put a great strain on Feng since his income was tied in with the film's box-office receipts (Wangyi Yule, 2010).[31] This strain gradually drove Feng's filmmaking towards commercialisation.

This tendency for commercialization highlights the role of the producer in Feng's filmmaking. When making NYCFs in the late 1990s, Feng usually undertook the dual role as director and producer (Qiu, 2011). He actively participated in film promotion, such as attending the meet-and-greet events of *Party A* held at 25 cities (Feng, 2003). This promotional tactic is commonplace in the present-day Chinese film industry, however, in the 1990s, few film directors had wanted to do so since 'they merely took the responsibility for shooting films and explicitly requested producers to guarantee their individual incomes' (Qiu, 2011). *Party A* actually represents his attention to the producers' function and his understanding of the duty of directors under the

[31] Gao is the vice-general manager of Beijing New Film Association. He attended the film's test screening. He remembers that Feng was under great pressure at that time. He even cried during the test screening since the project malfunctioned.

government-led marketisation. From the aforementioned scene of Yao Yuan's introduction, we can see that none of four employees were previously directors and Qian Kang who leads the fictional company was a screenwriter. The company bases the dream projects on consumers' requirements rather than on the employee's individual artistic pursuit. Reflected in Feng's filmmaking, the NYCFs' socially concerned content represents the filmmakers' artistic intention. Feng began his career as a successful screenwriter. Compared with other filmmakers such as the Fifth Generation directors, he had little formal, specialised education in filmmaking and little intention of artistic experimentation. This experience more easily allowed Feng's filmmaking to implement the 9550 project. It is worth noting that the cooperation with regulatory authorities aggravated the deficiency of critical intelligence in Feng's works, since he had to give priority to the films' political attribute and commerciality.

Feng's attention to market demands contributes to his collaboration with Huayi Brothers since making *Sorry Baby* in 1999. This collaboration set Feng free from the responsibility as producer, enabling him to focus on commercial exploration and social concern. Under this circumstance, the other two measures mentioned in *Party A*, namely, finding advertising sponsorship and working with real estate companies, were put into practice. Accompanying the establishment of CFG, the government gradually controlled the pace of the film industry's commericalisation. The filmmaking framework proposed at the Changsha Conference was consolidated; the requirement

of promoting main melody spirits was set up, and the whole film industry turned to accelerate commercialisation and further opened up to non-state capital. As Feng had already initiated commercial exploration with the support of official investment, the industry's new changes led his commercial filmmaking on to a new level at which was ahead of other film professionals. This competitive advantage allowed Feng and Huayi Brothers to undertake many bolder measures, such as introducing integrated marketing strategy into film production and promotion. From *Sorry Baby*, production placement is used widely in Feng's filmmaking. Taihe Property Company worked as an advertising sponsor and participated in the production of *Sigh* (2000). It then financed Huayi Brothers to merge as Huayi Taihe Corporation which produced Feng's next three NYCFs. [32] The ample and stable financial support from investors and sponsors allowed Feng to keep an eye on restoring the critical intelligence of his NYCFs, which worked in tandem with his commercial exploration to change the format of his filmmaking in the 2000s.

[32] The three films are *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001), *Cell Phone* (2003) and *A World Without Thieves* (2004). For more details, see Chapter 5.

Big Shot's Funeral: the Globalisation and Commercialisation of Feng's Filmmaking

As the first NYCF produced by Huayi Taihe, *Big Shot's Funeral* highlights the commercial change of Feng's filmmaking. Similar to *Party A*, this film self-reflexively represents the influence of the Chinese film industry's development on domestic film production. It depicts a freelance Chinese cinematographer Yoyo (played by Ge You), who asks his former colleague Louis Wang (played by Ying Da), the boss of a media company specialising in organising commercial shows, to plan a fake funeral for Tyler (played by Donald Sutherland), a fictional famous Hollywood director who intends to remake Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987). Partly due to his worry of how to make the film for the Chinese market, Tyler has a heart attack during the filming, and before falling into a coma, he asks Yoyo to plan a Chinese funeral for him. However, the funeral becomes an advertising show from the beginning of Yoyo and Wang's preparation, as Tyler does not offer funds and Wang aims to use it for promoting his own business. Most sections of the film revolve around representing how Yoyo and Wang seek investments and balance the requirements of advertising sponsors. Tyler's recovery upsets their planning, which leads Yoyo and Wang to be sent to a mental hospital as the advertising show's debt drives them insane. The film ends with a sequence where Tyler works with Yoyo to turn this experience into his new coproduction relating to China.

These three characters are the symbols of Chinese film professionals, domestic private film enterprises and foreign (mainly refers to Hollywood) film companies, respectively. The relations among them figuratively reflect the process of the Chinese film industry moving from marketisation towards commercialisation and globalisation at the turn of the century. As China joined the WTO, except for the domestic market, the Chinese film industry also turned its eyes towards overseas markets and sought international cooperation. Meanwhile, since China's film import quota doubled under the WTO agreements, foreign film companies showed enthusiasm for China's market and actively participated in China's domestic film production. *Big Shot's Funeral,* a collaboration of Columbia Pictures and Huayi Brothers in 2001, is a product of such cooperation.

With a focus on the three characters' identities, it can be seen that their relations also represent the change in form of the Sino-foreign film coproduction. The fictional relations correspond to the film's investment structure. They metaphorically indicate the division of labour between domestic and foreign film companies in the initial stage of the Chinese film industry's globalisation in the 2000s. In order to disentangle the characters' relations and comprehend their symbolic meanings, this chapter considers the film into three parts: Yoyo and Tyler's collaboration, Yoyo and Wang's preparation for the fake funeral, and the fake funeral event. In the first part, during their collaboration, the role of Yoyo changes from passive participant to positive organiser, but Tyler's influence always exists. From Yoyo's experience, the film

reveals the function of Chinese film professionals in the coproduction and influence of foreign companies and investment in domestic filmmaking. In the film, Wang and Tyler have no direct connection. Their cooperation is based on Yoyo's fake funeral project. This relation reflects a feature of the current coproduction, in that it was linked by popular domestic directors, for example, it is the excellent box-office performance of Feng's works that facilitated the cooperation between Columbia Picture and Huayi Brothers.[33] The fake funeral's practice displays the relation between Yoyo and Wang, which corresponds to the collaboration between Feng and Huayi Brothers. The measures that appear in the fictional funeral show are widely applied in Feng's subsequent NYCFs. From this point, *Big Shot's Funeral* is an experiment of Feng and Huayi Brothers' commercial filmmaking for which Columbia Picture provided sufficient investment.

Based on this division, this section of the chapter focuses on the film's self-reflexive comments on the domestic filmmaking in the context of China's entry to the WTO. It analyses how the Chinese film industry's commercialisation and globalisation affected domestic filmmaking from three aspects: the transformation of Sino-foreign coproduction, the interaction between domestic film enterprises and film professionals under such new coproduction form, and the consequent new forms of the commercial practices in domestic film production and promotion. In addition, this section highlights the function of domestic film professionals in the Sino-foreign

[33] See *Film Art*'s interview with Feng, Wang Zhongjun and Wang Zhonglei about *Big Shot's Funeral*, 2002, p. 47.

coproduction and their creative responses to negotiate the requirements of different investors and sponsors. Through these analyses, this section argues that the Chinese film industry's globalisation accelerates the commercialisation of Feng's filmmaking, while stable and sufficient private investments provide him with more room for expressing social concerns and further, positively pressurise him to carry out new commercial exploration. Different from his previous exploration, the new one needs to consider not only domestic but foreign film companies and various sponsors. This requirement makes the aforementioned measures, as used in *Big Shot's Funeral*, such as the integrated marketing strategy, more generally applicable and replicable. Accompanying the film's commercial success, these measures in turn promote the film industry's commercialisation, trigger domestic private film enterprises' awareness of industrialisation and facilitate the genre transition of Feng's NYCFs.

More specifically, as the representation of Feng's experience, *Big Shot Funeral* indicates that local popular narrative patterns are at the heart of the Sino-foreign cooperation in the early 2000s. The situation places Chinese film professionals in the dominant position in shooting coproduction. This coproduction mode is the common point at which domestic and foreign film companies explore each other's markets. The domestic film enterprises aim to use foreign companies' investment and experience to complete self-construction and improve international influence. As regards the foreign film companies, they aim to complete the localisation of their production by using local narrative patterns and participating in local filmmaking. With the exception of film

exports, the localised production can help them gain a new market share in China. Therefore, in the film, Wang and Tyler have different attitudes toward Yoyo's funeral show: Tyler regards it more as an experiment since he has no inspiration to make Chinese films; Wang intends to use the show and Tyler's fame to expand the influence of his company and make money.

LOCAL POPULAR NARRATIVE AND SINO-FOREIGN COOPERATION

In the film, Tyler's predicament of filmmaking and the transition of Yoyo's role in their relation represent the shape of Sino-foreign cooperation when China first joined the WTO. The film starts with a sequence in which Tyler is directing a childbirth scene for his remake of *The Last Emperor*. The actress works hard to play the role, but Tyler is unsatisfied since he has not yet found an appropriate way to visualise his idea. The design of remaking *The Last Emperor* and the 'cannot give birth' sequence metaphorically indicate the development of Sino-foreign coproduction, in which foreign film professionals need to follow the Chinese film industry' globalisation and adjust their filmmaking to fit the demands of China's market. *The Last Emperor* marks the beginning of coproduction between Chinese and 'Western' film industries, as it is the first Western feature film about China that gained the full support of the PRC Government (Dilley, 2015: 41). Remaking the film suggests that the coproduction steps on to a new stage. Many Chinese audiences are actually familiar with films like *The Last Emperor*, as they have more access to foreign films via such as governmental imports, online platforms, VCDs and DVDs in the 2000s.[34] Foreign film professionals need new creative thinking when involved in production of films that may be relevant to China. The 'cannot give birth' sequence manifests the dilemma that foreign film professionals encounter in seeking this creative thinking. According to Feng's explanation in an interview, Tyler's dissatisfaction is caused by the repetition

[34] Although some of these methods probably involve in piracy, but they definitely increase the chance for Chinese audience to contact with foreign films. *Big Shot's Funeral* also represents a scene of VCD piracy, which corresponds to this phenomenon and expresses Chinese film professionals' concern.

of the method used in making films with similar subject matter; he believes, no matter how well he shoots the film, he merely imitates the emperor's emotion (since he does not understand the Chinese society and culture) (2002:48). Combining Feng's words with the sequence, it can be seen that the basis of the new Sino-foreign cooperation from the perspective of foreign film companies, is to find a way to understand China's market.

The film uses Tyler's connection with Yoyo to correspond to Columbia Pictures' way of understanding China's market, which triggers the company's collaboration with Feng's NYCFs production. In the scene where Tyler walks with Yoyo and Lucy (his assistant played by Rosamund Kwan), Tyler comments that Bertolucci's portrayal of the emperor as a tragic figure gives more consideration to Western audiences, while the Chinese probably do not accept this. In order to validate this conjecture, he allows Lucy to ask Yoyo for his understanding of the emperor. Yoyo replies,

> Yoyo: No. The emperor is not tragic since he had so many beautiful wives. He lived a state-subsidized life, could stay with a different wife every night. I've only had one, who divorced me. I'm the tragic figure.
> Tyler: That's it. That's what ordinary Chinese people think of the emperor.

Yoyo's opinion of the emperor accords with Tyler's rethink of his remake, namely, using local perspective to make coproduction. The same thought leads Tyler to authorise Yoyo to plan a Chinese funeral for him. Their interaction parallels the collaboration between Feng and Columbia Pictures. After analysing the annual reports of the Chinese film industry, Columbia Pictures 'valued the prospect of Feng's

filmmaking since his films usually did quite well at the box office'; the company therefore invited Feng to make *Big Shot's Funeral* (Feng, Wang, Ge and Wang, 2002: 47). Feng attributes the commercial success of his NYCFs to two narrative principles, 'the affinity with ordinary people' and 'the fantasy for ordinary people' (Chen, 2004: 33). Therefore, it the factors which actually effect the collaboration can be seen as Feng's narrative perspective of ordinary people and his popular methods of local narrative. Working with Feng may be the quickest way to participate in or carry out Chinese domestic film production.

This emphasis on local narrative improves the status of Chinese film professionals in the Sino-foreign collaboration and further changes the collaboration's form. Through displaying Tyler's attitude towards Yoyo, the film subtly reflects this change. At the beginning, Yoyo is only allowed to sell his technical skills, shooting the process of how Tyler remakes *The Last Emperor* as a documentary. According to Lucy's requirements, Yoyo cannot express his opinion during the shooting, and has no copyright or the right to make final cuts to the documentary, just simply being 'a pair of eyeballs recording events'. At this stage, Tyler regards Yoyo more as employee rather than working partner. In the first half part of the walking scene, the film uses a long shot to visualise this relationship: Tyler is talking to Lucy, while Yoyo keeps a distance from them as an outsider and silently works to record (Figure 2.5). Lucy's rules and Yoyo's status evoke the initial phase of the Sino-foreign collaboration in the 1980s, when foreign film companies offered funds and dominated filmmaking

and the Chinese film industry provided assistance via China Film Co-Production Corporation (CFCC) such as offering sets and labour resources (Lin, 2010). Although Chinese film professionals were involved in the collaboration, they merely worked to implement their foreign counterparts' plan. Taking *The Last Emperor* as an example, except for allowing the film crew to use Forbidden City and offering a large amount of extras, the Chinese film industry had little influence on the production. Bertolucci and the film's producer Jeremy Thomas had the final word. The passive role of Chinese film professionals in the collaboration can be further confirmed from the Chinese film critics' comments on the film, which they regarded it as 'historical inaccuracy' and 'orientalist imagination' (Rony, 1988, Cui, 2009, and Bai and Hu, 2011). These comments of dissatisfaction indicate that the film's historical perspective is different from the common understanding of that in China, in that the film relies less on Chinese film professionals, since it is not made for China's market.



Figure 2.5: Yoyo is only allowed to record Tyler and Lucy's conversation in Big Shot's Funeral (Huayi Taihe and Columbia Pictures), 2001.

The form of the Sino-foreign collaboration changed when the Chinese film industry followed the wave of globalisation, using WTO agreements to accelerate its commercialisation. The Chinese film industry infuses foreign filmmaking ideas, investment and technology into the commercialisation of domestic film production; foreign film companies take the collaborative opportunity to deepen their localisation in making films of China. During the interplay between the two parties, Chinese film professionals become the prominent party in the collaboration. Correspondingly in the film, the change of Yoyo's status happens when he has consensus of filmmaking with Tyler. Since the walking scene, they become closer and quickly understand each other even without Lucy's translation. In their relationship, Yoyo's importance is not realised until he works with Louis Wang to turn the fake funeral into a commercial show. From Tyler's comments on Bertolucci's angle, 'appealing to the Western audience to make money', and his thinking of ordinary Chinese's reactions, the basis of their consensus is still profit-oriented. Tyler agrees to try Yoyo's angle due to his consideration of China's market. As for Yoyo, the consensus gives him a job which is similar to his previous profession. Tyler's authorisation consolidates Yoyo's domination in his cooperation with Wang. When Yoyo dissatisfies some advertising sponsors, Wang has to cancel their participation in the funeral show. However, Tyler does not offer any funds; it is Wang who figures out a solution, using Tyler's fame to raise money for the funeral. Therefore, we can see Yoyo's importance is created in the indirect interaction between Tyler and Wang. The angle of Chinese thinking makes Yoyo stand out. Tyler's support enables Yoyo and Wang to commercialise

their project and in turn, Wang's participation improves the value of Yoyo in implementing the project for Tyler. As a result of the negotiation among the three characters, Yoyo is very much at the heart of their relationships.

By representing the relationships, the film figuratively displays Feng's function in the collaboration between Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures. This reflects the coproduction pattern that had shifted to a form which Chinese film professionals dominated the filmmaking in the early 2000s. However, it does not mean that foreign film companies do not have disproportionate influence in coproduction. With investment, they draw the coproduction towards their strategic intent of localisation. For example, 'Columbia Pictures owned 70 percent proprietorship of *Big Shot's Funeral*, including copyright, distribution right and other rights to make use of the film, such as publishing advertisements' (Qiu, 2011). At that time, the government did not, yet grant distribution licenses to domestic private film companies. This engendered an advantage of distribution to Columbia Pictures which allowed the company to choose markets in which to release the film according to its own needs. In fact, the film never played in North American cinema chains (ibid.). It was mainly made for China's market, in accord with the company's localisation strategy of filmmaking. *Big Shot's Funeral* pictures this influence with a *tiaokan* tone, describing how Tyler lives in hospital but can still supervise the process of Yoyo's funeral show. Yoyo is allowed to plan the funeral based on his personal preference; however, the funeral depends on whether Tyler continues to feign illness. Therefore, when Tyler leaves hospital, all the

advertising sponsors of the funeral come to Yoyo for compensation. Tyler pays the compensation and transfers most of Yoyo's planning ideas into his new film about China. This means that Tyler not only has the last word with the funeral show but also gains ownership of it, or, borrowing Zhang Yinjing's words, he is 'the real authority who pulls strings behind the puppet show' (2008: 19). Tyler's deeds metaphorically indicate the foreign film companies' latent controlling influence on the new Sino-foreign collaboration. Their support for Chinese film professionals' free creation therefore can be read as a negotiated way to integrate in domestic filmmaking.

As regards foreign film companies, localising filmmaking relies on domestic film professionals' experience, their understanding of the Chinese film industry, and their connection with regulatory authority. According to Courtney Brannon Donoghue, Sony uses a strategy of flexible localisation, in which '[its] local offices benefit from these collaborations because of their partners' on-the-ground knowledge and professional relationships, and insider knowledge helps with identifying material and developing partnerships that work within the cultural and economic context for a particular market' (2014: 11). As part of Sony, Columbia Pictures also implemented this strategy in making *Big Shot's Funeral* with Feng. The film projects Feng's experience of using on-the-ground knowledge onto the character Yoyo's operation of product placement. Yoyo intends to include an advertisement for '666' cigarettes in the funeral show (Figure 2.6). However, it is against the regulation 'Temporary Regulations on Tobacco Advertisement' which prohibits tobacco commercials in broadcast, film, television,

newspaper and magazine.[35] As a previous employee of a state-owned studio, Yoyo definitely knows the regulation and countermeasures. He sophisticatedly adds a banner into the advertisement, 'no smoking at the funeral, and that includes 666', which turns it into a public service announcement that the government welcomes. In this way, Yoyo ensures the funeral show's distribution.



Figure 2.6: Yoyo uses his on-the-ground knowledge to plant the advertisement of '666' cigarettes at the funeral in Big Shot's Funeral (Huayi Taihe and Columbia Pictures), 2001.

Yoyo's countermeasures reflect Feng's way of thinking when he introduces elements which may cause trouble with regulatory authorities, such as taboo and legally prohibited subjects, into filmmaking. He creatively uses the ambiguity of laws and regulations to represent these subjects for investors and sponsors' interest. This sanctioned method can be regarded as 'creative compliance', a term coined by Robert Baldwin and Martin Cave, denoting 'a process whereby those regulated avoid having to break the rules and do so by circumventing the scope of a rule while still breaching the spirit the rule' (1999: 103). In *Big Shot's Funeral*, Feng's creative compliance is embodied in the design of the sequence in which the funeral is converted into a parade of advertisements. Although some brands in the sequence

[35] The regulation was issued by the State Administration of Industry and Commerce in 1996.

are fictional, their images and slogans are easily associated with the existing companies such as Coca Cola and Wahaha Group, the largest beverage enterprise in China. These companies did not sponsor the film project or allow Feng to use their brands and product images (*Jiangnan Times*, 2011), therefore, this sequence may constitute trademark infringement, which may, in turn, impede the film's distribution and result in commercial failure. In order to avoid this situation, Feng humorously renames these brands in the sequence, such as changing Coca Cola as Crazy Cola and Wahaha as Lehaha, indicating that this behaviour is not proper by displaying the character Yoyo's reluctance when he is doing so (Figure 2.7). The film sets a condition that Yoyo knows Lehaha is a counterfeit of Wahaha, but still has to leave it an advertising space since the Lehaha Company threatens to sabotage the funeral. This operation embodies Feng's use of on-the-ground knowledge in the film. There is no difference in the way that Yoyo deals with the advertisement of '666' cigarettes, that is, to achieve the representation of legally prohibited subjects by way of criticising their incorrectness. As a result, this operation enables the film to use publicly familiar brand images to construct the sequence, which gives a consideration to both commercial activities and the government's regulation of them.



Figure 2.7: The advertisements of Cozy Cola and Le Haha in Big Shot's Funeral (Huayi Taihe and Columbia Pictures), 2001.

COMMERCIALISING DOMESTIC FILM PRODUCTION UNDER GLOBAL COLLABORATION

In addition to the development of the Sino-foreign collaboration, *Big Shot's Funeral* also visualises the commercialisation of Chinese domestic film production in the context of global collaboration, by depicting the motivation of Yoyo and Louis Wang's coalition and consequent division of labour in the funeral project. In the film, after accepting Tyler's funeral authorisation, Yoyo directly contacts Wang, who is good at organising big commercial shows. Yoyo used to work in a state-owned studio's photography department, however, was dismissed due to institutional restructuring in 1993. This experience endows Yoyo with strong commercial awareness in his job, for example, he asks Lucy to pay for the extra work he has done in explaining the Chinese cultural concept. By comparison, Wang's commercial thinking is more explicit. He includes advertisements in his shows and even organises benefits for relief efforts to earn money. Thus, it is this similar self-employment experience and commercial awareness that lead to Yoyo and Wang's collaboration. The two reasons echo the factors that trigger Feng's collaboration with Huayi Brothers. Early in 1994 when Good Dream Film Company launched his first film *Gone Forever with My Love*, Feng had already displayed his awareness of commercial filmmaking. In an interview about the film, he expressed, 'I'll continue to follow the path of making commercial films and at the same time bring delicate designs of art-house films into commercial filmmaking' (Yu, 1995: 16). This idea opposes the mainstream view within

the Chinese film industry of the 1980s which dismissed commercial films as a sign of cultural vulgarity (Rao, 2008: 7). However, as it accorded with the industry's reform in the 1990s, Feng's commercial awareness actually gained official encouragement and was embodied as the market-oriented production of NYCFs. These films' high box-office receipts attracted Huayi Brothers' attention. According to Li Haixia, at that time, the company was 'eagerly looking for cooperation with profitable directors in order to raise its profile and expand its market share' (2006: 57). Participating in Feng's NYCF projects is an inevitable choice based on their common understanding of commercial film production.

Feng and Huayi Brothers' collaboration demonstrates the progress of the domestic film production's commercialisation in the early 2000s. The combination of film professionals and private capital propels domestic filmmaking towards profit-oriented production. It shapes a new collaborative pattern that binds professional producers (film production companies) with a particular well-known or bankable director. In the late 1990s, this kind of pattern had appeared in Zhang Yimou's collaboration with the Beijing New Picture Film Company. However, their collaboration was small in scale and temporary, for particular film projects (Lei and Ding, 2010: 44).[36] As to Feng and Huayi Brothers, their collaboration was established in 2000 when 'Huayi Brothers swapped its shares for the ownership of Feng's studio'

[36]After *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006), Zhang suspended filmmaking and prepared for the 2008 Olympics' opening ceremony. Beijing New Picture accordingly closed its business (Qiu, 2011). This situation also reflects that the combination of Zhang Yimou and Beijing New Picture actually has little influence on others, especially on those that were formed after 2005.

(Today Morning Express, 2014). *Big Shot's Funeral* becomes the first film produced through this collaboration. Compared with the collaborative pattern of Zhang Yimou and Beijing New Picture Film Company, the partnership of Feng and Huayi Brothers is long lasting, thoroughly commercialised and more influential. Consequently, Feng's films continued with strong box-office performance since 2001, which therefore exemplified this pattern for other film professionals to emulate. Many similar collaborations emerged after 2005, such as Chen Kaige and China Film Group, Ning Hao and China Film Group, and Jiang Wen with Polybona Films (Qiu, 2011). In this sense, Feng and Huayi Brothers' collaboration not only conforms to the situation in which the Chinese film industry developed commercial filmmaking, but also in turn accelerates the progress.

The collaborative pattern's advantage is specialisation and efficiency caused by its division of labour. By displaying Yoyo and Wang's duties in planning Tyler's funeral, *Big Shot's Funeral* actually represents how the pattern works in implementing film projects. In the film, Yoyo undertakes the task of funeral design and leads a crew to put his ideas into practice. Wang uses Tyler's fame to attract sponsorship, and also connects technological support and provides personnel for the funeral. As Tyler does not offer funding to Yoyo, Wang actually holds a concurrent post of producer and investor. This division of labour results in an assembly line-like work method. For example, Wang brings the advertising sponsors to Yoyo; the latter then works to find a way to insert their products into the funeral and balance their different requirements.

This coordination accelerates the progress of planning the fake funeral, which enables Yoyo and Wang to complete the project during Tyler's short hospital stay. Correspondingly, the mechanism of Feng and Huayi Brothers' collaboration is similar. Feng concentrates on making films, while Huayi Brothers works as producer and investor to offer support. This close collaboration guarantees the quantity and efficiency of Feng's NYCF production. During the 2000s, Feng launched almost one film per year, most of which were made within only two months.[37]

This division of labour boosts the development of domestic film production. Accompanying the development, private film companies introduce many operational approaches used in other media areas or in other film industries. This introduction enriches the ways of commercial filmmaking in China and promotes domestic private film enterprises to step into industrialisation. In the film, Wang borrows the approaches of organising commercial shows such as advertising sponsorship and integrated marketing to make the funeral. He suggests Yoyo sells the funeral's advertising spaces for initial capital, and at the same time brings his cooperative partners into the sale, for example, Wang gives the funeral's broadcasting rights to his friend who promises to pay the satellites' rent. Meanwhile, he asks Yoyo to leave some advertising space on the hearse truck for a music company which is a business contact of Wang's; in exchange, the company sends its signed singer Xue Cun to

[37] For examples, Feng started shooting *Big Shot's Funeral* in April and finished in June 2001. His next NYCF *Cell Phone* was initiated in March and completed in May 2003. The duration of making *A World Without Thieves* was also from April to June in 2004.

perform at the funeral for free (Figure 2.8).[38] Thus, Wang binds the funeral project with other companies' merchandising, including his own business, which covers investment and achieves the sharing of promotional resources. These deeds are the reflection of Huayi Brothers' operations in producing Feng's NYCFs. The predecessor of Huayi Brothers is an advertising company which also acts as an agent of BMW automobile. Since their collaboration began in 1999, Huayi Brothers has used product placement to cover the cost of Feng's filmmaking, for example, the advertising revenue of *Sorry Baby* is 15 million RMB (2.2 million USD), which is nearly double the investment of Huayi Brothers, with 8 million RMB (1.17 million USD) (Li, 2006: 57 and Lei, 2010: 4). The image of BMW automobile frequently appears in Feng's NYCFs in the 2000s. In other words, Huayi Brothers integrates Feng's filmmaking into its other business interests and collaborations, which displays the tendency of industrialising domestic film production.

[38] The film subtitles demonstrates that the singer's name is Li Nan, not Xue Cun that Yoyo and Wang actually talk about. The song is called 'Don't Come Back', the theme music of a fictional popular television series, *Cannot Close Eyes* (*Yong bu biyan*). Considering Feng's operation of parody, Li Nan probably refers to Sun Nan, a popular singer who had sung theme songs for Feng's NYCFs many times. He has a song with similar name, called 'You Come Back', a theme song of the television series, *Never Close the Eye*. (*Yong bu mingmu*, dir. Zhao Baogang, 1998). As to Xue Cun, he really exists who became popular after performed at the 2001 Spring Festival Gala. As *Big Shot's Funeral* was released at the end of 2001, using the name 'Xue Cun' in the film's dialogue is more easily to attract audiences' attention, which again reflects Feng and Huayi Brothers' commercial awareness of filmmaking.



Figure 2.8: Wang asks Yoyo to leave an adverting space on the hearse truck for his business partner in Big Shot's Funeral (Huayi Taihe and Columbia Pictures), 2001.

This tendency suggests that Huayi Brothers had begun to regard the Chinese film industry as a commercial business in the early 2000s. One manifestation is that the company continued to seek opportunities to establish its own industrial chain of film production since cooperating with Columbia Pictures.[39] *Big Shot's Funeral* uses comical sequence to represent the tendency. Tyler's recovery hits both Yoyo and Wang hard. They go insane and are sent to mental hospital. With a long take, the film first depicts a scene of suspense in which characters discuss the economic prospect of China and the progress of different industries, such as the market potential of television and film industries, the development strategy of online business, and the prediction of housing price. The characters all wear red gowns, while the place looks like a business club. Then, following the camera's movement, the characters start to talk themselves and many hospital beds appear on screen: these people are actually

[39] Under the influence of Columbia Picture, Huayi Brothers always tended to build a media corporation which covers the sectors of film production, distribution and exhibition. For more details, see Chapter 5.

patients (Figure 2.9). Nevertheless, their discussions are reasonable and foresighted. These ideas not only reflect the awareness of commercialisation and industrialisation in various fields in China, but this also came true several years after the film's release.[40] In the sequence, Yoyo wears a blue gown and Wang, red. Considering that Yoyo malingers, this colour distinction assorts Wang into the same category of the aforementioned patients. In other words, the film suggests that the media trade that Wang works on is a kind of industry, just like the ones that other patients belong to. The darker gown worn by the patients depicts the more serious condition they are in, and their stronger awareness of industrialisation. This *tiaokan* figuratively indicates the contribution of Huayi Brothers and other domestic private film enterprises to the development of the Chinese film industry's industrialisation. In 2002, one year after the film was released, the government proposed the idea of developing cultural industries. Since 2003, both film authorities and film professionals generally recognised the commercial attribute of filmmaking. Consequently, many domestic big pictures (*da pian*) emerged on to the market, which indirectly expanded the genres and the connotation of NYCFs. From this point of view, the collaboration of domestic private and foreign film companies at the turn of the century created or facilitated the awareness of industrialisation, which drove Chinese film production into more commercial forms.

[40] For examples, the characters mention that online business relies on clicks that can be increased by creating stunts, while the housing price should rise to 2000 USD per square metre. In fact, using hype has already become one of main marketing strategies of many online business platforms. All the first and second (even many third and fourth) tier cities' housing price had greatly exceeded the standard the film predicts.



Figure 2.9: The patients in mental hospital are discussing the economic prospect of China; Yoyo who pretends to be mad wears a blue gown (top left), while Wang who actually goes insane wears red gown (top middle) in Big Shot's Funeral (Huayi Taihe and Columbia Pictures), 2001.

INTEGRATED MARKETING STRATEGY AND PRODUCTION PLACEMENT

Partly due to the need for constructing its own industrial chain, Huayi Brothers becomes the first to introduce the integrated marketing strategy into filmmaking. *Big Shot's Funeral* represents the strategy's specific operations. The funeral planning sequence can be regarded as a self-reflexivity of the filmmaking process, just as Feng suggested in an interview with Yomi Braester, 'isn't [the funeral] the same as making a movie' (2005: 558). Most of these operations are actually used in producing the film itself and Feng's subsequent NYCFs such as *Cell Phone*, *A World Without Thieves* and *The Banquet*. Therefore, the film's fictional funeral planning may be considered as an experiment of the integrated marketing strategy. It allows Huayi Brothers and Feng to rehearse the commercial approaches of film promotion and product placement on a large scale, without worrying about market response. The film already sets a tone of the planning sequence as a farce, mocking the combination of funeral and commercial activities. With this *tiaokan*, Huayi Brothers and Feng prevent the potential accusations of abusing product placement since they critique these operations first.

In the film, the test first appears in the scene of Wang's auction, a preparatory stage of the funeral. The auction aims to attract as much attention as possible in order to gain investment and sponsorship. It therefore uses emotional and dramatic methods to produce sensational effects. Wang requires a live global streaming of the

auction, making it as an international event. He asks Yoyo to give a very brief introduction which mainly works to emphasise that Yoyo is the only one who has Tyler's authorisation. Wang then spends the rest of the time selling the funeral's advertising space (Figure 2.10). During the process, Yoyo suddenly becomes furious, when he notices one of the successful bidders is a VCD player production company that specialises in selling pirated films. He cancels the bidder's qualification and yells to the media on the scene, 'although selling the funeral's advertising spaces is not ethically suitable, we at least earn our own living, unlike the pirates who gain profits by stealing from others without shame'. This deed not only arouses people's attention to piracy but also causes a fierce debate about the funeral project. This public debate spreads the information of Wang's preparation, attracting too many product placements to advertise in the funeral. From the effects it creates, the auction is like a press conference before film professionals shoot particular film projects. Yoyo's dramatic deed can be regarded as a public stunt that suddenly occurs during the film press conference, setting an agenda to maintain the project's visibility and media buzz.



Figure 2.10: Wang and Yoyo are holding an auction to sell the funeral's advertising spaces in Big Shot's Funeral (Huayi Taihe and Columbia Pictures), 2001.

Correspondingly, the approaches of holding a press conference and executing public stunts are frequently used in Huayi Brothers' promotion of Feng's NYCFs. At the early stage of Feng's NYCF career, the promotion approaches mainly appeared in the forms of meet-and-greet event and premiere (Cheng and Zhang, 2008: 58). During these activities, Feng sometimes proactively mentioned and defended the commercial attributes of his filmmaking, creating a topic for debate. Since *Big Shot's Funeral*, the promotion of Feng's NYCFs put an increasing emphasis on sensational effect. This becomes good at turning accidental events into public stunts for the films. For example, Huayi Brothers held the premiere of *Big Shot's Funeral* at the Cultural Palace of Nationalities, a Beijing landmark, and made the film a fashionable must-see (ibid.). The company launched a lavish red-carpet premiere for *A World Without Thieves* at Beijing Exhibition Hall, in which 'Feng and his sizzling group of movie stars paraded through an army of media people and screaming fans, staging a spectacle

copied straight from Hollywood's playbook' (Li, 2009: 236). Accompanying the premiere was a charity auction that sold the film's properties, such as the actor Andy Liu's costumes; meanwhile, Huayi Brothers applied many novel promotional ideas, for example, following the film's story, it rented a train that was named as 'A World Without Thieves' to carry the whole cast, sponsor representatives and fans to attend the premiere in Hong Kong (*The Beijing News*, 2004). For *Cell Phone*, in addition to the press conference, the company seized upon the similarities between the film's protagonist Yan Shouyi and a real famous host Cui Yongyuan, and Cui's criticisms of the film, to successfully draw media attention. Some online media like Sina even launched a special column to trace the event's progress.[41] Similarly, when promoting *The Banquet*, Huayi Brothers highlighted that the film would participate in the contest for submission to the U.S.-based Academy Awards, and revealed Feng's competition with Zhang Yimou for the government's nomination. These examples show that Huayi Brothers' approaches to film promotion basically follow the methods of operation that the character Wang uses in planning Tyler's funeral, that is, before or during the films' release, using novel forms or scandals to causes a sensation which subsequently warms up the market.

In addition, *Big Shot's Funeral* demonstrates the other two operations of

[41] In *Cell Phone*, the protagonist Yan has a talk show called 'Talk It Like It is'. Either from the perspective of name or of form, this fictional show is similar to Cui's TV talk show. Admittedly, this similarity is nothing wrong. However, in the film, the protagonist Yan quits his job and gives it to his mistress who uses their scandal to threaten him. Coincidently, in reality, Cui also left his position, while his replacement was a female. This coincidence made the public and media associate the two things together, which bothered Cui a lot. He therefore disputed with Feng, questioning the motivation of Feng's filmmaking. Sina launched a special column called 'Cui Yongyuan's Criticisms on Feng Xiaogang'. Nowadays, this event's aftereffect still exists.

integrated marketing strategy: tie-in promotion and product placement. The tie-in promotion is a form of cross marketing, 'a joint promotion of two or more products or services' (Kaser, 2013: 304). According to Charles Lubbers and William Adams, the tie-ins actually indicate the 'partnerships developed with other organizations that are designed to promote both of the organizations' (2004: 60). In film industry, these partnerships are built on resource sharing between film companies and other enterprises. The enterprises incorporate film promotion into their own merchandising; thus, they 'get to associate their products with films' (Marich, 2013: 147). In the film, when Wang uses the funeral to develop his own business, many operations of tie-in promotion are formed in the process, such as the aforementioned examples of renting satellites and getting Xue Cun's performance for free. His measures bind the funeral project, his business and partnerships together, into a community of shared interests. These measures are widely used in promoting Feng's subsequent NYCFs. Taking *Cell Phone* as an example, Huayi Brothers allied with the catalogue retailer Gome, which repeatedly played the film clips in Gome stores; in return, Feng, Ge You and other actors attended the book signing events that were held in these stores, while Gome was permitted to use the film to implement other promotion activities, such as one called 'Buy Gome Electrical Appliances, Get Film Tickets' (Zhou, 2006). Regarding *The Banquet*, the film was combined with a broadcast programme of the Football World Cup called 'Grand Banquet' (*haomen shengyan*) in which 'the scenes of football matches intercut with the film's clips' (Liu, 2006). This operation 'not only gave television audiences access to *The Banquet* in advance, warming up for the

film's release; but also attracted people who want to watch the film's clips to go watching the broadcast programme and raised its audience ratings' (Cheng and Zhang, 2008: 59). The resource sharing achieves small cost in exchange for an effective and efficient promotion, creating a win-win situation both for the film and the broadcast programme.

Compared with tie-ins, product placement is mainly used to cover the cost of filmmaking. Through purchasing the advertising spaces of films, sponsors involve themselves in the film productions in order to expose their products, brand images and other trademarks in the films. The films themselves do not build any direct association with these products and brands. This type of combination is a unidirectional communication, a purchasing behaviour, rather than resource sharing action. As a self-reflexivity of the filmmaking process, *Big Shot's Funeral* reflects Feng's principles of using product placement by portraying the character Yoyo's countermeasures to the sponsors' needs and requirements. In the film, Yoyo insists on working with famous brands, such as those in the top 500 companies worldwide. In his eyes, these brands match Tyler's reputation; more importantly, only this kind of collaboration can address a strong-strong ally (*qiangqiang lianhe*), making the funeral well known. When putting this idea into practice, Yoyo also emphasises the compatibility between the advertised products and the funeral. He tries to include advertisements in the funeral without breaking its theme. For instance, he accepts a furniture advertisement since beds and other items are necessary for the funeral, or in

his explanation, 'anyhow, we need to put Tyler's body somewhere'. From this point of view, the furniture advertisement can be considered as a story-point product placement that fits in to the funeral's planning. Introducing famous brands and using story-point product placement are common techniques in Feng's NYCFs. Only for *Big Shot's Funeral*, are many products of popular brands inserted, such as SunRun Beauty Cream and Outback Steakhouse, in the sequence of funeral planning (Figure 2.11). As the sequence is to display the process of Yoyo implementing product placements, Feng's advertising inclusion does not break with the film's narrative. These real brands mix with the fictional ones to become advertising sponsors of Yoyo's funeral project. This creative operation solves fund demand and the integrity of narrative structure, and further, responds to the dissenting voice of commercial filmmaking in the early 2000s.



Figure 2.11: SunRuan Beauty Cream (left) and Outback Steakhouse (right) are the companies that really exist and sponsor the film Big Shot's Funeral.

Using story-driven product placement gradually becomes Feng's signature style, which evolves into a narrative mode featuring commercial aesthetics.[42] The increased amount of product placement leads advertising sponsors to be more and

[42] For more about the narrative mode, see my Chapter 5.

more influential on Feng's filmmaking. Through interacting with their requirements, Feng's NYCFs develop into more high-concept films, with simple story themes, appealing forms and comprehensive merchandising. *Big Shot's Funeral* also concretises the influence of sponsors, symptomising the transformation of Feng's filmmaking in the 2000s. Again, in the sequence of funeral planning, when facing so many sponsors, Yoyo has to make full use of every place of Tyler's body to coordinate different advertisement releases (Figure 2.12). He uses a dummy to represent Tyler and dresses it with shorts and tank top of one brand, puts a trainer on its left foot and a leather shoe on right, makes it wear a pair of sunglasses but takes out one lens, leaving the place for a brand of contact lenses. Moreover, Yoyo lets the dummy hold a tea bag in its mouth and sprinkles soot over half of its hair, leaving the other half to display a shampoo's anti-dandruff effect. In order to satisfy a sponsor's requirement, he even orders the band to speed up the pace of dirge, which turns it into a cheerful rhythm that better suits the advertised product's brand name with a happy meaning. Thus, using product placement no longer works to collect investment to support the funeral, rather, it makes the solemn ceremony become a carnival of advertisements. In other words, advertising sponsors dominate the project's production, which leads to the conditions that Mark Crispin Miller identifies, 'the transfer of creative authority out of the hands of filmmaking professionals and into the purely quantitative universe of the CEOs' (1990: 198). For this reason, it is easy to understand why the topics of Yoyo's project and its counterpart, Feng's NYCFs, are both simple and concise: with more complicated themes, film professionals can hardly find a balance between

product placement and narrative effectively.

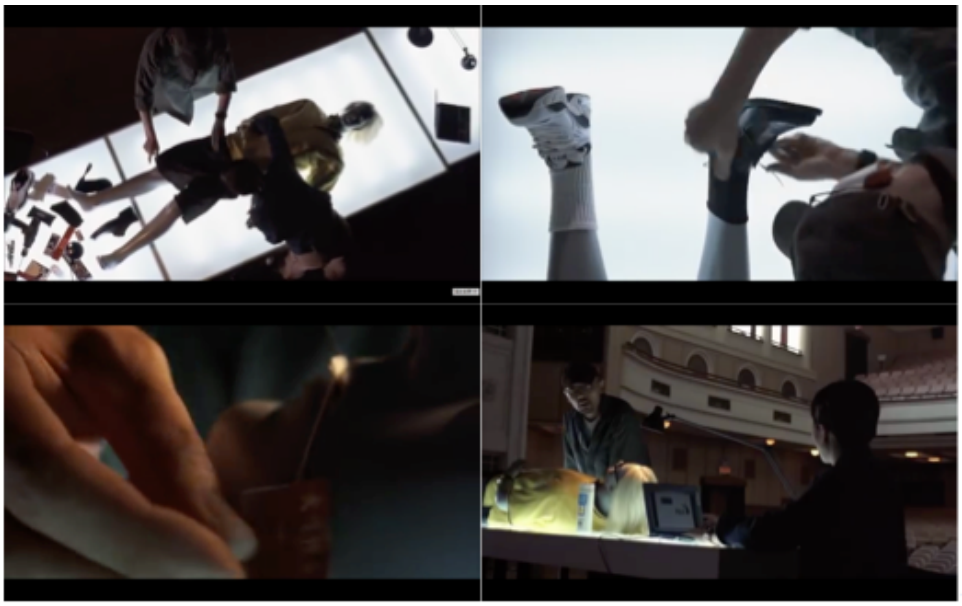


Figure 2.12: Yoyo makes full use of every place of the dummy to plug in advertisements in Big Shot's Funeral (Huayi Taihe and Columbia Pictures), 2001.

Similar to Yoyo's experience, Feng also coordinates the advertising sponsors' requirements. His filmmaking tends to rely more on product placement after *Big Shot's Funeral*. This reliance in turn aggravates the difficulty in Feng's coordination. In an interview of the CCTV-2 programme in 2005, Feng expressed this predicament, 'if a film's budget was over 80 million, I just don't know what the film would look like, just imagine how many advertisements I would have to find a place for' (Zhang, 2008: 143). Moreover, the extensive use of product placement is the source of much public criticism. Many audiences mocked the film *Cell Phone* as an advertising show of Motorola (Yu, 2011), while *If You Are The One* was dubbed as a two-hour-long joint advertising programme (Entgroup, 2011). Some film professionals jokingly nominated Feng as the CEO of the product placement business in the Chinese film industry (Liu,

2013). However, this criticism also benefits the film industry, leading domestic film professionals to obtain more funding sources beyond government support. Many of them accepted this approach and used it in filmmaking, such as Xu Jinglei's *Go Lala Go* (*dulala shengzhi ji*, 2010) and Go Qunshu's *Wind Blast* (*xifeng lie, 2010*). With these examples, some previous opponents such as Pang Ho-Cheung changed their attitude and also joined in using product placement (Liu, 2011). This tendency even attracted the attention of SARFT in 2011, which considered making regulations to guide and manage the development of the application of product placement.[43] Therefore, it can be said that the commercialisation of Feng's NYCF productions contributed to the wider commercialization, and in turn, the sustainability of the Chinese film industry.

[43] According to the heated discussion of using product placement, in 2011, Zhang Haitao, the vice-director of SARFT, expressed that the government was preparing for issuing regulations, in order to supervise this operation as soon as possible.

Conclusion

Party A, Party B and *Big Shot's Funeral* reflect the synchrony between the development of Feng's filmmaking and the progress of the Chinese film industry from the 1990s to the early 2000s, which correspond to the industry's market-oriented reform, its commercialisation under the increasing global coproduction and the subsequent tendency of industrialisation. These two films were made at important moments in the industry's progress, in which Feng adjusted his filmmaking and sought new collaborations according to the new economic and regulatory environment in China. In response to the Changsha Conference in 1997, he chose to work with the government-sponsored Forbidden City Company to make *Party A,* which initiated his NYCF production. The release of *Big Shot's Funeral* in 2001 consolidated his collaboration with the domestic private film company, Huayi Brothers, and facilitated the new form of Sino-foreign coproduction. Through these two films' self-reflexive comments, Feng's filmmaking steps towards commercialisation. This commercialisation is politically sanctioned; it is built on the government's guidance and develops under the framework of political promotion.

With a self-employment story, *Party A* visualises the establishment of the commercial keynote of Feng's NYCF production. The story figuratively represents the interaction between Feng's filmmaking and the government's influence. The 1993 market-oriented reform engendered the formation of his filmmaking's commercial

attribute. The Changsha Conference in 1996 required domestic commercial filmmaking to give priority to political promotion. Feng's collaboration with Forbidden City indicates that he accepted the mode of government-led commercialisation. This compromise brings both financial and administrative support, allowing Feng to focus on commercial exploration. Thus, Feng's filmmaking has competitive advantage compared with others. As a result, his NYCFs usually gain strong box-office performance, facilitating his subsequent collaboration with domestic private and foreign film companies in the 2000s.

Big Shot's Funeral makes a series of self-reflexive comments on the competitive advantage and its functions in global collaboration. This advantage enables Feng to dominate filmmaking in global collaboration. He works as a pivot to connect Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures. The global collaboration brings funding, technology and marketing approaches, further expanding the competitive advantage of Feng's filmmaking on the path of commercialisation. Meanwhile, the complicated investment structure puts forward new requirements in the way Feng balances the interests of different investors and sponsors. These requirements gradually propel Feng's filmmaking towards a high-concept mode, which becomes one factor that engenders the genre transformation of Feng's NYCFs in the 2000s. From this development of Feng's filmmaking, the government's involvement is an indispensable factor, in the sense that the domestic commercial filmmaking is set under the framework of promoting (or at least maintaining) main melody spirits. Feng's filmmaking subtly uses

the framework to achieve commercial representation of taboo subjects. Further, it uses a critical tone to bring these sensitive but socially concerned subjects to the big screen. This creative operation is the result of the negotiation between Feng's filmmaking and regulatory authority, which is explored in depth in the next chapter with a focus on two more of Feng's NYCFs, *Sorry Baby* and *If You Are The One*.

Chapter 3 *Sorry Baby* and *If You Are the One*: Regulatory Authority and Creative Compliance

Introduction

With its influence, film has been used as a propaganda tool for a long time in China, especially after 1949 when the PRC was established. Beginning in the late 1980s, the government invested in producing making main melody films relating to the Chinese revolution from the 1920s to 1949 along with the anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign initiated in 1987, to weight the Party's importance in the increasingly expanded economic reform. Accompanying the reform's progression, the government's management of media industries moves from authoritarian supervision towards hegemonic intervention, in which the Party's legitimacy gains consolidation alongside these industries' commercial development. Under this situation, the connotation of main melody spirits expands and displays a humanising tendency since the mid-1990s, which leads the subjects of main melody films to be no longer limited to revolutionary history but cantain people's everyday experiences as well as leads the production of this genre to be more commercialisation by strengthening the collaboration with domestic and overseas private film companies. The changes displays the development of the Party's regulatory means, in which it begins to rely on state apparatus and uses regulations to manage film business, for example, according to the 1996 film regulations and 1997 censoring rule, the Film Review

Committee bans many film professionals' works including Feng's, pushing them to work with the government to make main melody films under the 9550 project.

With the project's dual mission of political education and industrial recovery, the film professionals' cooperative attitude and the film regulations' ambiguity jointly make conditions for Feng and other filmmakers to address sensitive subjects. In the late 1990s, the project entered its final phase, in which private investment participated in the government-guided filmmaking. From Feng's contemporaneous NYCF *Sorry Baby*, we can see this participation facilitates commercialising the 9550 project and Feng's filmmaking begins to involve violent and sexual subjects but in a creative and appraisable way such as the representation of comical kidnapping and sexual innuendo in the film. In response to the Chinese Film industry's globalisation in the 2000s, the government adjusted film regulations in 2006, which added detailed provisions to emphasise main melody spirits, and relaxed supervision on certain taboo subjects such as sex, violence and superstition by removing the related interpretation clauses. Feng's filmmaking adapted to the change again and launched *If You Are The One* two years later. The film revolves a series of blind dates, interweaving several previous taboo subjects such as extramarital affairs, homosexual images and premarital pregnancy.

Focusing on these two NYCFs, this chapter uses film texts, cultural and political policies, film regulations and interviews to explore the engagement of regulatory

authority in Feng's production of NYCFs. It focuses on Feng's treatment of sensitive subjects including taboo and socially concerned subjects, revealing how regulatory authority shapes domestic commercial filmmaking and how film professionals react. Through analysing the interaction, this chapter identifies the dual function of regulatory authority in the development of contemporary Chinese commercial cinema; this authority stimulates the film industry's commercialisation but supervises the progress, leading it to consolidate the Party's cultural hegemony. Regulatory authority is a form of cultural authority, which legitimises the concrete existence of cultural authority and maintains its domination in shaping the formation of mainstream culture. The 'regulatory authority' here refers more to its concrete form, administrative bodies, including propaganda institutions, censorship and the organisations that undertake both functions of political promotion and censorship, e.g. SAPPRFT, its subsidiaries and the relevant entities such as state-owned studios. These institutions are usually intertwined in terms of mechanism, while their responsibilities often overlap. The complicated mechanism system and division of responsibilities further confirm the role of regulatory authority in managing domestic filmmaking as both the constitutor and adjudicator of film regulations.

Based on these investigations, this chapter argues that Feng's filmmaking parallels with and even proactively executes political promotion plans, while this cooperation enables his filmmaking to use the film regulations' ambiguity and changes to present sensitive subjects in commercially viable ways. This response is

not totally submissive, since it carries Feng's social concern about the subjects, forming a creative but sanctioned representation mode. This creative compliance accords with the filmmaking framework in which regulatory authority infuses political promotion into commercial film production. Following the Chinese film industry's commercialisation and the Party's humanised adjustment to main melody spirits, Feng accordingly improves his way of using creative compliance. From the late 1990s to 2000s, Feng and collaborators internalise political promotion projects and regulations in their filmmaking, such as giving more attention to represent previous taboo subjects, especially those that widely arouse public debate. Partly for expanding the market and simultaneously meeting film regulations, these representations are in apparently neutral ways, without explicit judgment.

This series of changes can be seen in the use of sensitive subjects from *Sorry Baby* to *If You Are The One*. *Sorry Baby* puts political promotion at the forefront and then gives consideration to commercial demands. It depicts a story of a driver who implements a fake kidnapping to ask for unpaid salary in order to save his comatose sister. The film's agenda of filial piety and goodness is in accordance with the main melody spirits that the 9550 project seeks to promote. Under this framework, the subversiveness of representing taboo subjects related to social order is undercut, since these representations are in lightly comic tone which makes the content palatable, particularly to the Party. Meanwhile, in these representations such as the one of kidnapping, it is the kidnapped who organises the 'crime', which therefore does

not ruin the moral image of the protagonist, the driver. Instead, the film uses the kidnapping's failure to underline the correctness of the protagonist's adherence to morals and ethics which finally helps him to get the salary. From here, one can see that through its creative combination of promoting main melody spirits and using taboo subjects, the film is able to circumvent the scope of film regulations to represent such censored subjects.

As for *If You Are The One*, the film internalises the promotion of the harmonious society policy in filmmaking and synchronously pays more attention to involving new released taboo subjects into the film's storyline. It tells a story of an overseas returnee's blind dating experiences. The theme of *If You Are The One* proactively responds to the core agenda of the harmonious society policy, i.e. being honest. In terms of using sensitive subjects, the film straightforwardly represents them, without explicit moral judgment and preaching. For example, it displays extramarital affairs and homosexual image, but holds an ambiguous attitude towards them, i.e. the film neither criticises nor supports these subjects. From this attitude, it can be said that the sensitive subjects work to construct the context of the film, in which the pursuit of individual profit along with rapid economic development engender moral laxity. This arrangement actually reemphasises the importance of the film's theme. The change in the function of sensitive subjects can also be found in the creation of humorous effect. Different from *Sorry Baby*, the film's humorous effect is caused by the absurdity of the characters' dishonest deeds rather than the sensitive subjects themselves. This

change indicates that Feng's filmmaking tends towards a softened and more commercial use of sensitive subjects under the regulatory authority's hegemonic intervention. In order to comprehend the regulatory authority's impact on domestic filmmaking, it is necessary to first review the progress of film propaganda and censorship, and figure out the two apparatuses' management structures and mechanisms.

The Party's Hegemonic Intervention in Domestic Filmmaking

MAIN MELODY SPIRITS AND CULTURAL INDUSTRY POLICY

Since its foundation in the 1920s, the Party has valued the function of propaganda in launching political campaigns and disseminating political views. After the establishment of PRC in 1949, the Party expanded its propaganda system to state level. The state propaganda apparatus is subordinate to the Party's Central Propaganda Department. Under this framework, media such as film work as the 'mouthpiece of the Party', represent the propagandistic tools to practise political and ideological oversight over the society to consolidate the Party's rule. In response to the voices for reform in economic and political fields in the late 1980s, the Party initiated market-oriented reform and 'selectively adopted democratic elements and neoliberal logic as a strategic calculation to strengthen its dominance without changing the character of the state apparatus (Zhang, 2011: 23). Correspondingly, the Party's practice of propaganda tended towards hegemonic intervention, which is directly embodied in the state propaganda apparatus' adjustment in humanising political promotion. The softened adjustment corresponds to the basic characteristic of hegemony which Antonio Gramsci describes as 'the combination of force and consent' (1971: 80), i.e. hegemony is 'a relation, not domination by means of force, but of consent by means of political and ideological leadership' (Simon, 1991:2). In the domain of film, the humanised adjustment is reflected in making promotional

projects based on people's demands and issuing regulations to carry out legal administration of film business. The two measures reveal the adjustment's purpose, to integrate propaganda missions into market-oriented film production, putting the film industry's development under the Party's control.

The formulation and use of laws and regulations enable the Party to employ state institutions, such as censorship, to 'implement its policies' and 'legitimate its will' (Zhang, 2011: 88). In 1996, the government released its first administration provision of cinema management, 'Regulations on Administration of Films', and used it to monitor film production and distribution. One year later, the government issued a detailed censorship policy, its 'Rules of Film Censorship', and established the Film Review Committee to execute film censorship according to the rules. These regulations not only identify taboo subjects but also define the prohibited forms of sensitive subjects. In this way, censorship achieves a systematic supervision from film project approval to film release, which indeed drives domestic film professionals towards collaborating with the government. Taking Feng's filmmaking as example, due to these regulations, his drama *Living a Miserable Life*, which involved extramarital affairs and sexual descriptions, was ordered to stop shooting. This ban aggravated the financial crisis of the Good Dream Company and suppressed investors' appetite for Feng's projects. This situation led Feng to participate in the 9550 project, making NYCFs with the Forbidden City Company and promoting main melody spirits.

From the transition of Feng's filmmaking, it can be seen that the function of regulations in ensuring the process of political promotion campaigns. These campaigns are made to consolidate the Party's domination in the economic reform. They encourage introducing the economic measures of capitalism but simultaneously restrain the dissemination of capitalist ideology or what the Party called 'bourgeois liberalisation'. This policy appears paradoxical but leaves room for the Party to establish hegemonic intervention and enrich the interpretation of main melody spirits. Early in the late 1980s, the Party had launched campaigns for 'the political implication of market reforms and the need to oppose both bourgeois liberalization and peaceful evolution' (Brady, 2008: 47). One explicit example is the proposal of main melody spirits and main melody films, as a part of the anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign in 1987. Following the economic development, underlining the Party's leadership in market-oriented reform and in industrial commercialisation become the core agenda items of political promotion. This change enables the Party to adjust its role in culture sectors and renew its cultural authority, by 'continuously broadening its own conception of propaganda and mainstream culture' and 'working on a new reference system [with the socialist core values]' (Meyer-Clement, 2016: 247). Accordingly, the connotation of main melody spirits is extended from the three core values, 'patriotism, socialism and collectivism' refined by the Present Jiang Zeming, to a broad rhetoric ''spirits of the time' (*shidai jingshen*). The connotation contains everything that would be helpful to consolidate the Party's legitimacy, such as neo-Confucian ideas, morals and ethics, and virtues.

Consequently, the subject range of main melody films is also expanded from revolutionary history to ordinary people's daily experiences. This transition displays a symptom of the Party's hegemonic intervention which was fully reflected in its promotion of the 9550 project. At this stage, main melody films are allowed to represent 'the true contradiction in life', however, this contradiction should receive treatment and solutions should be presented (Calkins, 1998: 307). In other words, the core agenda of main melody films—to 'show post-liberation China in a positive light' (ibid.: 308), displaying the moral superiority of Chinese socialist society—is not changed but reinforced. However, this change does not improve the main melody films' competitiveness alongside foreign film imports. These main melody films released from the late 1980 to early 1990s had poor market response, since they still use a clichéd narrative structure in which morally perfect protagonists are rewarded with a happy ending and their rivals are foolish. At the same time, the box-office performance of domestic entertainment films (*yule pian*) was not good enough to support the industry's rejuvenation. Many of them achieved commercial success but based on presenting contents perceived as obscene and violent. This situation impels the government (MRFT to be more precise) to promulgate the 9550 project, starting out the combination of political promotion and commercial development in the domain of film. From the perspective of Feng's NYCFs, the project is successful. These NYCFs complete sanctioned representation of socially concerned subjects, such as the situation of dismissing staff of state-owned enterprises in *Party A, Party B*, the wave of going abroad in *Be There or Be Square*, and the phenomenon of demanding

unpaid salary in *Sorry Baby*. Meanwhile, these representations also received market approbation since all three films ranked in top position at the box office.

Accompanying the film industry's commercialisation, the 9550 project's completion and the regulatory authority's formation of domestic filmmaking, the Party adjusted its hegemonic intervention in the film domain in the 2000s. The government no longer made any specific propaganda plans like the 9550 project, but encouraged domestic filmmaking to support the Party's policies such as the governing philosophy of harmonious society. Meanwhile, it started to relinquish control over socially taboo subjects and cancelled their interpretation clauses, i.e. it allowed film professionals to make appropriate representations of these subjects. From here it can be seen that the Party's idea of adjustment is to seize the core agenda of ideological promotion and simultaneously give more room for commercial development. Compared with the one in the late 1990s, this adjustment appears to ease restrictions on film production but actually strengthens the Party's control over the film industry. During the adjustment, many new provisions were issued to direct the industry's opening-up to private capital and to reinterpret the censoring rules. One example that can further manifest the adjustment's features is the policy of establishing a cultural industry proposed by the Party in late 2002. With Document No. 21 (2003), the Party started to implement the policy. It evolved the system of the cultural sector from simple self-sufficient propaganda apparatuses into publicly beneficial cultural institutions and commercial cultural enterprises. This shows that the Party 'is moving away from complete control

over the whole media sector towards completed control over the core part [...] while partially deregulation the other business in the media sector, giving more space to commercial sector to pursue economic interests' (Zhang, 2011: 56). From this point of view, economics becomes the Party's new sphere through which to manage media industries' development. The Party can selectively open up media industries and legitimise certain reform measures based on its political demands.

Due to the limited deregulation, the Party's domination in the process of converting domestic filmmaking into an industry is obvious. Regulatory authority circulated and renewed many regulations, which not only simplified the censoring procedure but also loosened control over the socially taboo subjects with high commercial potential. The comparatively open environment of filmmaking brought by these new regulations drew film professionals closer towards regulatory authority, proactively boosting the Party's political philosophy and strategies. In 2003, SARFT issued 'Regulations of Film Script Approval and Film Censorship (Tentative)', which asks licensed film enterprises to submit a 1,000-word synopsis of their proposed projects before beginning shooting. On the one hand, this clause reduces the possibility of banning completed films and therefore guarantees investors' interests; on the other hand, it conducts reviews and eradicates politically inappropriate projects at the pre-production stage, which actually improves the efficiency of censorship. Consequently, the renewal of the 1997 censoring rules, entitled 'Regulations of Film Script Approval and Administration of Films' (2006), increases the effectiveness of

censorship in sustaining the film industry's government-led commercialisation. It removes the previous censoring rules' detailed clauses of socially taboo subjects, creating more flexible room for regulatory authority to interpret the rules. In other words, film professionals require (tacit) approval from regulatory authority when taking on these subjects. Corresponding to the Party's political policies is a common practice. Taking Feng's *If You Are The One* as an example, it involves many new relinquished taboo subjects such as premarital pregnancy and homosexuality in the scenes of blind dates to create dating prospects. Considering the film's agenda of honesty, it is easy to understand the feasibility of using these subjects in the film. The agenda corresponds to the Party's political compendium of harmonious society, while these portrayals reflect the current conditions of Chinese society in which advocating sincerity becomes important.

REGULATORY AUTHORITY AND THE MECHANISMS OF PROPAGANDA AND CENSORSHIP

The flexible operation of film reviews as well as this operation's purpose indicates the integrity of censorship and propaganda apparatuses, and consequently complicated mechanisms. The activities of the two apparatuses usually combine and interact. Propaganda institutions oversee particular promotion projects based on the Party's guideline, while censorship works to ensure the enforcement of these projects in order to reshape the Party's culture authority and construct its hegemony. From the aforementioned examples , it can be seen that, 'without some form of censorship, propaganda in the strict sense of the word is impossible' (Lippmann, 1922: 43). Elena Meyer-Clement's study of censorship in China in the 1990s further confirms the relation between the two apparatuses. She indicates that censorship regulation is effective, counteracting many music and film producers' non-compliance with the political-ideological norms of production (2016: 247). In other words, with the force of censorship, the Party achieved an integration of private production and political power at that time. It '[creates] a new unified, national culture that follows both commercial and propagandistic considerations and can gain international influence are not so far off track' (ibid.). This cooperative relation for building cultural authority makes the two apparatuses compatible, or borrowing Matthew Johnson's metaphor, 'propaganda and censorship are two sides of the same coin' (2012: 153). In this way, the two apparatuses' mechanisms are usually intertwined and their functions overlap. For

example, SAPPRFT, under jurisdiction of the Party's Central Propaganda Department, takes responsibility for both propaganda and censorship. It offers policy support such as the 9550 project to enhance domestic films' market competitiveness in order to better complete political promotion.[44] At the same, SAPPRFT proposes specific censoring rules and employs its affiliated institutions to fulfill the duty of film reviews. The institution Film Review Committee works to censor theatrical distribution, while the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) copes with other distribution forms, such as DVD and the Internet publication.[45]

Considering their interrelated mechanisms, the term 'regulatory authority' is used herein to denote both censorship and propaganda apparatuses, which highlights their common functions in constructing the Party's hegemony. According to Nancy Fraser, 'hegemony designates a process wherein cultural authority is negotiated and contested' (2013: 142). From the perspective of power relations, regulatory authority is a cultural authority that manifests 'the ability to assign legal significance to activities' (Reichman, 1998: 245). In the context of the Chinese media industries, it embodies an interpreter that is 'involved in the negotiation of the "rules of the game" and the interpretation of the behaviour of the regulated' (Keane, 2003: 171), i.e. 'it is the authority to set the rules, to define the winners and losers, to change the definitions of the regulation game' (Reichman, 1998: 245). From this point of view, regulatory authority is both constitutor and adjudicator of regulation. This dual role corresponds

[44] To be more precise, it is MRFT, the predecessor of SAPPRFT, which proposed the 9550 project.
[45] In 2013, the GAPP was merged with SARFT, which then was renamed SAPPRFT.

to the two means of hegemony: consent and coercion. In the field of film, SAPPRFT, its subsidiaries and other relevant official entities, can be referred to the body of regulatory authority. Taking SAPPRFT as an example, its propaganda mechanism works as the constitutor, issuing promotion guidelines and rules by making production plans and goals. Its subsidiary censorship plays the role of adjudicator, making detailed censoring rules and implementing them to support the production guidelines. As these guidelines are more relevant to the government-led economic development of media industries, the censoring process accordingly becomes more flexible but of greater importance. Censorship becomes the crucial step to ensure the Party's leadership in the commercialisation of media industries. In other words, due to the ambiguity of regulations, censorship can be stricter or more lenient than before. This depends on the level of the correspondence between media production and the Party's production guidelines.

This adjustment in the division of responsibility does not mean that the propaganda mechanism loses force. Working to promote the media industries' commercialisation actually strengthens the influence of propaganda apparatus in a subtle way. In terms of reshaping cultural hegemony, this economic intervention enhances the tacit cooperation between censorship and propaganda apparatuses. As to the propaganda apparatus's economic intervention, Jesse Owen Hearns-Branaman (2009) uses Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's propaganda model (1988) to investigate propaganda in China's news media. Since all media are

under the management of the Party's Central Propaganda Department, the studies and model can also help to figure out the propaganda mechanism of film studios and relevant enterprises. The model consists of five filters, which can be categorised as three types: economically determinant filters (ownership, advertising, size, profitable structure, sourcing patterns), a social-cultural filter (flak-producing organizations) and an ideological filter (dominant ideology) (Hearns-Branaman, 2009: 120; building on Herman and Chomsky 1988). In the domain of film, the ideological filter is usually used in conjunction with economically determinant filters, playing the most efficient role in the propaganda mechanism of film. From the perspective of ownership, film studios are state-owned; film enterprises are more or less influenced by government's capital, which is embodied in their organisation structures, such as government-sponsored, state holding and joint state-private owned forms. The ownership determines that the government invariably dominates the film industry's progress, controlling the degree of opening-up based on the Party's political demands and the industry's actual situations. For instance, the regulatory authority initiated a reform of joint-stock system in the industry in 2000, in which it expanded the capital sources of film business on a limited scale.[46] It encouraged state capital inside or outside the film field to join in filmmaking, allowed film distribution sectors to accept domestic private capital, and agreed for exhibition sectors to attract foreign investment. Four years later, SARFT issued a rule which permitted domestic entities

[46] See the 'Suggestions on Deepening the Reform of Chinese Film Industry', issued by SARFT and the Ministry of Culture in 2000.

to establish film production companies.[47] These companies can apply for one-off production license from SARFT to make films; but this kind of production is still associated with state-owned studios and enterprises, since they monopolise technical and labour resources such as film laboratories and relevant professionals.[48] Therefore, the opening-up may be regarded as a way that the Party takes advantage of ownership to employ various capital sources to nourish its economic filters, i.e. the combination of economic and ideological filters intensifies the effectiveness of the propaganda mechanism in the field of film.

The government-led opening up indicates the purpose and principles of economic and ideological filters. It does not manifestly reveal the two filters' specific methods of operation as a part of film propaganda mechanism as well as the consequences of these operations on domestic filmmaking. As to these two points, the answer can be found in how regulatory authority implements political promotion missions such as the 9550 project. During the implementation of the project, regulatory authority gave financial and administrative support to film professionals involved in the mission. There were at least five kinds of funding, which amounted to between 1 and 1.5 billion RMB (140 million to 220 million USD). They included tax credits, the subsidy from film imports' box-office revenue (the proportion was five percent), the subsidy from the advertising income of television stations (three percent), the specific funding with 10 million RMB (1.45 million USD) per year for those films

[47] The rule is 'Interim Provisions on Operation Qualification Access for Film Enterprises'.
[48] Taking Feng's NYCFs in the 2000s as example, these films' copy printing is usually made by Beijing Film Developing and Video Technology Factory, a subsidiary of CFGC.

identified by the government as important, and 20 million RMB (2.9 million USD) funds for children's films each year.[49] In addition, the state-owned enterprises take the initiative to purchase the advertising spaces of these compliant film professionals' works. For example, in Feng's *Sorry Baby*, the image and service of Bank of China emerges many times, and is often considered as the first application of product placement since the film industry's market-oriented reform began. In terms of administrative support, through internal communication, regulatory authority can accelerate the producing and censoring process of these film professionals' works. Feng's *Party A, Party B* gained the full support of Beijing Film Studio which gave priority to its production, while the Forbidden City Company worked to intercede with Beijing Propaganda Department to ensure that the film script successfully passed the censorship (Feng, 2003).[50] Moreover, regulatory authority encouraged these film professionals to bring their works into the competition of domestic film awards such as the Hundred Flower Awards, the Golden Rooster Awards and the Huabiao Awards.[51] These awards signify official recognition, which sets an example for other film professionals who hesitate to join in the project. As to these participants, the official recognition enables them to easily get investment since their works' distribution is guaranteed. In other words, the financial and administrative support brings film professionals and promotion projects closer.

[49] See Yuan Lei's report about the development of main melody films, *Southern Weekly*, 14 June 2007.
[50] Han Sanping was in charge of promoting the film's production, while Zhang Heping communicated with Long Xinmin, the vice Minister of Beijing Propaganda Department at that time, to explain that the film script was in accordance with the 9550 project as well as the film industry's development direction.
[51] China Film Association set up the Hundred Flower Awards in 1962. The award is sponsored by the magazine *Popular Cinema*, and is voted by audience through SMS, the Internet and phone call. The Golden Rooster Awards were also inaugurated by China Film Association since 1981, the year of Rooster. The award is selected by a jury of film professionals. The Huabiao Awards were selected and given out by SAPPRFT. These awards are regarded as the three main film awards in China.

Compared with the propaganda mechanism, the censorship one is explicitly based on regulations. The institution Film Review Committee mainly takes charge of overseeing the film-censoring process with the regulations.[52] The two most significant factors that censors usually consider are the content and style of films. If the films meet the institution's standards, it will issue them a license, the 'Permit for Public Projection', to distribute publicly. As to the standards, regulatory authority requires films to contain elements such as 'positive acknowledgement of the Communist Party, protection of national dignity and adherence to socialist agendas' (Calkins, 1998: 308); it also sets counterparts, the taboo subjects, such as violation of the Constitution, jeopardy of national security, overt sexual themes and violent crime, in order to identify the base line of filmmaking. From the 1990s to 2000s, the regulations were renewed, with regulatory authority updating its treatment of taboo subjects. It emphasised the legal grounds of taboo subjects, and therefore added many articles about ideology and listed relevant explanation clauses, such as distortion of China's history and profanation of revolutionary heroes. Simultaneously, regulatory authority removed the detailed explanation articles referring to sexual and violent subjects. These subjects are commercially viable, and some of them are socially concerned, such as premarital pregnancy, extramarital affairs and homosexuality. The regulations' ambiguity gives the Film Review Committee more room to cope with the films with the released taboo subjects. It can therefore interpret the regulations based on specific situations. This inevitably increases the possibility of film professionals' compliant

[52] These regulations include 'Regulations on Administration of Films' (1996 and 2001), 'Rules of Film Censorship' (1997) and 'Provisions on the Archival Filling of Scripts (Abstracts) and the Administration of Films' (2006).

cooperation with regulatory authority.

In fact, when using these subjects, film professionals have to balance political promotion and social concern. In this situation, humorous expression again becomes a viable choice for them. It acts 'as effective lubricant in helping films ease through the approval process' (Calkins, 1988: 323), because keeping censors laughing seems to be 'the best policy for keeping the [their] scissors still' (Havis, 1996). Reflected in Feng's NYCFs, this tendency that binds the representation of sensitive subjects to humorous expression is prominent. In *Sorry Baby*, Feng's first NYCF that involves sensitive subjects, the representation is transformed into comedic sequences and even farces. After regulatory authority released the taboo subjects in 2006, Feng launched a comedic NYCF, *If You Are The One*, two years later, after having made several films with serious themes. This return of Feng's style partly works as a response to the market expectation for his comedy.[53] However, the film's heavy use of newly released taboo subjects is another factor that suggests his style change. As to the humorous expression's specific function in the establishment of Feng's creative compliance, the following paragraphs will first focus on *Sorry Baby* to figure out how his filmmaking completes the commercial application of taboo subjects under the support of regulatory authority.

[53] In an interview with Dushi kuaibao (2008), Feng explained the two reasons that he returned to making comedic NYCFs. First of all, audiences, especially his fans were eager to watch his new comedy. The second reason was that the whole society was in depression due to the disasters of the earthquake and the economic crisis. Comedy could help people to reduce anxiety and release pressure.

Sorry Baby: Creative Compliance and The Commercial Application of Taboo Subjects

As a film commissioned by the Film Bureau, *Sorry Baby* follows the practice of Feng's previous NYCFs, using the commercially secured mode to continue the 9550 project's joint missions of political promotion and economic development. To achieve both goals, Feng paradoxically deals with taboo subjects to enhance the film's topicality. This operation reflects that Feng had realised the latent risk to the film's market performance, if he merely repeated his narrative pattern which overtly implemented political education. In several interviews, Feng expresses that he actually planned to make a serious drama of extramarital affairs after his second NYCF, *Be There Be Square* in 1998. Shooting *Sorry Baby* is a temporary decision, since the Film Bureau thought NYCFs should be trilogies and suggested that he make one more. In exchange, Feng was allowed to make the film he wanted (People.com, 2010 and Wang, 2011), i.e. a serious drama, which turned out to be *Sigh*, released in 2000. Meanwhile, Huayi Brothers, the private investor of *Sorry Baby*, promised to offer funding for the drama, if Feng decided to accept the Film Bureau's suggestion to make *Sorry Baby* part of a trilogy (People.com, 2010). Therefore, regulatory authorities dominate in selecting the themes of NYCFs commercially and politically, while the expectation of a return on investment leads domestic private film enterprises to respond to the authorities' political demands.

This cooperation echoes the film industry's government-led commercialisation but enhances the difficulty of Feng's commercial filmmaking. As Feng observed after the film's release,

> I didn't want to make the film, because I was worried about failure. I thought I should quit when I performed well. Shooting this assigned film means that we need to continue the narrative structure we used in previous NYCFs. This repetition probably brings a farfetched story, since we give more attention to sustaining the film's NYCF form rather than conceiving its content. Moreover, our best card is to surprise audiences. But now they are already familiar with [this pattern]. Nevertheless, we still have to repeat the pattern to complete the assignment (Sina, 1999).

These words indicate Feng's creative dilemma in which newly joined private investors expect to acquire economic benefit, and regulatory authority hopes his NYCF filmmaking will continue as a prominent outcome of the 9550 project. Either the economic or political requirements result in the restrictions on Feng's production of *Sorry Baby*. Accordingly, the film proceeds with the agenda of promoting main melody spirits, i.e. 'the society is full of heartwarming things (*renjia ziyou zhenqing zai*)', as in Feng's first two NYCFs.[54] It uses Feng's market-tested style, describing ordinary people's daily annoyances and defusing them in a humorous way.

The dilemma between the requirement of repetition and the pressure of commercial innovation facilitates Feng's filmmaking to modify narrative

[54] *Party A, Party B* portrays a story that a company voluntarily helps people to fulfill their dreams, while *Be there or Be Square* describes a Chinese immigrant who does his best to help his compatriots in Los Angeles, without considering personal gains and losses. The themes of two films are both corresponding to the agenda from different perspectives.

approaches in *Sorry Baby*. The film revolves around the subject of demanding unpaid salary, but represents it in a humorous and novel way in which the creditor under the direction of the debtor's girlfriend to play a kidnapping prank for asking for salary. Han Dong (played by Ge You) is a freelance driver who is employed by Boss Ruan (played by Fu Biao). Although running his travel agency very well, Boss Ruan always refuses to pay Han's salary. The latter has no choice but decides to kidnap Ruan's girlfriend Xiaoyun (played by Wu Chien-lien), a Chinese Singaporean, since he needs money urgently to pay the medical care of his comatose sister. When starting the kidnapping, Han regrets immediately; surprisingly, Xiaoyun requires him to continue the plan so that she could know how much Ruan loves her. Therefore in the rest of the film, Xiaoyun guides Han to play tricks on Ruan for demanding ransom. When knowing Han's real motive for planning the kidnapping, she starts to fall in love with him. The film ends with a sequence in which Ruan realises his mistake, pays the salary and becomes Han's friend.

Unlike his previous NYCFs, the film does not feature much verbal humour, such as asking the male protagonist to make *tiaokan* on others or his experiences. Instead, it presents a comical kidnapping with farcically sexual innuendo and makes the female protagonist Xiaoyun who should be the victim, to direct Han to commit the 'crime'. This angle and consequent design of role reversal create strong comedic effect, relieving the monotony of the clichéd narrative structure.

Meanwhile, the comical representation of taboo subjects does not undermine the film's superficial ideology of main melody spirits. It is Han's filial piety that helps to finally get the salary rather than Xiaoyun's tricks. Kidnapping is a social problem rather than a political phenomenon specific to post-socialist China. Thus, the comical representation not only brings a high profile to the film since few films at that time involved this subject, but also combines entertainment and political promotion.

This section focuses on the film's contributions to political promotion, its representation of taboo subjects, and their creative combination. It investigates how Feng's filmmaking commercialises the use of violent and sexual subjects and how the use assists the film's agenda of promoting main melody spirits. Based on the two investigations, this section reveals the influence of regulatory authority, manifested in part in the 9550 project, on Feng's filmmaking at the initial stage of his NYCF production, and discusses how the influence shapes Feng's style of NYCFs. To facilitate these explorations, this analysis is divided into three sub-sections, the first investigating the direct influence of regulatory authority, which confines the film's story to the frame of political education. Accordingly, the frame establishes causality between characters' beliefs and their fates, giving a predictable ending in which the characters who adhere to main melody spirits achieve their goals. Next, the application of the two taboo subjects is addressed to see how Feng's filmmaking creatively represents criminality and sex in a highly regulated environment. Then,

analysing the solution to demanding unpaid salary that the film presents, it is revealed how the film's representation of taboo subjects contributes to its political promotion mission, i.e. how the representation constructs the film's agenda as well as enhances its political acceptability.

Through these analyses, this section argues that the filmmaking of *Sorry Baby* achieves a commercialised political promotion, which creatively uses taboo subjects to implement state-led industrial rejuvenation in company with state propaganda. Through accepting regulatory authority's assignment (rather than only according with the 9550 project), Feng and his collaborators gains more opportunities and more flexible room to complete commercial exploration, i.e. Feng makes concessions to regulatory authority in the name of commercialisation. From the perspective of regulatory authority, it also makes a concession in censoring the film, and uses it to exchange a continuity and reinforcement the implementation of the 9550 project. This interaction rebalances the film's dual goal of political promotion and commercial development, which strengthens rather than undermines the regulatory authority's function in commercialising Feng's filmmaking. This can be seen from the film's purpose and approaches of using taboo subjects. All the taboo subjects represented in the film enhance the effect of political promotion, while taboo content does not offend film regulations. Feng's filmmaking circumvents the scope of the regulations, using their ambiguous clauses to find room to represent taboo subjects. In addition, Feng applies certain unwritten strategies to evade

censorship, such as making the representation humorous, and designing Xiaoyun as a foreigner to emphasise that her criminal organisation does not reflect the moral and legal conduct of China's society.

By indicating that Xiaoyun's kidnapping trick for demanding unpaid salary is unsuccessful, the film further dissolves the potential risk of representing these subjects to its agenda of promoting main melody spirits. For example, after knowing Han's motive, Ruan pays him without hesitation and even wants to be his friend, i.e. it is morals that can solve the problem rather than violence and crime. The film suggests that moral influence is so powerful that there is no need for judicial intervention. In the film, the police appear late. They just warn Han but criticise Ruan. In this way, the film subtly downgrades the issue of demanding unpaid salary from social contradiction to individual dispute.

POLITICAL PROMOTION ASSIGNMENT AND MORAL AGENDA

As a promotion assignment, *Sorry Baby* continues to accord with the requirements of the 9550 project. The film emphasizes morals and ethics across its storyline, steering Han and Ruan's dispute towards reconciliation. It establishes a link between characters' moral attitudes and fates, consolidating the moral agenda and thematics of Feng's previous NYCFs, in which 'people will be rewarded for their good deeds'. In terms of characterisation, the film repeatedly highlights the protagonist's virtues. Han is presented as a kind, honest and responsible person. He refuses to use radical actions to demand the salary. Although Han intends to kidnap Xiaoyun for a ransom, he soon changes his mind and turns to caring for her when she contracts tuberculosis. Unlike Feng's first two NYCFs, *Sorry Baby* depicts Han's stubborn desire for money. For example, when Xiaoyun asks Han to choose between her and the money, Han immediately chooses the money, even though he has developed a crush on Xiaoyun. The film does not explain Han's motivation until the end, revealing that he needs money to pay the medical fee of his sister. As to the boss Ruan, the film first praises him, displaying his generous and kind deeds, such as donating money to the poor students in rural area. However, he always pleads company's development as the reason for delaying salary payment. When Han asks ransom, Ruan prepares joss paper for him without considering Xiaoyun's security.[55] The comparison between his deeds indicates that Ruan is hypocritical and avaricious compared with Han. The

[55] In China and other Asian countries, 'joss paper' is a kind of fake money that is used for burning for ancestors at occasions such as funerals and memorial ceremonies.

different moral attitudes lead the two characters to exchange their positions in the kidnapping game. Ruan loses his advantage, while Han gradually takes control and gains a happy ending in which he gets his salary and receives Xiaoyun's love.

In the film, in most respects, Ruan's deeds highlight Han's adherence to morals and ethics. From this point of view, Ruan can be seen as a villainous foil. This character design is new compared with Feng's previous NYCFs, which can be regarded as an innovation within the fixed and clichéd narrative structure. It is the first time such a character appears in Feng's NYCFs. After *Sorry Baby*, this innovation continues to be used in his filmmaking, e.g. designing the character Uncle Li in *A World Without Thieves*. In fact, these characters are not villains in the strict sense of the word. Taking Ruan as example, his countermeasures for the kidnapping are socially innocuous; most of them actually work to create comedic effect by reflecting how Han fools him. More importantly, Ruan's immoral deeds can be made good, since the film presents him and Han as temperamentally similar. In the film, Xiaoyun describes that Ruan used to be kind-hearted and honest person, just like Han. However, when Xiaoyun comes back from Singapore, she suddenly finds Ruan is changed, with an excessive devotion to wealth. The film uses the dialogue between Xiaoyun and Han to represent her memory of Ruan. This memory works as a metaphor to explain the change, linking it with China's economic growth. When they were children, XIaoyun often hung around with Ruan to enjoy the mountain scenery in Beijing. Now there are many tall buildings in the city that block their view. Ruan never

accompanies her again, but Han does. Combining Ruan's avarice and Han's devotion, this metaphor reveals the impact of the desire for wealth on Chinese people's value judgment. Thus, the film brings out its agenda again, which celebrates characters who adhere to an officially sanctioned morality and promotes the moral charisma of post-socialist China on people's deeds.



Figure 3.1: Ruan pays Han and expresses his intention of making friends with Han in Sorry Baby, 1999.

Meanwhile, the metaphoric treatment of Xiaoyun's memory indicates that the film's innovation of narrative structure subtly avoids discussing the influence of social or political factors; instead it attributes Ruan's change to economic development and therefore downgrades Han and Ruan's contradiction to the level of the individual, not the social. The operation of downgrading as well as the dual male protagonists manifests the tendency that Feng's filmmaking adjusts character's social identity to suit the new market demands. Many film scholars describe this adjustment as 'targeting the emergent urban middle-class audiences and their cultural consumption

mania' (Kong, 2014: 6).[56] The demographics of Mainland China's film audiences have changed considerably since 2000. White-collar professionals have gradually emerged as the majority audience, which led many commercial films to cater strategically to this middle class (Yang, 2011: 7). As a film released in 1999, *Sorry Baby* and its adjustments reflect the consistent commercial sensitivity of Feng's filmmaking and Feng's estimate of market demands at the turn of the new century.[57] In fact, after the film, the male protagonists in his works, especially those comedic NYCFs, become Ruan-esque middle class rather than the working class like Han. As the characterisation of Ruan corresponds to the climbers from working class under the economic reform, he also has Han's virtues and moral attitude inside. Based on the logic the film displays, Ruan loses himself in an increasingly materialistic society. Thus, moral influence is shown as the most effective solution to the problem in the film. From *Sorry Baby*, working-class characters, rural area and the past usually become the symbol of moral purity in Feng's subsequent NYCFs.[58] The middle-class protagonists correct their deeds after encountering these intrinsically cleansing forces. Therefore, one may say, political promotion mission leads Feng's filmmaking to accord with the humanising main melody spirits regardless of how the form of his NYCFs changes.

The essentially same moral attitude between Han and Ruan indicates not only

[56] As Shuyu Kong mentions, these scholars are Rui Zhang (2008), Yomi Braester (2005) and Kong herself (2003 and 2007).
[57] Based on the box-office performance of his NYCFs, the commercial sensitivity of Feng's filmmaking worked from the late 1990s to at least the 2000s.
[58] Such as young Yan Shouyi in *Cell Phone* and Shagen in *A World Without Thieves*, which are analysed in more detail in Chapter 5.

the feasibility but also the necessity of implanting moral education. Accordingly, the film emphasises the function of moral influences in Han's dispute with Ruan. It invalidates Xiaoyun's tricks and uses them to bring the police into the narrative. The police educate Han's behaviour of making fake kidnapping, but also display recognition of his moral value. They only give Han a warning, yet criticise Ruan three times after knowing he owes money to Han. The different attitudes suggest the film's advocacy of morals and ethics since the police symbolise social order in the film. The following scenes after the police appear continue to highlight the advocacy. Xiaoyun persuades Ruan to pay, but he still refuses. When he realises Han's motivation of filial piety, he changes his mind immediately. The three scenes are progressive, laying the foundations one by one for displaying the powerful effect of moral influence. Both the police's criticisms and friend's persuasion assist only in solving the dispute; the moral influence is the crucial factor that triggers Ruan to fulfill his obligation. Along these lines, the film combines the fictional solution and moral persistence and thematically promotes main melody spirits.

TABOO SUBJECTS AND CREATIVE COMPLIANCE

The sequences of Xiaoyun's kidnapping prank and the fake sexual descriptions do not undermine the film's agenda of political promotion. Although these textual elements address taboo subjects, they are of little relevance to the film's theme of rewarded virtue. The two sequences can appear decorative and superficial, making appeals to viewers without compromising the film's underlying prosocial themes, such as creating comedic effects and bringing surprise to audiences. As regards the fake sexual descriptions, the film combines characters' flirting followed by their what appears to be sexually suggestive movements, which builds a cliffhanger. Then, at the sequence's end, the film reveals what the characters are actually doing. The unconformity between the truth and the salacious descriptions causes surprise and enlightenment with in a humourous sense. Meanwhile, in the film, Xiaoyun, the foreign victim, organises the kidnapping. Her identity softens the criminal descriptions and helps in constructing the scenes of sexual suspense. It is worth noting that the relation between these creative applications and the film's nature as a political assignment. In other words, only when regulatory authority permits, the ambiguous regulations and flexible censorship can be transferred into the conditions for creative filmmaking. From this point of view, the film's creative compliance demonstrates the impact of regulatory authority, especially the mechanism of censorship, on domestic filmmaking. Before analysing the impact based on the interaction between censorship and Feng's filmmaking, it is helpful to first realise the rationale for film regulations'

ambiguity and to see how the priority of implementing state propaganda makes regulatory authority concede to film censorship.

The ambiguity leads to different interpretations. Censors can decide what they deems compliant with film regulations according to whether films accord with propaganda projects. The difference is aggravated since the Film Review Committee's staff composition is complicated and unstable. The resultant uncertainty of censorship makes it possible for film professionals to creatively use taboo subjects. As aforementioned, accompanying the running of the 9550 project, regulatory authorities issued a series of film regulations and established the Film Review Committee to execute their directives. Although these regulations, such as the 'Rules of Film Censorship,' included detailed lists of forbidden subjects, there still exists flexible room for censors' interpretations. As Yin Hong observes, 'there often has a controversy on a same film within the Film Review Committee, since censors have different understanding of the clauses' (Zhang, 2012). The causes of controversies become clearer after reviewing the agency's composition. The committee consists of 36 members from different institutions, including the Ministry of Education, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the Supreme People's Court Information Office, and the scholars of the Communication University of China, the Beijing Film Academy and the Chinese National Academy of Arts; when the film is relevant to juveniles, the committee also invites the staff of the All-China Women's Federation to participate in censorship (ibid.).Therefore, one can

see that the committee's composition is complicated and plural, and sometimes unstable when reviewing film projects with particular subjects such as the aforementioned topics related to juveniles. The members' different sociocultural backgrounds as well as their respective responsibilities necessarily lead to various opinions towards the censored films. As a result, these opinions inevitably are integrated into broad and ambiguous judgments. Film professionals usually confuse with the judgments since they receive no effective guidance on revisions to make their films acceptable. For example, when the director Lu Xuechang submitted *The Making of Steel* (*Gangtie shi zenme liancheng de*, 1997) to the Film Review Committee, the feedback from censors stated, 'no specific suggestions but not allowed to distribute' (ibid.). Feng also had similar experiences which led to him complaining about censorship. He said, 'a lot of the suggestions that they [the censors] give you—like, I almost want to laugh. [I ask myself,] what does that even mean?' (Feng, cited in Pulver, 2013). The ambiguous censorship does not mean that there is no way to revise and distribute films. The censors have a common mission of protecting and promoting main melody spirits. If a film accords with the mission, it can technically pass the censorship. Furthermore, filmmakers can address taboo subjects in a sanctioned way, since whatever is not prohibited is allowed.

The ambiguous censorship engenders film professionals' self-censorship, and more importantly stimulates their creative application of taboo subjects. *Sorry Baby* is a prominent example of these two consequences. The film uses camera positions to

achieve a continuous shift between Han and Xiaoyun's angles of view to show their response to each other's words to create the suspense of their intimacy (Figure 3.2). A series of medium shots and close-ups are used in the shift, which make the sequence focus on particular behaviours and emotional reactions that strengthen the sexual innuendo. With the shot-reverse-shot pattern, the film visually makes the fake sex look real to maintain the description as a selling point but without breaking censoring rules. In the sequence, Han sits opposite Xiaoyun and suggests how they share rooms to sleep. The film uses a medium shot to show Xiaoyun's impassive reaction and connotative words, 'you take a shower first'. With a shot-reverse-shot tactic, it connects this shot to the next one, a medium close-up that displays Han's surprise. Then, through a jump cut, the film shows Han hurrying to the bathroom. This series of shots focus on the two characters' facial expression and give little indication of Xiaoyun's intention. The vague visual information and Xiaoyun's suggestive words construct a sexual connotation. Based on this deliberate misrepresentation, the film continues to build the suspense with another jump cut, which shifts the frame to a medium close-up: Xiaoyun pushes Han down into a chair, while Han yells, 'stop, stop, forget it'. The subsequent tracking shot shows that Xiaoyun approaches Han's face and says with a flirtatious voice, 'we've made a deal, you volunteered'. A jump cut is used again, shifting the frame to a scene with medium shot in which Xiaoyun kneels down and separates Han's legs. After that, the film reuses shot-reverse-shot tactic with close-ups, switching the angles of view between Han and Xiaoyun. These scenes show Han's facial expression and Xiaoyun's reaction. He feels pain and begs

her to stop, ‘I am not the kind of person you think I am. I would rather go to the police station’. At the end of the sequence, the real situation is revealed with a medium long shot where Xiaoyun binds Han and explains that she needs to do so for her comfort and security.



Figure 3.2: The sequence of sexual suspense (from top left to bottom right) in which Xiaoyun is actually tying Han for security in Sorry Baby, 1999.

The tension between the two characters and the following twist create a humorous effect, presenting sexualised content under the guise of promoting main melody spirits. The medium shots and close-ups restrict the frames to the characters’ partial actions, which work in tandem with the flirtatious conversations to create a deceptive relationship between them. However, Xiaoyun does this actually ‘for self-protection’, which completely accords with the sexual morality and therefore meets the requirement of censorship. Meanwhile, Xiaoyun’s action triggers another humorous effect, since she as the kidnapped is tying the kidnapper Han. This role reversal softens Han’s criminal motivation since he intends to kidnap Xiaoyun for ransom. From this point, Xiaoyun starts to dominate Han during the kidnapping, which gradually develops into a prank since there is no real victim in it. Xiaoyun’s Chinese

Singaporean identity and Han's hesitant cooperation make her organisation reasonable to the censors — even though the prank is a crime, it is not directed by Chinese — which corresponds to the regulatory authority's ideological mandate to represent post-socialist Chinese society's superior morality.

In fact, Xiaoyun's identity exerts more influence on Feng's creative compliance in *Sorry Baby* since the film uses the identity's intersecting elements to reach a sanctioned representation of taboo subjects. Continuing with the aforementioned sequence as an example, the film relies on Chinese people's stereotype of foreign sexual attitudes to make Xiaoyun's deeds reasonable to audiences and censors. For decades after the establishment of the PRC, discussing sexual subjects publicly was considered immoral. Following the opening-up in the 1980s, many foreign ideas flooded in and promoted the change of sexual attitudes in China. As Zhongli Yu mentions, at that time, the country 'stepped from being a society where sex was completely taboo into a liberated one, under the influence of Western sexual liberation and sexual freedom, and "sex book fever" appeared as a source for sex education' (2015: 174). The change continued in the 1990s, nonetheless, many conservative attitudes remain prominent. As Joanna McMillan argues, social conservatives 'have continued to construct premarital sex as harmful and to be avoided' (2006: 63). In the domain of film, these ideas were reflected in regulations. The domestic film production was required to carry out spiritual purification, i.e. representation of sexual and violent elements as well as widely debated social issues was reduced to the minimum;

instead, promotion of traditional values and moral ideals such as collectivism, sacrifice, loyalty, kindheartedness and justice, was reinforced (Yin, 1999: 23). As to *Sorry Baby*, it underlines Xiaoyun's nationality many times, indicating that she migrated to Singapore as a child. Xiaoyun's diasporic, and thus foreign identity suggests that she would be influenced by foreign thinking and would have a relatively liberal attitude of sex, which makes the sexual tension reasonable to censors. This design of foreign character circumvents the 1997 censoring rules —'prohibiting the promotion of immoral sexual relationships and the representation of obscene scenes with sensory stimuli'— and delicately uses the unwritten rules of censorship, e.g. 'if [filmmakers] want to explore any salacious topics, [they can] either set them somewhere else, or in some cases, [they] can set them in the past' (Cain, 2011). More importantly, it accords with the regulatory authority's promotion requirements. Xiaoyun's foreign identity creates a distancing effect, which defines her as an 'other', not a Mainland Chinese subject whose screen behaviour would provide moral lessons. The film defines her as inhabiting a different subject position from the presumed mainland audience, i.e. it suggests China as an enlightened society with a superior moral civilization, since the foreigner Xiaoyun is the person whose behaviours engender sexual tension, even it is a misleading one.

The emphasis on Xiaoyun's foreign identity is reflected more clearly in the sequence of organising the kidnapping in which the film addresses the taboo subjects of crime and violence. The sequence is a long take with a wide-angle view, which

represents the whole process of Xiaoyun teaching Han to play a kidnapper and to 'beat' her (Figure 3.3). At the beginning of the sequence, Han appears in front of the camera, tugging Xiaoyun's hair. He approaches the stationary camera, creating a close-up that displays his angry face. However, the close-up shows him from a low angle, which neutralises his irritation by making his aggressive facial expressions comically distorted. The next scene immediately explains the situation: Han is making a kidnapping video under Xiaoyun's direction. Unsatisfied with his performance, Xiaoyun asks Han to slap her to make the video appear credible to Ruan. Han refuses but then has to accept since Xiaoyun threats to call the police if he does not cooperate. The sequence uses a tracking shot to highlight Han's hesitation: he steps back and forth, continuing to drink beer to embolden himself; after a yell, he finally slaps Xiaoyun. Based on the visual information, the sequence is literally against the 1997 censoring rules, which 'prohibit film professionals to represent murder, violence, criminal means with details and contents which would stimulate audiences to commit crime and violate public order'. However, in effect, it turns Han's kidnapping into Xiaoyun's fake one, a humorous prank that is more like a show in which the kidnapper and the kidnapped conspire and rehearse. The scene's content offers zero lessons on how to kidnap someone successfully, and therefore avoids any potential infringement of the censoring rules. From the whole process, we can see Xiaoyun takes control in her interactions with the kidnapper Han after her initial kidnapping. After listening to Xiaoyun's plan, Han is actually shocked and even questions whether she is a Taiwanese spy. The contrast between Xiaoyun's composed deeds and Han's

alarmed reaction reflects the function of Xiaoyun's foreign identity in using forbidden subjects. This identity separates her from the Chinese that Han represents, suggesting again that 'nothing bad or subversive ever happens in the modern-day communist utopia that is China' (Cain, 2011). From this point of view, the film's representations of violence and crime conform to the regulations under which domestic filmmaking is asked to assist in constructing socialist material civilisation and spiritual civilisation.[59] These representations do not erode the film's agenda — neither the violence nor criminal threat solves the dispute between Han and his boss— but rather, lead the story to a moral education since Han's commitment to filial piety helps him to get his salary back.



Figure 3.3: The sequence of kidnapping organisation (from top left to bottom right) in which Xiaoyun is teaching Han to take a video for the ransom in Sorry Baby, 1999.

[59] The 'Regulations on Administration of Film' (1996) expressly state this requirement.

Under the combined impact of political promotion and censorship, *Sorry Baby* turns the serious issue of demanding unpaid salary into a morally educational sketch. Like the taboo subjects, the issue also becomes this political assignment's selling point. The film expresses social critique to the phenomenon of demanding unpaid salary and related issues of workers' rights, but does not discuss it deeply. It stresses the uselessness of violence and crime and claims that obeying morals and laws are the key solutions for the issue. Withholding salary was a hot topic when the film came out. As Xu Xi argues, it has been a common social phenomenon since the mid-1990s, which happened often among rural migrant workers —'many of the workers used radical means such as suicide and self-harm to arouse the public's attention to protecting their interests (2008: 256). Using this topic reflects the consistent consideration of Feng's filmmaking to market demands, which conforms to his creative preference, 'the affinity with ordinary people'. The film also displays the radical means but with a low intensity and in a humorous way. It sets the scene for a labour dispute between two Beijing native city dwellers, since involving the character of a rural migrant worker is easy to escalate the dispute to a social contradiction. In addition, the humorous representation dissolves the threat of these radical deeds to social order. This representation is sanctioned but shows the film's interest in the social topic by reminding of its existence. This limited reveal is still based on the purpose of promoting main melody spirits. Therefore, in the film, after representing

the kidnapping, the police immediately intervene, which moves the labour dispute towards reconciliation. It suggests that the current political and moral system is a crucial condition for Chinese people to correct their mistakes, i.e. the film praises and maintains the current social order.

From another perspective, the limited representation contributes to public discourse about the subject of demanding unpaid salary. It corresponds to Feng's other creative preference, 'the fantasy for ordinary people', which aims to 'pleasure audiences through fulfilling their daydreams and venting their frustration in daily life' (Feng, 1999 cited in Yu, 1999: 45). The key factor to achieving the contribution is the characterisation of Xiaoyun. Accordingly, the film deliberately represents the domination of Xiaoyun as the victim and simultaneously emphasises her foreign identity. For example, it uses the linguistic stereotype to denote Xiaoyun's identity. Ma Xiaoqing, a Mainland actress, dubs Xiaoyun's voice. Instead of standard Mandarin or Beijing dialect, she uses the Mandarin with Hong Kong and Taiwan accent (*gangtai qiang*). Wu Qianlian, the actress who plays Xiaoyun, is Taiwanese and started her career at Hong Kong; Wu probably could speak fluent Taiwanese Mandarin and Cantonese. Moreover, it is unusual for a Singaporean character to speak Taiwan and Hong Kong Mandarin. However, if we associate the accent with the colloquial phrases Xiaoyun often uses, it can be found that the film actually uses them to label Xiaoyun's identity. These phrases such as *man* (literally means 'very') and *youchi* (literally means 'have eaten something') are highly recognised expressions of Mandarin

spoken in Hong Kong and Taiwan.[60] They appear frequently in many popular films, television dramas and TV shows in the 1990s and led many audiences, especially the northern Chinese, the main audience group of Feng's early NYCFs, to imitate them for fun.[61] From this point of view, the film borrows popular public discourses in narrative to strengthen its commerciality and in passing entertain its moral promotion.

Based on the analyses above, as a political assignment, *Sorry Baby* continues putting political promotion at the forefront. Feng's filmmaking reaches a negotiation with regulatory authority in terms of using taboo subjects, which allows the film to address the sexual and violent subjects without breaking the film regulations. Except for political purpose, the regulatory authority's concession is caused by its commercial consideration since enhancing the competitiveness of domestic films is also one aim of the 9550 project. Therefore, Feng and his collaborators gain more flexible room in making *Sorry Baby*, which commercialises the film's promotion of main melody spirits. Correspondingly, the film's representation of taboo subjects is sanctioned and acts mainly as a selling point. It consistently accords with the film's theme of moral education, reflecting how regulatory authorities combine economic and administrative means to implement hegemonic supervision of domestic filmmaking. Many domestic film productions like Feng's making of *Sorry Baby* tend to proactively implement political promotion in exchange for governmental support to complete commercial

[60] The word *man* (蛮) is usually expressed as *hen* (很) or *feichang* (非常) in mandarin to give emphasis to an adjective or adverb. *Youchi* (有吃) is usually expressed as *chiguo* (吃过) in mandarin. Here the word *you* (有) works as the auxiliary verb, which is similar to the word 'have' in English.

[61] In the terms of box office, Feng's NYCFs performed better in North China than in South China. The continued unbroken until *The World Without Thieves* was released in 2004. See Hou, 2004.

exploration. As a result, the ideological content of their works is packaged in a commercially viable way, within popular genre frameworks. In *Sorry Baby*, one manifestation of this is the limited representation of social issues. The film first represents the social problem of delaying salary and connotes the power relation between working class and the new rising middle class and the moral decline following the rapid economic development. Then, it solves this problem by awakening characters' moral consciousness that is shaped in their childhood, i.e. during the socialist period. This solution corresponds to the Party's purpose of promoting main melody spirits in the post-socialist period featuring economic reform. This creative method of using taboo subjects is frequently applied to Feng's subsequent NYCFs, such as the representations of extramarital affairs and homosexual images in *If You Are The One*, which this chapter will explore in the next section.

If You Are The One: Internalised Political Promotion and Neutral Representation of Sensitive Subjects

Since 2000, accompanying new political policies and economic prescriptions, the government improves state propaganda with a consideration of public acceptability and preference, presenting a market-oriented tendency. Censorship redefines taboo subjects, making a new condition for film professionals to use them. Feng's NYCF in this period, *If You Are The One*, reflects the influence of the regulatory authorities' adjustments on domestic filmmaking. The film works in concert with the political slogan of 'harmonious society', and involves many new relinquished but still socially sensitive subjects in sustaining the correspondence commercially. In 2002, the Party formulated its cultural-industries policy, which launches an industrialised reform in cultural sectors, strengthening supervision on ideological orientation and increasing support for their commercialisation. The ideological orientation embodied as the policies of harmonious society (2004) and soft power (2007). The former one aims to construct a harmonious culture that centres on patriotism, collectivism and socialism and promotes the 'Socialist Concepts on Honors and Disgraces'.[62] The latter also forwards the construction of harmonious culture and cultivates the prevailing custom of socialist civilisation, which benefits traditional culture, advocates cultural innovation and encourages people to adhere to honesty and integrity.[63]

[62] i.e. the 'Eight Honors and Eight Shames' (*ba rong ba chi*) which was proposed by the President Hu Jintao in 2006, as the moral codes for Chinese.
[63] See, the current President Hu's speech, 2007.

In response to the policies, SARFT revises film regulations and censoring rules. In 2001, The State Council circulated a new version of the 'Regulations on Administration of Films', which opened the sector of film production to the entities outside cinema by issuing them one-off production licenses. Two years later, SARFT issued the 'Regulations of Film Script Approval and Film Censorship (Tentative)'. The provision requires film professionals to submit a 1000-word synopsis of their projects in advance, which accelerates the censoring process and increases pass rate.[64] In 2006, the institution put forward a comprehensive regulation entitled 'Regulation of Film Script Approval and Administration of Films', which replaced the tentative regulation and the 'Rules of Film Censorship' (1997). The new regulation adds clauses of socialist ideology, history and Chinese culture, and deletes the detailed explanations of taboo subjects that are lists in the 1997 censoring rules. For example, it removes the entries that are attached to the clause on sexual subjects, such as 'extramarital affairs', 'premarital relationship' and 'homosexuality'. Thus, this adjustment aims to place weight on political subjects and consequently relinquish others, especially those commercially viable subjects, and therefore makes a condition for film professionals to use these subjects in their works.

When the film professionals incorporate sensitive subjects into their works, the ambiguous regulations lead them to accord with the promotion of the Party's policies since regulatory authorities only support the use of sensitive subjects in politically

[64] SARFT later updated the tentative regulation in 2004, adding detailed requirements of the 1000-word synopsis and censoring progress.

compliant projects. The regulations' ambiguity makes censorship become an economic means to shape domestic filmmaking. Taking *If You Are The One* for example, it narrates the blind-dating experiences of an overseas returnee Qin Fen (played by Ge You). By representing different dating prospects and their motivations, the film projects its theme of honesty and integrity. This moral agenda is in accordance with the current priority policy in the late 2000s, the policy of harmonious society. The film starts with the sale of Qin's innovation of which he claims can resolve all kinds of human disputes. In fact, the innovation is just a piece of tube to prevent disputing parties from cheating when they use the rock-paper-scissors game to solve their disputes. Although this solution looks absurd, the investor praises Qin's thinking and immediately buys the innovation. This sequence is farcical but contains many descriptions to suggest the importance of 'being honest', namely, the core agenda of the social harmony policy. Qin is honest by nature and hopes to find a partner who also holds a sincere attitude to love. In the film's first part, he attends many blind dates but does not find to meet his expectations. To construct these dating prospects' insincere attitude to their date with Qin, the film employs sensitive subjects such as premarital pregnancy, extramarital affairs, and homosexuality, and therefore attributes the dates' failure to their ulterior purpose. In the second part, the film focuses on Qin's romance with Xiaoxiao (played by Shu Qi), who is the mistress of a married man. Unlike *Sigh* and *Cell Phone*, it does not represent extramarital affairs in depth. The subject merely works as a symbol of Xiaoxiao's identity, since Feng turns the focus towards her loyalty to her lover and her consideration for the lover's family.

This virtue leads to her successfully correcting the inappropriate deeds and finding the one, Qin. In this way, the film subtly combines the use of sensitive subjects with the promotion of harmonious-society principles, supporting the need for honesty.

This section of the chapter focuses on how the film corresponds to the 'harmonious society policy', how it uses sensitive subjects and what the function thereof is, in this political correspondence. Therefore, it explores how the film's production and representation intersect with cultural-industry policies and harmonious-society principles. To facilitate these explorations, the case here is analysed from three perspectives. At first, this analysis focuses on the film's beginning in which it distinctly states the theme of harmonious society. The title sequence sets the keynote of the film. With an analysis of the setting construction, this section investigates how Feng strategically demonstrates the value of honesty and social harmony and discusses the factors or reasons that trigger such demonstration. Then, consideration is given to Qin's blind dates and explores how the film parallels cultural-industry policies to use sensitive subjects to characterise dishonest dating prospects. This exploration also reveals the function of these subjects in highlighting the importance of harmonious-society principles. Finally, my analysis focuses on events that occur later in the film — Qin and Xiaoxiao's journey to Hokkaido — and identifies how the film neutralises the sensitivity of extramarital affairs and characterises Xiaoxiao in correspondence with the theme of harmonious society.

Through these explorations, this section argues that Feng and his collaborates internalise film regulations into making *If You Are The One*, strategically integrating the Party's harmonious-society principles into the commerical use of sensitive subjects. This integration leads the film's representation of the subjects to be politically sanctioned since Feng neutralises the sensitive contents as signs to mark characters' identity or to indicate the story's social background. These neutralised representations only address the social issues behind the sensitive subjects rather than discussing them, i.e. the representations are decorative, which contain socially conscious topics as selling points and in passing, highlight the necessity of promoting the harmonious-society principle of honesty. Therefore, Feng's way of neutralisation in this film is to simplify sensitive contents for balancing political promotion and commercial consideration. For example, the film allows the homosexual character, Molly (played by Feng Yuanzheng), to express his opinion of marriage, and then dissolves it by classifying him with other dishonest dating candidates as a group. In other words, the film simplifies the social phenomenon of gay marriage. Meanwhile, it inserts the landscape of Hangzhou and Hokkaido into Xiaoxiao's romance with her lover, softening her extramarital affair. Instead of discussing Xiaoxiao's mistress identity and morally inappropriate deeds, the film stresses her honesty and loyalty to love. By presenting certain attitudes as normal and others as aberrant, the film tries to build a moral consensus that accords with the 'harmonious society' policy.

COMMERCIALLY PROMOTING "HARMONIOUS SOCIETY"

The film's theme parallels the Party's late-2000s political philosophy of harmonious society. The film transforms this dominant political agenda and the relevant social contexts into selling points, which integrates political promotion into its commercial operations. The idea of social harmony is derived from Confucianism and combines with the moral virtue of honesty as part of main melody spirits. Accordingly, the film starts with an advertisement for Qin's invention called 'the Conflict Resolution Terminal'. The advertisement states that conflicts have existed in human society since ancient times and people dream of finding a way to resolve all conflicts. It therefore displays Qin's invention on screen and claims the terminal can fulfill the dream. Accompanying this visual, a slogan appears, 'What is the most precious commodity in the 21st century? Harmony' (Figure 3.4).[65] This slogan represents a combination of the ancient Confucian idea and the principles of state ideology in post-socialist China. As a monolithic ideology in China's history, Confucianism works to sustain social stability, or as Jana Rošker argues, Confucianism 'implies different currents that can be used quite arbitrarily and selectively by modern ideologies, which are marked by their function of legitimising the state power' (2013: 4). In the film, the advertising slogan emphasises the cultural inheritance of this Confucian idea, i.e. advocating harmony still works in the new century. It reflects the cultural legitimacy that the Party endows main melody spirits by infusing Confucianism into them. Under this condition,

[65] The film's subtitle uses the word 'peace' to denote '*he xie*', while Chinese usually translate the word as 'harmony'.

restoring moral conduct becomes an effective solution for consolidating social order. Therefore in the sequence, the advertisement of Qin's innovation simply attributes conflict among people to the lack of harmony due to their dishonest communication. The mechanism of his invention is to prevent cheating by using the tube to cover the process of the rock-paper-scissors game between disputing parties, i.e. the invention aims to maintain the old game's rules, a metaphor for social order. In a word, Qin notices the new social phenomenon of dishonesty (market demands) and borrows traditional idea (harmony) to create a business, selling his solution as a commodity. This plot reflects Feng's idea behind making the film, which transforms ideological agenda into commodity, completing commercial purpose and achieving political promotion.



Figure 3.4: The advertisement for Qin's invention, which ends with the slogan 'Harmony' in If You Are The One, 2008.

Compared with Feng's previous comedic NYCFs such as *Sorry Baby*, the commercialisation of political promotion in *If You Are The One* is more active in its following of the trend of the Party's new political and cultural policies since Feng's

filmmaking needs administrative support to deal with the increasing commercial pressure from different investors. This compliance can be seen from Feng's intention for making this film, which aims to 'give audiences a cardiac jolt and cheer them up after encountering the predicaments and frustrations caused by the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and economic crisis' (Bu, 2009: 26). Consequently, this film expresses story in an upbeat tune and has 'no big scene about the vicissitudes of life, no big concern about the nation, and no aggression to the current society' (Feng, cited in Zhang and Li, 2009). Due to this cooperation with regulatory authorities, the film receives somewhat preferential treatment from censorship which suddenly strengthens overseeing film production at that time partly due to the public response to Ang Lee's *Lust, Caution* (*Se, jie*, 2007). Compared with other works with dozens of comments from censorship, *If You Are The One*, as Feng indicated in the aforementioned interview (ibid.), only received eight or nine revision suggestions as a result of his reconsideration of the tense situation and subsequent adjustment in expressing critical commentary and satire in his filmmaking. Meanwhile, Feng was elected as one of vice-chairmen of the China Film Association in 2008, the year when the film came out.[66] This election indicates that Feng had gained official recognition not only commercially but also politically. One indication of the recognition is that the CCTV New Broadcasting, the highly rated propaganda programme, introduced the films alongside two other releases, *Forever Enthralled* (*Mei lanfang*, dir. Chen Kaige, 2007) and *Ip Man* (*Ye wen*, dir. Wilson Yip, 2008). The two films are about Peking

[66] The film was released on18 December 2008. The election was announced at the 8th National Conference of China Film Association on 26th December 2008.

Opera, and martial arts with patriotism, respectively, which are in accordance with the current cultural policy of soft power in the late 2000s. Linking *If You Are The One* with these films in this official news reporting indicates the film's attribute of state propaganda, while the television coverage reflects a combination of state propaganda and commercial promotion since it increased the film's visibility. Thus, one can further say that Feng achieves a commercialisation of political promotion in his NYCFs.

The scene of Qin's blind dates, as aforementioned, is an explicit example of how Feng's filmmaking commercialises political promotion. There are eight dating prospects, including Qin's homosexual former colleague, a saleswoman of graves, an airline stewardess and mistress, a middle-age woman with amnesia, an ethnic minority girl, a frigid widow, an expectant single mother and a stock trader. Based on Zhu Meimei's interview, the ideas of designing these eight prospects came from Huayi Brothers' internal research. The company asked its employees to collect the hot social topics around them as material for the film script, such as the current stock market crisis, homosexuality, extramarital affairs and so on (2009: 64). The conflicts that these topics reflected were also a part of the social context that facilitates the Party to launch the policy of harmonious society. According to the document 'Resolutions of the CPC Central Committee on Major Issues Regarding the Building of a Harmonious Socialist Society' (2006), one factor that triggers social conflict is people's lack of credibility and moral decline. Consequently, the policy document recommends that the government combines laws and moral conducts in its

administering of the country, such as promoting ethics and morals e.g. honesty and integrity, establishing socialist concepts of honor and disgrace, and cultivating the prevailing custom of socialist civilisation. The film's selection of subjects thus superficially corresponds with the harmonious-society policy. As the policy is directed against the new emerging social phenomena, this correspondence with the policy makes the film's subject selection commercial. Further, due to this commercial consideration, the film avoids addressing the subjects of social system, although the policy mentions them. Instead, it gives consideration to those subjects that are more commercially viable, e.g. queer's view of love, which is the first time that homosexual content publicly appears on the big screen. Meanwhile, these subjects, i.e. the eight dating experiences, work in contrast with Qin's marriage personal. He hopes the candidates to be '*fei cheng wu rao*' (means 'don't contact unless you're sincere'). However, none of them are sincere. This contrast forms a *tiaokan*, humorously echoing the film's theme, and again represents Feng's operation of entertaining/commercialising political promotion.

NEUTRALLY REPRESENTING HOMOSEXUALITY

When using sensitive subjects to construct the eight dating experiences, the film represents their sensitive contents neutrally — by setting them to highlight the story's social background and marking dating prospects' identities — to correspond to its moral agenda of being honest with due consideration to market demands since these subjects are commercially viable. This political-economic consideration naturally creates many paradoxical representations, which reflect the creative response of Feng's filmmaking to the changed regulations and cultural-industry policies. These paradoxical representations demonstrate that he tries to represent the sensitive subjects in a superficially apolitical way and explores a balance point between the permission and the prohibition of regulatory authority.

The film's homosexual-related sequence of Qin's blind date with Molly is a prominent example that reflects Feng's filmmaking's neutralised representation of sensitive subject matter. The sequence first portrays Molly's homosexual identity and leaves room for him to explain his opinion of love and marriage. Thereafter, it immediately distracts the focus from the explanation to Qin's humorous response. Thus, the film not only conforms to film regulations but also maintains to some extent the issue's social appeal. Specifically, the sequence begins with a tracking shot of a view of a pretty girl's back. Following her steps to a restaurant, Qin appears on screen. He is waiting for a dating candidate named Molly. The tracking shot creates an illusion

that the girl is Molly. Qin's former colleague Jianguo suddenly emerges and sits opposite Qin. He says he is Molly, which surprises Qin (Figure 3.5).

> Qin: Are you trying to get in my way? My advertisement was for a marriage partner.
> Molly: I wanted to see you. Besides, you didn't write 'no men wanted'.
> Qin: Of course I didn't. Why would I seek a man? I'm not gay....
> (Molly is awkward. Qin pauses and points to him)
> Qin: You're...?
> Molly: Yes (smiles and nods)
> Qin: Huh? But I'm not.

This conversation reflects a neutralised technique that the film deals with the subject matter of homosexuality. The film constructs the heterosexual character Qin to reveal Molly's homosexual identity with negative sentences and questions, e.g. 'I'm not gay' and 'you're...?'.[67] The philosophy of this technique is easily associated with that of the 2006 film regulation that removes the detailed articles of socially sensitive subjects and makes equivocal explanation for how to represent them in films. The regulation removes the clause of homosexual contents; but there is still no public screening of any films with the topic. Correspondingly, the film openly represents the queer image and later positively displays Molly's pride about his identity; nevertheless, it finally turns the sequence into a farce and degrades Molly into the group of dishonesty.

[67] Qin uses the word '*tongxing lian*', i.e. 'homosexuality'. The film's English subtitle uses the word 'gay'.



Figure 3.5: Molly's date with Qin in If You Are The One, 2008.

In fact, the equivocal application of film regulations is mainly caused by censorship, the adjudicator part of regulatory authority which can circumstantially interpret the regulation in practice. Reflected in the filmmaking, censors intended to ban the sequence, but then agreed that it could be retained after Feng promised to cut most of the conversations between Qin and Molly (Zhang and Li, 2009). One prominent manifestation of this adjustment is the words that directly show Molly's identity never appear again in the dialogue, such as 'gay' or 'homosexuality'. The sequence turns to focus on Qin's humorous response to Molly's affection for him. It first makes Molly explain his change and idea of identity, e.g. 'I used to lack the courage to face my identity'. He suggests Qin bravely face it if he is homosexual as well. Qin replies 'you are ahead of the curve. But I am not that enlightened yet... whenever I clear a woman out (of my heart), guess what happens next? Another woman fills the space'. When Molly drives the conversation to express his love, Qin immediately stops him. From these dialogues, we can see that the film carefully keeps the representation of homosexual content in a moderate form. It designs Qin to use Feng's trademark humour to dissolve Molly's manifesto. However, Qin's words only

work to refuse Molly indirectly rather than display opposition towards Molly's idea. Meanwhile, the filmmaking makes Molly's manifesto focus on his pursuit of love instead of his opinion of the current marriage system. Comparing with the social issue of the marriage system, representing Molly's personal relationship is more easily acceptable to censors. Therefore, the film halts Molly's love confession, since it is sensitive as a threat to the social system under the circumstance of seeking ideal partners for marriage.

Except for using negative sentences and questions, the film pays more attention to the use of visual stereotypes of gay men to overemphasise Molly's identity. This operation may be regarded as a remediation for cutting down the dialogue between Qin and Molly according to censors' requirements. As Feng Yuanzheng who plays Molly mentions, 'although there are a few of lines about sexuality, but you can easily distinguish Molly's identity just by glancing him' (Beijing News, 2008). More important, it represents Molly's actions as comical and therefore softens the influence of his manifesto. In the sequence, Molly's image is thoroughly feminised. He uses a female name, wears makeup, has received cosmetic surgery for double-fold eyelid and speaks with a soft tone. When talking with Qin, he employs the words that women would generally use when flirting, such as *renjia* (a pronoun of 'I') and *taoyan* (literally means 'I hate you'). These impressions of Molly correspond to the mainstream cognition of gay men in Chinese society. He is 'described as a freak who has the ingrained stereotype of homosexual, effeminate, transvestitism and androgyny' (Wei, 2010: 92). In other words, using stereotypes to comically represent homosexual

content is sanctioned by censorship. Only in this way, can the film retain the expression of Molly's identity and manifesto. This reservation reflects the film's attention to the subject of homosexuality. However, this attention is more attributed to the commercial viability of this subject as a talking point, since the formation of the sequence's comedic effect is based on the mainstream misunderstanding of the homosexual group. Thus, the stereotypical image and softened manifesto are the outcomes that the film negotiates to meet the requirements of the censors, mainstream market and homosexual audience group, for the sake of increasing box-office returns.

In order to commercially represent homosexuality in both viable and ideologically acceptable ways, the making of this sequence not only complies with the censors' requirements but also serves as the film's theme of being honest. The filmmakers juxtapose the sequence with the other seven sequences of insincere dates, which suggests its nature, i.e. Molly's deed is also dishonest, and therefore should not be advocated under the construction of harmonious society. This dishonesty is reflected in Molly's concealment of identity. However, his crush on Qin in sincere, since he cannot forget that Qin rescued him. Partly for this reason, the film presents Molly's date with Qin at the beginning of the sequence. The following blind dates become more and more ridiculous: one candidate comes to sell graves, another seeks a father for her unborn baby, a further one treats marriage as a business like trading stocks and shares. Thus, the film subtly attributes the failure of Molly's date to his identity

concealment and therefore avoids discussing homosexuality and expressing opinion explicitly. The representation of homosexual content works as a selling point, as it mainly aims to drive the story which promotes the honesty principle of harmonious society. In fact, based on Qin's embarrassing reaction on this dating occasion, he would not go even if Molly told him the truth. By comparison, the mistress Xiaoxiao who also has a sincere attitude to love is accepted by Qin and gains a chance to correct her improper deeds. This result further verifies the function of using homosexual subject matter as a selling point and political-promoting tool, i.e. this use complies with mainstream attitudes about sexuality, as it is a part of the current social system that the harmonious-society policy aims to maintain and support.

ROMANTICISING EXTRAMARITAL AFFAIRS

The film's second half focuses on Xiaoxiao's travel in Hokkaido, during which she eventually gives up her lover and chooses to stay with Qin. Xiaoxiao's extramarital affair only works as a symbol to mark her identity of mistress and show her motivation to live a more moral life. These two points reflect that the film's representation of extramarital affairs complies with film regulations and censors' requirements. As a result, the film stresses more on Xiaoxiao's sincerity than her affair. Also, it intertwines beautiful landscapes with her memory of the extramarital affair, which romanticises her trysts and creates a sorrowful ambience for her encounters. In this way, the film suggests that Xiaoxiao's improper deeds can be repaired under the harmonious society and her correctness is politically educational and persuasive.

Different from Feng's previous films of extramarital affairs, the film mentions the affair as a love story and from the perspective of the mistress, which reflects Feng's adjustment according to the changes in film regulations. In his early films like *Sigh* and *Cell Phone*, Feng's filmmaking follows the basic narrative structure of the extramarital-affair film which 'is simplified binary opposition between morality and desire plus the filler of descriptions about landscape, details of family life, visual and sound effect, and trigger points of the affairs' (Geng, 2009: 35). This use responds to the 1997 censoring rule that clearly lists extramarital affairs as a taboo subject.[68]

[68] i.e. the 'Rules of Film Censorship'.

Partly due to the consideration of the films' box office, Feng's filmmaking continues to blur the binary opposition in a sanctioned range, 'making moral sin outside judgment, and avoiding prettifying and whitewashing desire' (ibid.: 36). When making *If You Are The One*, the 2006 censoring rule removes the extramarital affair content from the taboo subject list. Correspondingly, the commerciality of representing extramarital affairs is increased in the film.[69] The representation shuns the role of the wife in the love triangle and emphasises Xiaoxiao's goodness. She tries not to break her lover's family and avoids having conflicts with the wife. They only meet once, and the wife is unaware of Xiaoxiao's existence. According to Geng, 'the moral judgment of extramarital affairs mainly comes from the betrayed; their existence makes the betrayer and the other woman/man bear the moral burden' (ibid,: 37). The absence of the wife's character undermines the offence of Xiaoxiao's deeds to moral conduct. It turns the story of Xiaoxiao's extramarital affair into her love of loyalty, shifting the film's focus from moral judgment to sympathy for the mistress.

When portraying Xiaoxiao's trysts, the film inserts landscapes in her memory of the affair to fill up the gap in the binary opposition between morality and desire; it focuses rather on describing the trysts' trivial details, such as the boat they carry in Hang Zhou and the landscapes of Hokkaido. The descriptions romanticise the representation of Xiaoxiao and her lover's desire. Comparing with Feng's previous extramarital-affair films, this representation is more connotative, which reflects the

[69] i.e. The 'regulation of Film Script Approval and Administration of Films'.

multiple impacts of investment resources and censorship. Meanwhile, as the 2006 censoring rule is equivocal, censors' comments become more unpredictable. As a result, the film turns to focus on exhibiting the landscapes, creating poetic ambience, and therefore defocuses Xiaoxiao's trysts. For example, the film sets a scene that Xiaoxiao and her lover are laying on a *wupeng* boat at Hang Zhou (Figure 3.6). They say nothing but whispers of love. The *wupeng* boat is a poetic symbol of the canal towns in southern China. In addition, the film uses ink colour and dim light to further render the scene's romantic atmosphere. Thus, it dissolves the potential risk of representing extramarital affairs into its aesthetic portrayals of the story setting. Similarly, in the part of Xiaoxiao's travel, the film combines the flashback of Xiaoxiao's memory of trysts with the landscapes of Hokkaido (Figure 3.7). Based on Chris Lukinbeal's research, the landscapes 'play a central role in the shaping of the film's ambience' (2005: 7). As to *If You Are The One*, the Hokkaido landscape evokes Xiaoxiao's sorrow of the past since she started the relationship with her lover there. Accordingly, the film tends to slow down narrative, which 'exhibits a distant, peaceful and sentimental atmosphere' (Hong, 2008: 22). The design corresponds to the film's theme of moral persuasion since the sorrowful atmosphere suggests that extramarital affair is painful. For the same persuasive purpose, this design softens Xiaoxiao's improper deeds — by turning the focus to representing peaceful and beautiful Hokkaido — to make a condition for her rehabilitation at the end.



Figure 3.6: Xiaoxiao's tryst on wupeng boat at Hang Zhou in If You Are The One, 2008.



Figure 3.7: the sequence that combines Xiaoxiao's recall of her trysts and the Hokkaido landscapes in If You Are The One, 2008.

Except for displaying the reprehensible nature of extramarital affairs, the sorrowful atmosphere also highlights Xiaoxiao's quality of sincerity of love. Based on the film's logic, this quality is the necessary condition for her correctness and happy ending. Specifically, in the section of Hokkaido travel, Qin's friend asks him whether it is worthy to love Xiaoxiao. He replies that Xiaoxiao has a good soul and sincere heart compared with other dating candidates. The film then arranges a scene of attempted suicide for Xiaoxiao, working as a metaphor to indicate that she washes her moral sin and breaks with the past. Thereafter, she chooses Qin, the symbol of sincerity in the film, which means Xiaoxiao's return to the mainstream ideology. With the happy ending of Qin and Xiaoxiao's combination, the film represents the significance of implementing harmonious-society principles. Considering they come to blind dates for marriage, this combination signifies the construction of family which is the basic unit of society. It symbolises the establishment of harmonious society and the resulting maintenance of the current social order.

Conclusion

The two films, *Sorry Baby and If You Are The One*, reflect the interaction between regulatory authority and Feng's filmmaking in the period in which propaganda campaigns were changed and film regulations were updated. During the period, his filmmaking continually accords with the changes, implementing political promotion; it therefore receives a positive negotiation with regulatory authority for using taboo subject matter or involving sensitive contents that are relevant to the current social condition, which enhances the commerciality of his NYCFs. Considering that the government leads the film industry's commercialisation, this negotiation also inherently carries out the cultural-industry policies. As an ideological-commercial assignment of the 9550 project, *Sorry Baby* gives priority to the promotion of main melody spirits. Based on this, it exchanges chance to use taboo subject matter for commercial consideration. This use mainly works for entertainment, i.e. it is sanctioned. The characters' methods relating taboo subject matter such as kidnapping do not help them solve problems in the film. When they choose to adhere to main melody spirits, they receive happy endings. From here, it can be seen that the film completes a creative combination of political promotion and commercial pursuit. As for *If You Are The One*, the condition is different. The film proactively parallels the Party's current political philosophy of harmonious society in the late 2000s. It internalises the promotion of the harmonious society policy into filmmaking, and binds the promotion with the use of new relaxed subject matter, i.e. it

combines the popular political topics and widely discussed social phenomena, and turns them into selling points. In this way, the film functions commercialised political promotion and gains the official support from the CCTV News Broadcasting and the CCTV 6 film channel.

Tacit accordance with political ideology does not mean Feng's filmmaking is totally submissive. His filmmaking uses the film regulations' ambiguous articles and censors' unpredictable feedback to complete sanctioned representations of social focus. The representations express limited concern for the sensitive subjects involved despite their compliance with state propaganda. For example, the film at least exhibits a homosexual image on the big screen, although its representation is in accordance with the mainstream stereotype of this group. In this sense, Feng's filmmaking is in creative compliance with regulatory authorities' political promotion projects and film regulations. Meanwhile, as the dominant political topic and sensitive subject matter are both the selling points of Feng's NYCFs, regulatory authority's tacit permission is a kind of economic means that the government uses to control and coordinate domestic film production. Therefore, Feng's filmmaking actively meets regulatory authority's requirements, proactively implementing political promotion in the late 2000s. The tendency is a likely outcome that commercial pressure propels Feng's filmmaking towards the collaboration with regulatory authority, since he gains various sources of investment along with the government-led commercialisation process.

Chapter 4 *Be There or Be Square* and *Cell Phone*: Popular Humour and Commercialised Social Critique

Introduction

Accompanying the economic reform in the 1980s, the Chinese film industry had a tendency to make entertainment films that gave more consideration to market demand. Wang Shuo's stories featuring vulgar language and cynical attitude towards society were fashionable and made into films in quantity, such as Xia Gang's *Half Flame, Half Brine* (*Yiban haishui, yiban huoye*, 1988) and Huang Jianxin's *Samsara* (*Lun hui*, 1988). Following this wave of film adaptation, many works of similar style emerged in the early 1990s, such as Xia Gang's *After Separation* (*Da saba*, 1992) and Chen Guoxin's *The War of Divorce* (*Lihun dazhan*, 1992). These imitations consolidate Wang's style of *tiaokan* as a feature of the entertainment filmmaking at that time. For the media authorities, this style becomes an option for exploring the state-led commercialisation of domestic film and television production, and is widely used for displaying softened social criticism and turning state propaganda into appealing forms.

The humour style of *tiaokan* is rooted in Chinese traditional culture and evolved by combining with folk vocal art forms such as *xiangsheng* (crosstalk). It refers to a witty tease or banter with somebody or about some issues. This discourse inherently

supports the existing mainstream ideology, which allows it to tread a fine line, embedding criticism or indoctrination into entertainment form, in order to enhance the effectiveness of persuasion. In fact, from the semantic structure of the word *tiaokan*, this discourse' suggestive attribute is already evident. The character '*tiao*' means 'adjusting the discourse into a proper level', while the character '*kan*' refers to 'a mode of constructing words which not only highlights speakers' wittiness but also generates a surprise effect'; when combining the two characters into one word, the character '*tiao*' works as the attributive of '*kan*' (Tu, 2015:76). From the crosstalk, its derived short comedic films, Wang Shuo's stories, and to Feng's NYCFs, the use of *tiaokan* continually adheres to ideological approval. Only the level of criticism is changed according to different sociocultural contexts during the process. As a popular expression with an entertaining effect, *tiaokan* has a commercial potential. These political and commercial attributes tally with the aim of the film industry's state-led commercialisation which seeks to balance political appeal and commercial consideration.

This correspondence not only makes a condition for Feng's making of NYCFs to gain support from film authorities, but also makes his *tiaokan* style more entertainment-oriented. His first three NYCFs such as *Be There or Be Square* gradually abandon using political issues to make *tiaokan*, and give more consideration to social phenomena instead. This tendency becomes clearer in his subsequent films in the 2000s. Accordingly, instead of political slogans, Feng's

tiaokan expression involves more and more catchphrases such as advertising slogans. It is no longer limited to using the Beijing dialect to create a humorous effect, for example, the use of much Sichuan-dialect to create the *tiaokan* effect in *Cell Phone*. The increasing use of dialectic elements results in the transformation of Feng's *tiaokan* style in his collaboration with the writer Liu Zhenyun. Since Liu is involved in his scriptwriting, most of Feng's *tiaokan* expressions are not independent from film stories. His *tiaokan* style actually presents a tendency of using the whole story to create a sense of absurdity and humorous effect.

As the second work during this transitional period in which the focus of Feng's *tiaokan* turns from political to social content, *Be There or Be Square* retains many fixed patterns of Feng's political *tiaokan* and simultaneously practises his new modes of social *tiaokan*. *Cell Phone* is the first NYCF in which Liu joined in Feng's filmmaking, which not only inherits the mode of social *tiaokan* used in Feng's previous NYCFs such as *Be There or Be Square*, but also develops this mode by expanding the materials of *tiaokan* under the influence of Liu's narrative pattern. This series of changes is relevant to the film industry's institutional reform and the increasing investment in film business, and filmmakers' corresponding activities of market expansion. Focusing on *Be There or Be Square* and *Cell Phone*, this chapter explores how the appropriation of Chinese popular culture (Wang Shuo-esque *tiaokan* and Liu Zhenyun's humorous style packaged in his narrative) engages in the construction of Feng's *tiaokan* expression, shaping the comedic style of his NYCFs into a

commercially viable and low political form. Based on this exploration, it further reveals the role and function of *tiaokan* discourse in the negotiation of Feng's filmmaking with the changes in popular culture, the industry's commercialisation and the regulatory authorities' shifting directives and practices. In order to promote these explorations, this chapter begins with an investigation of the development of using *tiaokan* discourse. It helps to identify the discourse' attributes and features, and therefore ascertains the reasons why Feng's *tiaokan* (rather than other humorous expressions) are accepted by regulatory authority, from political and cultural perspectives. Then, this chapter explores *Be There or Be Square* to examine the impact of Wang Shuo-esque *tiaokan* on Feng's comedic style, and investigates how Feng revises Wang's *tiaokan* style according to the 9550 project's political and economic requirements. *Cell Phone* was made when the 9550 project had already been completed. At that time, Feng's filmmaking had operated within the state-led filmmaking framework and concentrated on commercial exploration, such as introducing Liu's humorous style. In the third part, this chapter therefore focuses on the film and explores how the style changes Feng's *tiaokan* expression to fit with the industry's deepened commercialisation and to represent taboo subjects.

Through these analyses and explorations, this chapter argues that the appropriation of popular culture shapes the humorous style of Feng's NYCFs and enables his filmmaking to give consideration to both political and commercial appeals. This appropriation contributes to the negotiated engagement of regulatory authority

and the Chinese film industry. Feng's filmmaking is politically sanctioned and commercially viable, indicating the government's attempt to incorporate popular culture into commercialised political promotion. This strategy takes advantage of Feng's NYCFs' welcoming market response and their penetration of popular discourse, with many film lines becoming catchphrases. Due to its inherent attribute of political approval, *tiaokan* expression can integrate ideological education, entertainment and social concerns. In Feng's NYCFs, this expression enables suggestive critiques of social problems, appealing first to people's understanding and therefore smoothing acceptance of arguments for ideological rectitude. In other words, although *tiaokan* discourse maintains a critical form, it works to consolidate the existing regime.

Taking *Be There or Be Square* as an example, when the regulatory authority gives priority to political promotion under the 9950 project, the *tiaokan* expression in Feng's NYCFs tends to be softened in comparison with Wang's style. However, it still retains the features of Wang's *tiaokan*, such as making *tiaokan* with political utterances and representing them as snatches that are independent of the film's story. In addition, Feng's *tiaokan* expression usually focuses on widely discussed social issues, which is in compliance with the 9550 project, requiring marketisation of domestic filmmaking. *Be There or Be Square* tells a love story of two Beijing immigrants in Los Angeles, and designs several pranks to represent their on-again, of-again relationship. These pranks usually contain certain scenes of political *tiaokan*

based on the humorous mode used in *Party A*. These *tiaokan* are often out of tune with the love story but do produce comic effect, and more important, the borrowed political phrases become guidelines for the characters to solve problems in the film. For this reason, it can be said that the function of Feng's political *tiaokan* is to celebrate rather than dissolve the authority of the political discourses.

In comparison, *Cell Phone* abandons using political utterances to make *tiaokan* and turns to express comments on new rising social phenomena. The film deals with a widely concerning topic of extramarital affairs, representing an embarrassing experience of a TV talk-show host Yan Shouyi (played by Ge You) whose infidelity is exposed via mobile phone. The transformation of *tiaokan*'s target from political issues to social problems is a result of Feng's acceptance of the state-led filmmaking framework and corresponds to the film industry's further commercialisation in the early 2000s. Under these circumstances, the importance of market consideration increases in Feng's filmmaking, which propels him to improve the political acceptability of his humorous style. *Tiaokan* as a featured expression of crosstalk is familiar to many Northern Chinese. Due to commercial pressure, Feng's filmmaking maintains the existing Northern trademark, in that by retaining the *tiaokan* style, his films simultaneously expand this market by introducing more humorous elements to help break through the limitations of dialects and local cultures. The adoption of Liu's humorous style is a logical consequence, which leads Feng's filmmaking to make *tiaokan* thorough telling stories. Meanwhile, the focus on narratives enables Feng to

combine *tiaokan* expression with product placement, using advertisements, particularly advertising slogans as material for *tiaokan*. This combination enriches the expression of *tiaokan* and also offers critical function to the film's product placement, reflecting the creativity of Feng's filmmaking in his cooperation with sponsors. In order to investigate the formation of Feng's creativity, the attributes and mechanism of *tiaokan* discourse should first be considered, to understand its capacity in balancing commercial and political appeal.

Tiaokan and Chinese Humour

THE ATTRIBUTES OF TIAOKAN DISCOURCE

As a popular humorous style, *tiaokan* discourse is deeply rooted in Chinese traditional cultural forms. It infuses entertainment into critiques of particular issues, in order to arouse the attention of the persuaded to notice their potentially unsuitable deeds at which the persuaders are really targeting. Similarly, when using the discourse in a political context, its criticism works to restore the existing regime. This political attribute is closely related to the understanding of humour in traditional culture. In Confucianism, using humour (*huaji*) is regarded as a manifestation of self-cultivation (Davis, 2013: 4), and therefore should be 'never crude or rude' (Xu, 2011: 59). This sets the requirements for the use of humour in communication. From the aspect of Daoism, humorous expression is endowed with more didactic function, and works to '[awaken] the sensibilities of its audience to the falsity and ridiculousness of contemporary mundane events that they otherwise would have accepted as inevitable parts of human life' (Chan, 2011: 73). Under the Confucian and Daoist influence, Chinese humour develops into a didactic tool that embeds social commentary into a pleasurable form to enhance persuasion. Many historical records show how humorous expression works for persuasion, e.g. the *huaji-ists* (literally means jesters) in Si Maqian's records of the *Grand Historian* (*Shi ji*, around 94 BC) use allusions and satire to euphemistically wage their autocrats to amend their

mistakes. These criticisms reflect the *huaji-ists'* strong sense of social responsibility and tend to facilitate rather than subvert social stability. Chinese crosstalk as a stage performance that was popular from the late 19th century is regarded as a derivative of the shows performed by these *huaji-ists* (*hua*ji *xi*).[70] It generally contains two actors who make *tiaokan* of each other. These witty jokes are usually related to current social issues. The crosstalk's form of duo dialogue colloquialises its humorous expressions to adapt to market demands. The features of the crosstalk's content and form construct a basic framework of *tiaokan* expression.

The Western sense of humour also builds on the formation of the crosstalk humour style by enhancing the poignancy and profundity of *tiaokan*'s criticisms and comments. This Western idea's popularity helps to spread the use of the humour style into a wider range of popular cultural forms such as film comedy. The new combination of this crosstalk humour style and film comedy creates a condition for further infusion of *tiaokan* expression into the storytelling in Feng's NYCFs. Early in the 1920s, Chinese intellectuals such as Lin Yutang introduced the Western understanding of humour, in order to strengthen the critical edge of the Chinese style of humour. This new humour expression was used to make commentaries on the Nationalist Party's government. For example, influenced by George Meredith, Lin regarded humour as 'the comic muse' and suggested 'comedy as a tool to promote reason and civilization, and to control the excesses of government and factional

[70] Luo Changpei (1950) regarded the jesters' performances recorded in Si Maqian's book as an origin of *xiangsheng*. Wang Liye also employed this idea in his book for introducing *xiangsheng* and its aesthetics (1982: 2-3).

groups in society' (Chey, 2011: 3). This idea influences contemporary popular crosstalk and derived short comic films. These films such as *Die for Marriage* (*Nan fu nan qi*, dir. Zhang Zhengchuan and Zheng Zhengqiu, 1913) and *Chuang Tze Tests His Wife* (*Zhuangzi shi qi*, dir. Li Beihai, 1914) are usually based on *wenming xi* (literally, modern play), using the same scripts and cast (Rao, 2005: 27). Some modern plays can be considered as a variety of crosstalk, since they contain the style of crosstalk and 'many crosstalk performers like Hou Baolin participated in the plays' (Xue, 2009 cited in Bian, 2009). Some short comic films inherit the humour style of crosstalk and function as social satire and moral indoctrination. With the increase of investment in filmmaking and the improvement of technology, short comic films were developed in the 1930s both in terms of length and narrative structure, and later evolved into the form known today as comedy film. Due to the popularity of the Western style of humour in the same period, many comedy films such as *Ideal Son-in-law* (*Cheng long kuai xu*, dir. Yuan Jun, 1947) and *Crow and Sparrow* (*wuya yu maque*, dir. Zheng Junli, 1949) displayed a strong sense of social critique. Similar to the crosstalk works of the same period, these films targeted the Nationalist government, and used satire and humour to make political commentary to criticise its reign.

After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, both film comedy and crosstalk turned to praise (*gengsong*) the new look of China, and satirise old customs and the

corruptive government of the Nationalist Party.[71] This transformation consolidated the attribute of Chinese humour that approves the current regime and makes its criticisms more suggestive, influencing Wang Shuo's use of *tiaokan* discourse in his stories. Wang's *tiaokan* is sharply critical, but its style is implicit and sanctioned. These criticisms responded to the political and social context of economic reform and opening-up in the 1980s, e.g. they mocked bureaucracy, according with the current social expectation of improving the Party's style of work. Wang paid more attention to improving the entertainment effect, and this reflected his market consideration under the economic reform. Under the market economy, socialist values were adjusted. The whole society was in a post-socialist situation 'where socialism has lost its coherence as a metatheory of politics because of the attenuation of the socialist vision in historical unfolding' (Dirlik, 2005:231). This situation encouraged Wang to use political utterances and symbols to make *tiaokan*. In fact, as the grand narrative of socialism was weakened, many art forms with similar expressions of Wang's *tiaokan* emerged. They all held a playful attitude towards political themes and images, and formed styles such as political pop and cynical realism. According to artist and critic Luo Fei, political pop works 'focused [on] the surface symbols and posturing, but they don't engage the politics'; cynical realism works such as Wang Shuo's stories represent 'meaninglessness with a mocking attitude' (Martin, 2012). These works do not take a

[71] According to Rao Shuguang, after 1949, the satirical feature of the Chinese comedy gradually faded away. A few satirical comedies appeared after 1956 when Mao Zedong proposed the Hundred Flowers Campaign that encouraged people to express their ideas about the Communist government. However, one year later, the Anti-Rightist movement suppressed the production of the satirical comedy, which led the development of the Chinese comedy into the praising type. From 1961to 1964, the praising comedy was allowed to add certain light necessary satire. However, when the Cultural Revolution started in 1966, the praising comedy was suppressed and moved away from the view of the public. See, *Zhongguo xiju dianying shi*, Chapter 1. Based on David Moser's study (2004), the similar condition happened in the filed of *xiangsheng*. Xiangsheng was 'called upon to praise rather to satirise'.

political stance, and the use of these political elements, in Luo's eyes, works more like a marketing strategy (ibid.). Therefore, this attitude of taking no standpoint and commercial consideration indicates that these two styles actually endorse the Party's core agenda of economic reform at that time.

As a result of this political endorsement, Wang's tiaokan style was retained in many popular cultural forms after the Party's political crisis in 1989, such as Feng's NYCFs in the late 1990s. Due to the sensitive political atmosphere, Wang's bitter *tiaokan* was no longer opportune. Consequently, Feng continued to use Wang's methods of generating *tiaokan* such as borrowing political utterances as materials, but softened his style into a more amusing form. In this sense, 'Feng is a moderate version of Wang Shuo' (Gong, 2009: 208). Different from Wang's sanctioned mockery on the problems of the current social system, the political utterances that Feng uses work more to promote the Party's ideology and praise its governance. In his NYCFs, these utterances usually become the guideline for characters to overcome their predicaments, such as the revolutionary slogan in *Be There or Be Square*, the idea of 'social harmony' in *If You Are The One*. Thus, Feng's *tiaokan* can be read as a pastiche, that is to say, it is an imitation of political catchphrases without an antagonistic attitude and predetermined purpose, or in Richard Dyer's parlance, it is 'textually signaled' and' evaluatively open' (2007: 24). This does not mean that Feng's *tiaokan* lacks a critical dimension. It simply attaches more attention to social phenomena than political issues. Since *Be There or Be Square*, using social *tiaokan*

in Feng's NYCFs has become more and more frequent.[72]This transformation happened along with the film industry's state-led commercialisation in which government sponsorship withdrew from Feng's filmmaking, while private investment joined in. In this new commercial context, Feng's NYCFs paid more attention to the market. In addition to representing current affairs, Feng introduced Liu Zhenyun's narrative mode to adjust his *tiaokan* style in order to enhance this humorous form's market acceptability. As a result, his NYCFs retained *tiaokan* content as their market base, and simultaneously broke through the cultural and linguistic barriers in understanding *tiaokan*. Feng's tiaokan thus evolved into a style, which centres on commercial appeal and also takes political promotion into account. As economic development is at the heart of the Party's agenda, this style's dual purpose again highlights the political attribute of Feng's *tiaokan.*

[72] In his recent films such as *Personal Tailor* (*Siren dingzhi*, 2013) and *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (*Wo bushi Pan Jinlian*, 2016), Feng clearly made many political *tiaokan*. Similar to his social tiaokan, the humorous effect of these political ones was created by film stories rather than using political utterances, such as the dream project of experiencing bribery in *Personal Tailor* and the petitioning for divorce in *I Am Not Madame Bovary*.

THE MECHANISM OF TIAOKAN DISCOURCE

The humorous attribute of *tiaokan* enables users to make suggestive but sanctioned criticisms. In the context of cultural industries, this attribute allows popular cultural forms such as crosstalk, Wang's stories and Feng's NYCFs to have both political and commercial appeal. The humorous effect of *tiaokan* is usually created by a mismatch between semantic and conversational contexts. This mismatch indicates that the communicative purpose is inconsistent with the informative intention in *tiaokan*, as Herbert Colston explains, 'the words often mean something quite different from and even the opposite of what is meant' (1995: 25). *Tiaokan* therefore works as a 'dual-meaning discourse' (*shuangsheng huayu*, Li, 2001:178), simultaneously carrying literal information and subtext to the addressed. Under such a communicative aim, *tiaokan* discourse is guided by two prominent pragmatic principles: being 'euphemistic and interesting' (Tu, 2015: 76). Due to the former principle, the expression of *tiaokan* undermines potential offensiveness but retains intention for mockery. The principle of being interesting works to adjust the speaker's expression into an acceptable range. In conversation, the speaker plants their intention into an amusing form that may be irrelevant to the topic. Admittedly, this irrelevance may blur the speaker's meaning, and makes many possible links between the conversational context and their verbal messages. However, the addressed can find the optimal link, since they share the same cultural background and similar social experiences. They can use the on-the-ground knowledge to fill the *tiaokan*'s missing

parts and therefore decode the speaker's message. This interaction brings a thoughtful smile — caused by a tacit understanding of the conversational topics — between the speakers and the addressed. From here it can be seen, that the humorous effect is the symbol that estimates whether *tiaokan* works or not, while the key for a successfully conveyed subaudition is to establish the optimal link between the two parties of conversation.

Setting an optimal link is the basic mechanism of *tiaokan* discourse, which is widely used in crosstalk and gains development in Wang's stories and Feng's NYCFs. Chinese scholars such as Wu Shuyuan (2011), use Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's mode of 'ostensive-inferential communication' (1986) to explain how the mechanism works in crosstalk, and this helps to understand the construction of *tiaokan* in Wang and Feng's works.[73] According to this mode, the ostension of discourse contains two layers of information. The first layer works as an ostensive stimulus to lead the spectator to notice the intention in the second layer. The speaker 'who produces an ostensive stimulus must intend it to seem relevant' to the spectator and makes it 'be worth the [spectator's] attention' (Sperber and Wilson, 1986: 156). The ostensive stimulus can introduce various interpretations and form 'a set of assumptions' about the discourse (ibid.: 157). For *tiaokan*, the optimal link carries the discourse's aim, while other maximally relevant links in the set of assumptions work to create humorous effect. Taking crosstalk as an example, performers usually spend

[73] There are many other scholars such as Cui Jia (2004) and Wang Yan (2005) who also uses the mode to investigate the mechanism of *tiaokan* and crosstalk. See, Cui's *Xiangsheng youmo de guanlian lilun chanshi* and Wang's *Cong guanlian lilun kan youmo huayu de guanlian tezhi*.

time making logical and reasonable descriptions in order to set maximally relevant links between the descriptions and spectators' on-the-ground knowledge. These links have 'greater contextual effects' and enable the spectator to get the message's intended meaning across with a 'smaller processing effort' (ibid.: 125). When the links are ready, the performers pose their questions. Due to the former descriptions, the spectators can easily follow the preconceptions and give estimated answers. The performers then reveal their answers, i.e. the optimal link. The inconformity between the two kinds of answers makes spectators suddenly enlightened, provoking laughter (Wu, 2011: 66). This surprise with a humorous effect not only neutralises potential offensiveness especially when the speakers make political references, but further, attracts the spectators' attention to the issues discussed in the performance.

Wang's stories and Feng's early NYCFs inherit the mechanism but omit the descriptions for building maximally relevant links. They employ catchphrases and popular rhetoric to create preconceptions for the addressed as quickly as possible.[74] The feature makes them rely on more linguistic tricks such as puns and quips to construct *tiaokan*. In Wang's stories, he borrows political slogans, directives and the style of official rhetoric to describe vulgar trivial things in daily life. He maintains these phrasal forms but sets new contexts for them (Li, 2001: 183). For example, he uses the phrase of 'convening party-group meeting' (*kai dangxiaozu hui*) to denote the

[74]Partly due to the length of television programme, the crosstalk show in the Chinese New Year Gala also uses catchphrases for make *tiaokan*, since audiences are familiar with the catchphrases and can quickly get laughing points caused by the inconformity between the catchphrases' sematic and conversational contexts.

hedonistic and bureaucratic lifestyle of officials, such as gambling and corruption. This approach can be regarded as carnivalesque. It accords with the essential principle of 'grotesque realism' (Bakhtin, 1968) that degrades things from the high spiritual, ideal, abstract level to the low, material level. Meanwhile, according to Wang Yichuan's analysis, Wang Shuo designs the users of *tiaokan* in his stories to first make self-persiflage as a vulgar person, getting rid of moral restrictions, therefore then able to tease targets (usually superiors or elites) who cannot argue back due to their preset status (1999: 112). This analysis further manifests the *tiaokan*'s feature of 'carnivalistic misalliances' (Bakhtin, 1984: 123), which reveals the basic function of Wang's expression is to dissolve the authority of the phrases involved in order to remind and criticise the political decadences under the economic reform.

Feng softens the aggressively critical form of Wang's *tiaokan* and further commercialises it by introducing Liu Zhenyun's humour style. His first three NYCFs continue to adopt Wang's mode, using political phrases to talk about trivial things. These *tiaokan,* however, do not create satirical effect like Wang's. For example, *Party A, Party B* borrows a line of the Soviet propagandistic film *Lenin in 1918* (dir. Mikhail, Romm, 1939), 'comrade Lenin does not cough any more' to describe the health condition of a fictional celebrity who wants to return to normal life. This *tiaokan* appears apolitical and uses the inconformity between the line's original meaning and the film context to create entertaining effect. In fact, as with the products under the 9550 project, Feng's political *tiaokan* in these three NYCFs mainly works to support

the Party's philosophy of main melody spirits. They were allowed to dissolve the authority of political elements but only the ones that the Party intended to discard or disapprove. Taking *Sorry Baby* as an example*,* the film uses the homophone of *ren quan* (*ren* literally means 'human', while *quan,* 'rights') to mock the Western sense of human rights. It sets the following scene: a manager of a travel agency comes to a train station to pick up a group of tourists, because he has received message that '*ren quan dao*' (*dao* literally means 'arrive', while here *quan* becomes an adverb which means 'all'; the phrase therefore means 'all the members of the tour group had arrived). However, when the manager arrives at the station, he only picks up one person named 'Ren Quan'. The person claims that he has arrived first to check the manager's preparations. The phrase actually means the man named Ren Quan arrives. The use of the word *ren quan* can be easily associated with its homophone that means 'human rights', since the film was released in 1999 when the Chinese consciousness of this idea was growing but the government was still receiving criticisms from the West regarding its human right violations. In this sense, this *tiaokan* can be read a response to the Western criticisms, i.e. the arrival of real *ren quan* (totally introducing the western idea of human rights) cannot guarantee bringing benefit to the manager (the Chinese). In fact, the manager suffers a loss, since he has to pay to rent buses.

Since *Be There or Be Square*, Feng's *tiaokan* has turned from borrowing political phrases and elements to using social catchphrases and other popular aspects. This

transformation was accelerated in the 2000s when Liu Zhenyun joined in the screenwriting of Feng's NYCFs. The new *tiaokan* style associates more closely with film stories and agendas, highlighting his concerns and critiques on emergent social phenomena. Partly due to the commercial pressure caused by private investment, this style also incorporates the elements of product placements in Feng's films in the form of material, such as advertising slogans. For the same reason, many other dialects, slang and buzzwords also become the materials for Feng's *tiaokan*, such as the Sichuan dialect used in *Cell Phone* and the business buzzword *rencai* (human resources) used in *The World Without Thieves*. Using these linguistic elements not only responds to investors' expectation of expanding the market share of Feng's NYCFs, but also strengthens the critical function of the new *tiaokan* style. Taking *Cell Phone* as an example, the film sets dialect as a symbol of moral purity; therefore, the characters who insist on speaking in dialect can be considered as moral adherents. Based on this preset, this film designs such a kind of moral adherent, such as a writer who prefers to use Sichuan dialect to critique others' moral degeneration. However, he keeps an improper relationship with his female student, i.e. his deeds never match his words. The Sichuan dialect helps to satirise the writer, mocking his hypocrisy, i.e. this *tiaokan* is achieved by the symbolic meaning of dialects that is set by the film's previous plots. In effect, combining with film story makes social *tiaokan* more poignant and morally acceptable. This political attribute was established earlier in the making of *Be There or Be Square* when Feng's *tiaokan* turned to focus on social phenomena, which received further analyses in the next section.

Be There or Be Square: Moderating Wang Shuo-esque *Tiaokan* for Commercial Considerations with Chinese Characteristics

Since the economic reform began in the late 1970s, the Party has no longer insisted on its long-standing rhetoric of anti-capitalism in the Cultural Revolution period. The compatibility between the new economic policy and the previous ideological agenda breaks the coherence of the state's version of socialism and erodes its credibility. Under these circumstances, the image of *liumang* (hooligan) emerged in Chinese literature from the mid-1980s (Barmé, 1999: 71). It becomes 'a means for overturning the extreme value judgments [about China]', stating that 'life can no longer be understood in terms of black and white or good and bad' (Wang, 1989: 100). The most representative of this image are the bad boys in Wang Shuo's stories, who love to make *tiaokan* on themselves and others. Along with these stories' commercial success, Wang's *tiaokan* style becomes a symbol of Chinese popular culture — for example, there are at least four films adapted from Wang's stories in 1988, which leads critics to dub the year as "the 'Wang Shuo Year' of Chinese cinema" (Yu, 1992) — and inaugurates the commercial use of scripts, which further establishes the basic humorous style of Feng's NYCFs. In addition, at that time, the script studio Seahorse Film and Television Salon also assembled many later-well-known people such as the writer Mo Yan and Feng, since It encouraged screenwriters to take market factor into account when writing their stories and regarded scripts as goods which should be paid according to their quality (*an zhi yi jia*)

(Chen, 2014).[75] Under this marketing principle, the studio launched television series such as *Yearnings* (*Ke wang*, 1990) and *Stories from the Editorial Office* (1992). The good market performance of such works popularised Wang's humour style, for example, T-shirts with Wang Shuo-esque language (usually his *tiaokan* slogan) suddenly emerged and became fashion among young people in the early 1990s.[76]

As a participant in these works, Feng not only absorbs Wang's humorous style but also advocates his marketing idea of screenwriting, which facilitates the forming of Feng's own version of *tiaokan* in response to the film industry's state-led commercialisation in the 1990s.[77] At the beginning of this decade, Feng participated in producing many film and television projects with Wang's style, such as *After Separation* and *Beijinger in New York* (*Beijingren zai niuyue*, 1994), and became more active compared with his previous experience when working in the Seahorse Salon, for example, he was one of the two leading screenwriters of the film and codirected the television series with Zheng Xiaolong. The collaborative experience with Wang Shuo during the period of the Good Dream Film Company further strengthened the influence of Wang's style on his filmmaking, or in his own words (2003), Wang's ideas became 'the principles that guided his production of NYCFs (in

[75] Wang Shuo went one step further, '[working] his publishers to devise marketing schemes to increase sales' (Noble, 2003: 547).
[76] People generally call these kind of T-shirts 'cultural T-shirts' (*eihua shan*). According to Chen (2014) and Wang (1996), young people printed these statements of Wang Shuo on their T-shirts in order to emphasise their rebellious identity.
[77] For example, Wang Shuo divides contemporary Chinese literature into three types, propaganda literature, the experimental or pure literature, and popular literature. He regards his works as the popular form, 'which appeals to common people and thus has the largest readership' (Yu, 1992). Similarly, Feng says there are three film types nowadays, main melody film, art-house film and commercial film. He classifies his NYCFs as commercial films, 'a side room (*erfang*) off the hall (a metaphor of the Chinese cinema which treated main melody and art-house works as mainstream)'(Wu, 2000).

the late 1990s)'. Compared with the *tiaokan* in Wang's stories, the ones in the films and televisions are more commercialised by emphasising on creating entertainment effect and making relatively light criticisms.

In contrast, Feng's *tiaokan* become much more softened and market-oriented, especially the one used in the NYCFs produced under the 9550 project. These NYCFs maintains the amusing form of Wang's *tiaokan* expression which had been proved commercially viable by the market, since they are mainly based on Wang Shuo's stories, for example, *Party A, Party B* borrows many elements from his short story *You Are Not A Common Person* (*Ni bushi yige suren*, 1992) and narrative structure of *The Troubleshooters* (1989). Similarly, for *Be There or Be Square*, it continues to use the craze-for-going-abroad theme which had been represented in *After Separation* and *Beijinger in New York*. The two immigrant characters, Liu Yuan (played by Ge You) and Li Qing (played by Xu Fan), meet each other accidentally. Liu falls in love with Li and often uses quips and *tiaokan* to make her laugh. In order to chase her, Liu design a series of pranks such as playing as a blind person, and finally successes, taking Li back to China to visit his mother in hospital. From the function of these *tiaokan*, it is evident that Feng's humor had turned the focus from Wang Shuo-esque political mockery to sanctioned political criticisms for celebrating main melody spirits. Consequently, unlike *Party A, Party B* which still points out the political disadvantages of the Party's work style such as mocking bureaucracy, *Be There or Be Square* begins to promote the validity of socialism in the post-socialist society by

designing characters using the Party's political philosophy as a guide to solving their problems.

This section of the chapter focuses on *Be There or Be Square* to investigate how Feng adjusts the style of Wang's *tiaokan* in producing his NYCF in order to fit in the film industry's state-led commercialisation in the 1990s. Based on this investigation, this section highlights the factors that lead Feng to continue using Wang Shuo-esque *tiaokan* in his NYCFs, given that regulatory authorities had tightened their ideological control over cultural products at that time, including overseeing Wang's works. Given these factors, this section can reveal the principles and development direction of the state-led commercialisation, facilitating the understanding of how the interaction among popular culture, film industry and regulatory authority impact on shaping popular cultural forms. For promoting these explorations, this section is divided into three sub-sections, analysing Feng's use of *tiaokan* in terms of form, purpose and attribute. It starts by exploring how he inserts *tiaokan* into the film narrative, and identifies the relationship between the *tiaokan* sequences and the story, to indicate the function of *tiaokan* to the narrative, and therefore reveal the factors leading Feng to continually appropriate Wang Shuo-esque *tiaokan*. Based on this, the second sub-section discusses the role of the government's cultural policies and commercial consideration in introducing Wang's *tiaokan* style. As this introduction is not mechanically copied, it is also worth summarising the features of Feng version of *tiaokan* expression, since they suggest the influence of regulatory authority

(especially censorship) in the process. The third sub-section focuses on how Feng uses political utterances to make *tiaokan* and investigates the function of these utterances in making *tiaokan*, which will help to indicate the attributes that directly inform his further use of the *tiaokan* with political discourses in the 2000s.

Through these analyses, I argue that Feng commercialises Wang's *tiaokan* style, highlighting its entertainment function, and softening its critical edge by transforming it into a politically approved tool that carries out the 9550 project's goal of commercial appeal. Similar to Wang, Feng continually represents *tiaokan* in fragments in *Be There or Be Square*, which are relatively independent from the film story. This feature indicates the primary function of Feng's *tiaokan* is to enhance the film's comic effect. In addition to using Wang's modes of *tiaokan*, Feng forms his own, such as using self-mockery of his previous popular works based on Wang's stories and under Wang's influence. In other words, the film's self-mocking *tiaokan* are associated with his previous popular works, which acts as a marketing strategy for consolidating his own fan base and also attracting Wang's fans. The new mode suggests the formation of Feng's signature style, or it may be further said, the commercial consideration facilitates the construction of Feng's signature style. Another manifestation of the formation is Feng's version of the *tiaokan* with political discourses. Unlike Wang's mode, Feng's political *tiaokan* celebrate the authority of the political discourses they borrowed, which can be regarded as the result of implementing the promotion of main melody spirits, the political core agenda of the 9550 project.

SEPARATE CLIPS OF TIAOKAN FOR COMEDIC EFFECT

Feng's early NYCFs inherit the way that Wang inserts *tiaokan* in his stories. In *Be There or Be Square*, *tiaokan* usually occurs in characters' dialogues and jokes. These clips are independent from the film's other sequences, having little influence on the film story's development. This insertion produces an effect of fragmentation, distributing *tiaokan* loosely in the film narrative to achieve a frequent and continual comedic effect. For example, the film represents Liu Yuan's mockery of Chinese film professionals, the prank between Liu and his African American friend, Liu's banter of General George Patton, and his ridiculous plan of developing the Himalayas. These *tiaokan* clips emerge discursively and are of little relevance to the film's main plot of Liu and Li's romance. The film therefore is like a comedic gala under the theme of romantic love, which is composed of independent crosstalk shows, sketches and other comedic performances, i.e. placing *tiaokan* at the heart of the film's storytelling. Taking Liu's banter of General Patton as an example, Li complains the community where she used to live is full of Chinese. Liu comforts her with badinage that General Patton who conquered Europe should make more complaints, since Chinese immigrants occupy his old neighborhood. This *tiaokan* clip suddenly emerges after the scene in which Liu comes across Li for the second time. It abruptly breaks the film's original narrative of Liu and Li's love story, which mainly intends to let Liu tell the joke. This incoherence between the *tiaokan* clip and the film's other scenes is easily associated with the way that Wang constructs *tiaokan* in his stories, i.e. to make the

narrative give way to *tiaokan*. Wang actually regarded story writing as a language game (*wan wenxue*). He paid more attention to constructing sentences than organise narrative structure (Hu, 1994: 45-6). Consequently, his stories are full of garrulous banters and massive assemblage of words. The high similarity in making *tiaokan* reflects the commercial consideration of Feng's filmmaking. It reveals the primary purpose of his NYCFs at this stage is to produce comedic effect. In this way, borrowing the typical mode of Wang's *tiaokan* can help to consolidate the position of Feng's works in the NYCF featured comedy market in the late 1990s.

In the film, another manifestation of this commercial consideration is making the separated *tiaokan* clips address daily experiences, i.e. using the *duazi* (jokes and anecdotes) people talk about in daily life to construct *tiaokan*. For example, Liu proposes a fanciful plan for exploring the Himalayas (Figure 4.1). In the sequence, Li criticises Liu as unambitious person who has no big dream. Liu does not argue back but tells his plan of developing the Himalayas, in which intends to blow a fifty-kilometer wide channel through the mountain in order to allow the warmth from the Indian Ocean into Tibet. He describes a prospect to Li, 'try to imagine that our beautiful Tibet then will get rid of poverty and become rich and populous'. This *tiaokan* is mainly for fun, dissolving Li's criticism. It is based on the *duanzi* that Feng heard from a film investor at a symposium (Feng, 2003). In fact, how to insert popular jokes and anecdotes into film narrative is always the issue that Feng and his crew attempt to figure out (Yu, 1999: 46). They trialled various techniques in *Party A, Party B*,

finding that 'audiences accept such a kind of insertion', and therefore continued to use this strategy in *Be There or Be Square*. These inserted jokes and anecdotes are not closely related to the film story. As to Liu's plan, its previous scene represents the condition of Liu and Li's Chinese language school, while the scene that follows shows Liu's trip to Alaska. The independent structure retains these *tiaokan* clips' inherent comedic effects, which are assembled into what Feng called a 'game-playing' (*youxi hua*, ibid.) atmosphere. In this sense, one can further suggested, that it is the requirement for entertainment that spurs Feng to introduce the Wang Shuo-esque representation model of *tiaokan*.



Figure 4.1: Liu Yuan explains his plan for developing the Himalayas to Li Qing in Be There or Be Square (Forbidden City), 1998.

The film's assemblage of *tiaokan* clips is not random; instead, it is achieved by characterising the protagonist Liu's image. His humour becomes the narrative logic that threads the *tiaokan* clips. This connection type again indicates the primary function of *tiaokan* in the film, i.e. to enhance the film's comedic quality. A direct

manifestation of this creative intention is that all the *tiaokan* clips are represented from the view of Liu, the funny protagonist. More specifically, when meeting Li for the first time, Liu mocks Chinese film professionals to make her laugh. The next *tiaokan* clip is his tease about a Chinese film crewmember who borrows Li's apartment as a film set. Then the film reveals a robbery prank recounted through Liu's banter with his African American friend. In order to persuade Li to go back China, Liu complains about her body shape and teases that she would hardly make a good stripper in the United States. When they meet again, Liu makes *tiaokan* on General Patton to comfort Li and mocks the Chinese tourists who cannot wait to watch the strip show. In order to help Li's language school to attract students to enroll, Liu chooses to cooperate with the police but ends up teaching American police officers popular socialist slogans, which leads to many absurd situations. Based on these descriptions, it is clear to see that Liu's humorous personality links the *tiaokan* clips together, making them constitute a story. The film uses a few spaces to display the romance between Liu and Li, while their encounter and farewell always start and end with *tiaokan* clips. Therefore, the focus of Feng's filmmaking is making *tiaokan*, which inevitably leads to simplifying the representation of the romantic theme.

SELF-MOCKING TIAOKAN AS A MARKET STRATEGY

Based on the former analysis, the key to making the film's narrative focus on *tiaokan* is the characterisation of the protagonist Liu, and representation of his humorous personality. This kind of character set with similar narrative function had already existed in Feng's previous popular television series, such as the character Li Dongbao (also played by Ge You) in *Stories from the Editorial Office*. Due to similar personalities and images, it is easily to associate the character Liu Yuan with Li Dongbao, which establishes a link between the film and his previous works. In addition to the character set, Feng also strengthens the relevance by referencing popular cultural products for making self-mocking *tiaokan*. These *tiaokan* become selling points, which attract the fans of Feng's television series and Wang Shuo's stories and therefore expands the audience base. Holding a self-mocking attitude is also a prominent feature of Wang Shuo-esque *tiaokan*. As aforementioned, Wang usually sets the *tiaokan* makers at a lower status compared with their interlocutors in order to criticise the interlocutors without too many restrictions. For example, in his popular fiction *Troubleshooters* (1989), Wang designs the characters who always tease others to yell out, 'I'm a hooligan, so who am I afraid of', which later became the famous slogan of Wang's hooligan literature.[78] In fact, Wang treats this attitude as his writing strategy. According to Chou Ping, Wang '[belittles] himself as a mere "scribbler" "playing with literature" purely out of commercial motives', which helps to 'distance

[78] The fiction *Troubleshooters* (*Wanzhu: yidian zhengjing dou meiyou*) is the sequel of Wang's work *Masters of Mischief* (*Wanzhu*, 1987).

himself from politics since he does, in fact, trespass some "penalty areas" in his writing' (2002: 3). In contrast, Feng's self-mocking *tiaokan* are mainly for commercial consideration, bonding the film with other popular cultural products, rather than for relaying criticisms. The similar motives but different functions between the two type of self-mockery indicates that Feng starts to distance himself from the influence of Wang Shuo-esque *tiaokan* and gradually forms his own signature style.

This signature style is embodied in the way that Feng references his previous popular works such as the television series *Beijinger in New York* as the materials of self-mocking *tiaokan*. The *tiaokan* offer social and cultural comments to these works, which expects to attract fans and therefore expands the film's market share. For example, in the film, Li accepts Liu's suggestion and allows the film crew to use her house as a film set (Figure 4.2). She complains that the crewmembers leave the house untidy and cluttered and wants them to leave. Liu comforts her and makes a *tiaokan* on the film crew's work, which intentionally mentions the television series *Beijinger in New York* and its makers.

> Li: I had no right to let you in here. These people were nice enough to allow me to live in their house...and look what's happened.
> Liu: Isn't the owner Chinese? We Chinese need to help each other. This crew shot *Beijinger in New York* too. The series looked good because it took time to make.
> Li: I didn't like the series. It was rubbish.
> Liu: That's the reason why you need to help them! If you don't, you won't want to watch this series either. It could be shown all over the world...so who is going to lose. Only the Chinese will lose face. Do you think you could help? Don't you care about our national dignity? Comrade Li Qing.
> Li: You're impossible!

Liu mocks the film crew's achievement of making *Beijinger in New York* in order to plead with Li to assist in its current project. This *tiaokan* associates the fictional project, the NYCF and the television series together, conjuring up nationalism and addressing a cross-publicity: all are made by Feng's crew, representing the same subject of Chinese immigrants' life experiences in the United States. The crew that appears on the screen is played by the actual members of Feng's production team for the making of *Be There or Be Square*. The association reflects Feng's attempt to promote the film with the influence of his widely watched drama, i.e. to publicise the television series to his film audiences, reminding people of their shared directorship.[79] The film's similar story of immigrants fits within the social trend of going abroad, which caters to audiences' imaginary view of the United States. As to the *tiaokan*, it suggests that the film's quality is guaranteed. The crew would not make such a 'rubbish' film as like *Beijinger in New York*, or at least no worse than it. In fact, as opposed to Li's comments, the television series was in fact top-rated, which therefore encouraged Feng to become a film director. 'Following the economic success of *Beijinger in New York*, Feng assumed sole responsibility for several television serials and movies' (Keane, 2001: 57). Therefore, the underlying purpose of Liu's *tiaokan* can be understood as ironic rhetoric to promote that the film is as good as the popular television drama and even better. Meanwhile, the self-mocking gesture is left for Feng's team, i.e. the film might be still rubbish. The gesture is similar to Wang Shuo's but with different goals; with self-deprecation, Wang gets rid of moral and political

[79] In fact, in the film, through the voice of Liu, Feng reiterates his attitude towards the craze-of-going-abroad phenomenon that he also expressed in *Beijinger in New York*, i.e. 'America isn't what you think it is (*Meiguo buhao waner*)'. See Chen Guozhan, 2017.

restrictions and express his criticisms with relative freedom; Feng's self-deprecation is more for commercial reasons, acting as a form of self-protection to reduce the high expectations of official investors and the market based on the success of *Party A, Party B*.[80] Therefore, it can be seen that the self-mocking *tiaokan* enhances the commerciality of Feng's filmmaking, which not only creates a comedic effect but also fulfils Feng's marketing strategy for publicising the film.



Figure 4.2: Liu Yuan persuades Li to lend her house to the film crew as the film set in Be There or Be Square (Forbidden City), 1998.

Also, due to commercial considerations, Feng shifts the mode of his *tiaokan*, gradually removing the rebellious tone of Wang Shuo's *tiaokan*, and therefore turning it into a more softened and compliant form. As aforementioned, Feng began to work with the government-sponsored film company due to lack of investment from the mid 1990s. Meanwhile, the increasing commercialisation and tightened ideological control

[80] The success of *Party A, Party B* brings a lot of pressure for Feng. The film leaves audiences anticipating his next NYCF, *Be There or Be Square*. At the same time, many other directors also started to make NYCFs, which gave rise to a fierce competition in the Chinese film market. See Qiu Wuji, 1999, p. 126.

after the Tian'anmen protests discouraged rebellious and critical spirits and led to the commercialisation of youth culture. Consequently, the influence of Wang's style faded. One manifestation of this tendency is the decline of the 'cultural shirts' with Wang Shuo-esque language. 'By the mid-1990s, the expensive imported or pirate brand name T-shirt increasingly replaced the whimsy of the cultural shirts' (Barmé, 1999: 178), i.e. globalisation made indigenous humour and the films based on this style look passé and old fashioned. In this context, along with the pressure from official financial support, Feng's filmmaking gave more attention to market demand. His *tiaokan* retains the comedic form of Wang's style but weakens its subversion. The mockery and satire of Feng's *tiaokan* is 'under the principle that tries to avoid offending others' (Liu and Yang, 2009b: 97). This adjustment indicates Feng's prudence in using *tiaokan*, which aims to comply with censorship for distribution alongside his expectation for the return on official investment.

In *Be There or Be Square*, one example that reflects Feng's prudence is the use of newly coined words to make *tiaokan*. After portraying Liu's persuasion, the film sets a sequence in which Liu blames the crewmembers for their dreadful actions. The crewmembers explain that they belong to the team of a director of the Seventh Generation. Liu replies, 'nobody even cares for the Eighth Generation, never mind the Seventh; don't try to use that as an excuse'. In reality, the category of directors in Chinese cinema stops at the Sixth Generation. The terminologies of 'Seventh and Eighth Generation' are imagined categories that the film uses to make *tiaokan*. This

tiaokan contains both Feng's self-mockery of his filmmaking experiences and his mockery of the Fifth and Sixth Generation of directors. These directors such as Zhang Yimou and Jia Zhangke are well known for their work's aesthetics and social concern. However, these works did not achieve commercial success in the 1990s, which led to film authorities supporting other directors instead such as Feng.[81] Through the voice of the character Liu, the film banters this embarrassed condition of the Fifth and Sixth Generation, while the *tiaokan* is euphemistic. With the newly coined words, it clearly points towards the two director groups but avoids poignant critiques. Furthermore, the *tiaokan* eventually leads the mockery to Feng's own filmmaking experience. In the initial stage of his career, Feng also intended to make art-house films just like the Fifth and Sixth Generation of directors, however, later had to turn to making NYCFs due to censorship and lack of investment. In his eyes, Chinese cinema is like a sacred hall dominated by the Fifth and Sixth Generation. He cannot find a way in and therefore has to 'build a side room (making NYCFs) off the hall (to live)' (Feng, 2000, cited in Wu, 2000). Partly for comfort, the film makes fun of this experience and mockingly titles Feng as the director of the Seventh Generation. The self-mocking *tiaokan* not only displays the marginalisation of Feng's NYCFs in a critical sense in the 1990s, but also reflects his ambition to gain recognition from Chinese film critics. Therefore, the features of Feng's self-mocking *tiaokan* are evident. He integrates self-mockery into the mockery directed at social phenomena. This mixture 'dissolves the hostility

[81] The film authorities used to support the release of the Fifth Generation directors' films with international awards, such as Zhang's *The Story of Qiu Ju*, and wished to help the film industry out of predicament. However, this plan did not work. As mentioned in Chapter two, one reason that Feng could get officially financial support is that Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige insisted on making art-house films and refused Zhang Heping and Han Sanping's suggestion of making market-oriented films. See Chapter 2 for more details.

between mocker and the mocked and defuses the tension caused by the condescending attitude of the mocker' (Wang, 2006: 37). It is clear to see Wang Shuo and Feng's different attitudes towards cultural authority, reflected more distinctly in making *tiaokan* with political discourses.

TIAOKAN WITH POLITICAL DISCOURSES FOR IDEOLOGICAL PROMOTION

According to the 9550 project's political appeal, Feng's *tiaokan* hold a compliant attitude towards ideological promotion. Different from Wang's *tiaokan* which satirise the political phrases he borrowed, Feng's *tiaokan* of this kind are moderate and tactful in their criticisms. Feng's *tiaokan* actually promote the political discourses he introduces, which turn the focus towards comedic effect or criticisms of social problems that are supposed to be caused by lack of socialist values. Wu Difei's observation on the relation between Feng's *tiaokan* and his films' agendas further confirms this attribute of political approval, 'the cynic expression cannot dissemble the intention of Feng's NYCFs to comply with and advocate morals and ethics' (2001: 63). In fact, it is because of these *tiaokan* that the political discourses can humorously be represented with original meaning in the films. In *Be There or Be Square*, for example, Li criticises Liu, suggesting he should teach children something useful rather than quips. As for Liu, he thinks quips can help to improve children's interest in learning Chinese, and therefore uses the lines of a classic propaganda film of China's revolution, *Fighting North and South* (*Nan zheng bei zhan*, dir. Cheng Yin and Tang Xiaodan, 1952), to persuade Li. He quotes the line with a bureaucratic tone, 'you think that if I attack tonight, I could defeat Chiang Kai-shek's army tomorrow. But I can't, comrade. Our retreat today is for our advance tomorrow'. After listening to these words, Li duly acts as the criticised, nodding her head and leaving. In *Fighting North*

and South, the lines aim to promote Maoism and the Maoist military doctrine of mobile warfare.[82] However, they definitely do not fit in the context of discussing language-training methods within a romantic atmosphere.

The incongruity between the lines and the film's context creates opportunities for comedy. Liu's bureaucratic tone makes him like the superior of Li, reversing her role from critic to the criticised, and therefore enhancing the comedic effect of their conversation. In other words, unlike Wang Shuo's *tiaokan*, the comedy is not caused by dissolving the authority of political discourses, i.e. the Maoist ideas in this context. The ideas' original meaning of being patient and doing things step by step are completely preserved. They become rather the guidelines for Liu to solve his divergence with Li and direct their company development. As Wu points out, 'all the problems in Feng's films can be solved under the framework of the socialist system' (2001: 63). Therefore, it can be said that Feng's films offer imaginary solutions to problems within the established system and serve to consolidate the system. The *tiaokan* discourses work to carry these solutions, which aim to restore the authority of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Liu's *tiaokan* in the film particularly suggests the system is effective in guiding commercial activities, and also influential, which even applies to what happens in the United States.

[82] The Fighting North and South is the first military film of the People's Republic of China. It is based on a battle in the civil war between the Communist Party and the Nationalist Party. The film aims to embody the Maoist military doctrines, and works as a gift for commemorating the anniversary of the founding of the People's Liberation Army. See Yuan, 2006.

Another *tiaokan* example that manifests in the film's promotion of socialism with Chinese characteristics is the sequence in which Liu teaches American police officers some official Chinese phrases (Figure 4.3). In this scenario, Feng infuses patriotism and socialism into *tiaokan* discourse. As aforementioned, patriotism and socialism are the core elements of main melody spirits, which are usually the subject of the main melody films from the early 1990s. Along with the humanisation of main melody spirits, regulatory authorities launched the 9550 project in the film domain. As a product under the project, *Be There or Be Square* definitely worked to implement the promotion of the humanised main melody spirits. More specifically in the sequence, Liu finds the miscommunication caused by the language barrier between the American police officers and the Chinese immigrant residents, and decides to teach the police Chinese. In addition to the colloquial phrases with strong Northern Chinese characteristics such as *laoshi dianer* (don't cause trouble) and *shao feihua* (stop talking trash), Liu also teaches them the official Chinese discourses for greeting. He lets the police practice them at the end of his classes. On that occasion, Liu first says goodbye as 'students, you have worked hard' (*tongxue men, xinku le*), while the police officers reply with 'to serve the people' (*wei renming fuwu*). These discourses were used between superior and subordinate on the occasion of, for example, official leaders receiving people or inspecting troops. 'To serve the people' is a political slogan that originated in Mao Zedong's speech commemorating a soldier who died for the benefit of the people. The slogan later becomes a component of the Party's political morality as well as a principle of the Chinese Communist government. The

discourses' original context is quite different from the film's context, which therefore leads to antics: a group of American police officers speak Chinese phrases with socialist characteristics.



Figure 4.3: Liu Yuan teaches American police officers official Chinese phrases in Be There or Be Square (Forbidden City), 1998.

Although the *tiaokan* produces comedy by setting the political phrases in an irrelevant context, it does not dilute the phrase's authority since it makes the American police officers learn Chinese 'to serve the people', i.e. to carry out the socialist morality. In fact, the film could have assigned Liu to teach the police something ordinary or to open an English school for the Chinese residents, but it did not. This design is commercially oriented, reflecting Feng's game-playing principle of filmmaking. Compared with the scene of teaching the residents English, making American police officers speak Chinese while performing their duties may be more dramatic for Chinese audiences, and therefore create more possibilities for comedic effect. More importantly, this design again confirms the political attribute of Feng's *tiaokan* which is in accordance with the film's agenda of promoting main melody spirits. From here, Feng's passion for socialist ideals and values, and his commitment to humanism can be seen. According to Tao, this *tiaokan* clip is based on a story that

the film crew heard from the Chinese community during their American location filming: Because of the language barrier, a police officer almost shot a Chinese immigrant who broke traffic rules (2007: 121). Overcome with emmition on hearing the story, Feng thought the American police should have learned Chinese to avoid such an incident. He therefore changed the shooting schedule and added the teaching sequence (ibid.). In the film, Liu's original reason for opening the Chinese language school is in line with Feng's intention. He intends not only to train in language skills but also to publicise the moral dimension within the socialist system with Chinese characteristics. Borrowing Zhu Qi's parlance, 'Feng is using popular culture to say what he wants to say' (2005: 49). Therefore, the *tiaokan* clip celebrates rather than erodes the authority of the political discourse it used. Its engagement with socialist morality, from the perspective of concerned compatriots, corresponds to the 9550 project's requirement of promoting the humanised main melody spirits.

From the case of *Be There or Be Square*, it can be seen that Feng gradually formed his own signature style by infusing socialist morality into the comedic form of Wang Shuo-esque *tiaokan*. Different from Wang's, the primary function of Feng's *tiaokan* is to produce comedic effect. This purpose leads Feng's filmmaking to continually use the narrative structure of Wang's stories, which distributes *tiaokan* clips fragmentally in the film story and links them by characterising the protagonist with good sense of humour. In addition, Feng developed Wang's self-mocking strategy, and transformed it into a marketing technique whereby establishing a link

between the film and his previous popular works. On this basis, his *tiaokan* achieves the 9550 project's requirement of commercialising the promotion of main melody spirits. Along with the Chinese film industry's globalisation in the 2000s, expanding market share became a tendency to many Chinese film professionals. Feng adjusted his *tiaokan* style accordingly. In his NYCFs of the same period, for example, *Cell Phone*, the use of the *tiaokan* within political discourses is declining. Feng gave more attention to making *tiaokan* on widely concerned social issues and phenomena, which also works to publicise main melody spirits by setting causality between characters' troubles and their moral decline. The making of these social *tiaokan* usually connects with the product placement in the films, such as the use of advertising slogans as materials. This new approach brings the relation between Feng's filmmaking and investment closer, e.g. China Mobile Group and the film *Cell Phone*, of which the collaboration's influence on his filmmaking will be investigated in detail below.

Cell Phone: Introducing Liu Zhenyun's Humour Style for Commercialising Social *Tiaokan*

Following the Chinese film industry's commercialisation and globalisation in the 2000s, regulatory authorities further opened up the sectors of production, distribution and exhibition to non-state capital to different degrees. This measure attracted many domestic and overseas private film enterprises to the film business, e.g. Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures invested in Feng's *Cell Phone* in 2002. For Feng's filmmaking, this collaboration solved the lack of investment and filled the financial vacancy caused by the withdrawal of government sponsorship after the 9550 project was completed. The new investment structure reshaped his narrative style, including the methods of making *tiaokan*, into a mode that gives consideration to the national market (rather than only North China markets). Consequently, another famous writer Liu Zhenyun joined in Feng's filmmaking and influenced the screenwriting of his NYCFs since *Cell Phone.* Liu's participation makes Feng's filmmaking focus on storytelling, i.e. the coherence among plots, and on the emerging social issues such as extramarital affairs. Accordingly, Feng abandoned representing *tiaokan* clips separately, and relied less on characters' conversations than on plots to produce comedic and even absurd effect. In this way, his *tiaokan* turn to target social issues since the film stories are almost about them.

As Feng's new form of *tiaokan* is based on storytelling, it removes the cultural

barrier for comprehending the humorous discourse that featured northern Chinese dialects and colloquialisms. Retaining *tiaokan* style helps Feng's filmmaking to consolidate its existing market share, while the adjusted expression of *tiaokan* improves its market acceptance nationwide. The introduction of Liu Zhenyun's narrative and humour styles is the key to achieving this commercial consideration. Liu's humour is built on his story content rather than sentences. As Liu himself explains, his writing does not intend to be for hilarious effect, 'the stories are funny, because the topics or the phenomena they involve are farcical or contain farcical elements; and these can be perceived from the association between characters and their social surroundings (Zhang, 2017). Based on these words, Zhang Jie further summarises that Liu's humour is structurally produced, i.e. 'his stories are inherently humorous, which has effect through causing a sense of absurdity after contemplation, rather than tickling people to laugh' (ibid.). This humorous mechanism leads the language of Liu's stories to be plain, 'deleting all the sentence expressions that could directly create comedic effect' (Liu, 2017 cited in *People's Daily Online*, 2017). His narrative is repeated, making many redundant descriptions such as a large of amount of background information and story contexts. Only when linking them together, can the meaning of such narrative be understood, getting his satire on or comments about particular issues that were triggered by social surroundings. Liu named this narrative style as '*rao*', a roundabout way of talking about things. With this style, Liu's stories aim to reproduce the complicated relationship (*ningba*) between people and social environments. This entanglement makes the stories contain potential absurdity. On

this basis, Liu often 'assigns that characters' deeds are unsuited to their position and inserts the hints in their names to highlight and satirise the inconsistency' (Liu Xinzheng, 2014: 130). For example, in the novel *I Did Not Kill My Husband* (2012), he names a county magistrate as Shi Weimin (literally means 'governing for people'); however, the character always evades helping the female protagonist to redress an injustice in judgment.

Since *Cell Phone* in the 2000s, Feng made films mainly based on Liu's stories, or invited Liu to write or co-write scripts. Liu's style is incorporated into Feng's humour style, shaping his *tiaokan* discourse from independent quip to systematic satire. It adjusts the expression mode as well as the function of Feng's *tiaokan*. Feng's filmmaking does not distribute *tiaokan* clips fragmentally and randomly; instead, it uses the clips as steppingstones to lead the stories to the satirical arguments of social phenomena at which the films was aimed. This adjustment integrates the *tiaokan* clips into film plots, which make the films' subjects become the targets of the *tiaokan* clips, serving their agendas coherently. Taking *Cell Phone* for example, the film links the embarrassing level of the protagonist Yan with the updated functions of mobile phones, mocking his hypocritical deeds alongside the story's development. For Yan, the mobile phone first helps him handle the relationships with his lover Wu (played by Fan Bingbing) and wife (played Zhang Lu). However, it later becomes his nightmare: the wife notices Wu's flirting text messages on Yan's phone and therefore divorces him, while his new girlfriend Shen Xue (played by Xu Fan) receives a video recording

sent from Wu — which is about her tryst with Yan, and therefore decides to leave him. At the end of the film, Yan is left alone at home, having lost everything.

This change in using *tiaokan* may be deemed as an outcome of Feng's market consideration as well as the influence of Liu narrative pattern. As Feng explains, 'I think I should represent a pure theme, while too many *tiaokan* clips would break the film story's structural integrity' (Song, 2003). Meanwhile, as the film is about a widely discussed phenomenon of extramarital affairs, telling a continual story can strengthen the critical function of *tiaokan* as a sanctioned tool for both social concerns and political promotion. In fact, this strengthening is built on this strengthening is produced on the premise that Feng accepts the state-built filmmaking framework. This point can be further verified from his purpose of making *tiaokan* in the film, which is to tease the characters who do not adhere to moral and ethical codes. In other words, the film uses *tiaokan* to carry out ideological promotion in a humanised way, since it combines vivid examples to highlight the importance of main melody spirits rather than cram political phrases into the story to directly make moral indoctrination.

With attention to *Cell Phone*, this section of the chapter explores how Liu Zhenyun's humour style influences Feng's evolving application of *tiaokan*, and identifies how this shift helps his filmmaking balance market expansion, social concern and moral education. It addresses the factors that engender the introduction of Liu's style culturally and politically, and how the style shapes the development of

Feng's signature style since he constantly collaborated with Liu in the 2000s and the early 2010s. In order to advance these investigations, this section is also divided into three sub-sections, which begins with analysing the mode of *tiaokan* discourse in the film. It then combines this mode with the government's cultural policies and economic prescriptions for the film industry to examine the factors that result in this mode, which helps us to comprehend how Feng's *tiaokan* balances commercial consideration, social concern and political promotion, and also reveals the role of Liu's humour style in this balance. The third sub-section focuses on the categories of the materials for making *tiaokan*. Identifying the attributes or the features of these materials, this section tries to indicate the reasons leading Feng's filmmaking to select them. Considering the correspondence between the *tiaokan*'s forms and functions, these selections reflect the motives of Feng's adjustment of expressing *tiaokan*, which gives us some ideas about the development tendency of his signature style, at least in the 2000s.

Through these investigations, this section argues that the introduction of Liu Zhenyun's humour style reshapes the narrative pattern of Feng's filmmaking into a mode that closely combines the film's *tiaokan* clips and its scenario. The new mode strengthens the *tiaokan*'s function of social critique, and also creates the conditions for Feng's filmmaking to integrate the purposes of implementing market expansion, humanising promotion of moral principles and voicing sanctioned social concern. Under the influence of Liu's style, the *tiaokan* clips serve the film's theme of moral

persuasion. They strengthen satire of characters' deeds of moral decline, and thus, achieve to carry and convey Feng's comments on the social issues of extramarital affairs and technology ethics. Meanwhile, as the film's *tiaokan* clips are highly relevant to its scenario, their modes of expression are updated accordingly. The film maintains a few moments of verbal *tiaokan* but produces more with the forms that can be easily understand regardless of cultural knowledge of northern Chinese humour. For examples, it creates a *tiaokan* effect by highlighting the story's inherent absurdity, and also sets hints in characters' names to magnify this effect, since the characters' deeds do not match the values their names suggest. These new modes reflect Feng's intent to expand his film audience base to a national level. Another manifestation of the film's commercial consideration is to insert product placement such as advertising slogans into making *tiaokan*. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Feng advocated story-driven product placement especially since the 2000s, which creates opportunities for the combination of product placement and *tiaokan* discourse. This combination makes product placement laughable and socially critical. From another aspect, it clearly commercialises the expression of *tiaokan*. As this commercialised *tiaokan* mode threads the purposes of Feng's filmmaking commercially, politically and socially, it consolidates the comedic attribute of his NYCFs, becoming a trademark of his signature style, and therefore increasing the difficulties for his further filmmaking especially after the mid-2000s when he started to try different genres.

COMMERCIALISING TIAOKAN EXPRESSION WITH PRODUCT PLACEMENT

Liu Zhenyun's humour style makes a condition for integrating product placement into *tiaokan* expression in *Cell Phone*. This integration provides the film's product placement with humorous quality and a function of representing social critique. The humour of Liu's stories is created from his roundabout narrative which gives a large amount of background description. This mechanism leads the close correlation of different plots of his stories. Meanwhile, as mentioned in Chapter 2, early in the making of *Big Shot's Funeral* in 2001, Feng had used product placement to cover the cost of filmmaking, and advocated story-driven insertion, 'seamlessly incorporating advertisements and film plots' (Feng, cited in *Huangshang Chenbao*, 2010). Due to these two factors, it is possible for the filmmaking to use the advertising elements such as slogans and images to produce *tiaokan*.

Accordingly, *Cell Phone* involves many advertisements that are related to mobile products and communication companies such as Motorola and China Mobile.[83] These advertisements works as the materials of the film's *tiaokan* clips and therefore participate in constructing ironical criticisms of the protagonist Yan's moral decline. Taking the advertisement of China Mobile, for example (Figure 4.4), this always appears whenever Yan deceives his wife, girlfriend and mistress. After his divorce,

[83] China Mobile refers to the China Mobile Communications Corporation, the largest state-owned telecommunications company.

Yan starts a relationship with Shen rather than marrying his mistress Wu. Wu feels fooled and still cannot let the affair go. She continues to be preoccupied with Yan's movements such as watching his show. The show is about the issue of sincerity among ordinary people as well as public figures. During the show, the advertising slogan of China Mobile, 'communicating starts from the heart' (g*outong cong xin kaishi*), is often inserted as a spot announcement, especially when Yan is talking about the importance of being honest. This slogan is originally used to promote China Mobile's attitude towards customer service. Under this film context, it is borrowed to emphasise a sincere relationship among people, which corresponds to the film's moral agenda and contrasts sharply with what Yan does. In the show, he believes that public figures should be honest, but his deeds never match these declarations. In contrast, the product placement constitutes the film's *tiaokan* to Yan, ironically indicating his hypocrisy. Unlike Feng's early NYCFs such as *Be There or Be Square*, the *tiaokan* clip does not separate itself from the film scenario. It is deeply intertwined with the film's narrative, which only takes shape and works after the film makes other descriptions that are irrelevant to the clip such as Yan's pervious words and deeds. In other words, only by threading these descriptions can the film's purpose of *tiaokan* be seen. The association with other plots intensifies the *tiaokan* clip's satirical effect along with the film story's progress.



Figure 4.4: The advertising slogan of China Mobile inserts as a spot announcement and constitutes the film's tiaokan to Yan in Cell Phone (Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures), 2003.

By commercialising *tiaokan* expression, the filmmaking addresses the intensifying of the film's satirical effect. This approach to combine commercial pursuit and social critique is also reflected in the film's use of product placement of Motorola as *tiaokan* linked to Yan's deceptive deeds and in its comments on technology ethics. The film assigns characters to use different mobile models of Motorola, and visually displays the three models' feature functions, i.e. Yan's 388C, Wu's E365 and Niu's A768 (Figure 4.5).[84] From the commercial aspect, the display definitely works to meet the demands of Motorola, one of the primary sponsors of the film.[85] Feng's filmmaking subtly used mobile phones with updating functions as the film story's turning point. The frequent use of different and updated mobile phone models works

[84] There are at least five Motorola models that appear in *Cell Phone*. Yan Shouyi uses 388C, Fei Mo T720, Shen Xue V860 and Wu Yue E365. At the end of the film, the new mobile phone that Niu Caiyun sends to Yan seems to be the A768, a new model that came into the market soon after the film was released.

[85] According to Michael Keane's investigation, 'Motorola invested 4 million RMB (0.58 million USD) and China Mobile, 0.8 million RMB (0.12 million USD), while BMW contributed 1.2 million RMB (0.12 million USD)' (2006: 20).

as a metaphor for Yan's continual troubles that exaggerate his predicament.

Accompanying this tendency, the *tiaokan* clip's satire becomes more and more poignant. In the film, the mobile model first emerged is Yan's 388C, which features a touch screen for easily checking and deleting text messages. This function leads Yan's wife to glances at Wu's flirting message and therefore detects his extramarital affair. The second model is Wu's E365 that has a recording function. In the sequence of their tryst, the film uses Yan's voice to introduce the function when Wu plays the recording of their intimate moment. He says, 'I know you have bought a new phone with such a function', but his warning does not stop her from distributing the recording to his girlfriend. The video later becomes the evidence that Wu uses to threaten Yan to recommend her to take his position at the television station. The third model is Niu's A768, which can locate the user's position. As a salesperson, Niu sends Yan this type of mobile phone as a gift and invites him to be its spokesman. Though Yan has lost everything by that time, the mobile phone with the new function still panics him due to his previous embarrassing experiences. Along with the updated mobile phones, the film story gradually develops into one where everything is beyond Yan's control. The advanced functions of the different models do make Yan's daily communication (even his infidelity) more convenient, allowing him to fabricate things easily, however, they also lead Yan into an increasingly awkward and complicated situation that costs him his family, job, girlfriend, mistress and a peaceful life. This situation is similar to the condition in Liu's stories, which he describes as '*ningba*', which, in this film, is caused

by humanity rather than technology, 'as the mobile phone hides so many ulterior motives of people, it becomes dangerous like a handheld bomb' (Feng, 2003).[86] The entanglement between Yan and the Motorola mobile phones indicates the film's *tiaokan* to Yan's hypocritical deeds, and also carries Feng and Liu's concern of technology ethics, i.e. their treatment of the impact of technology on daily life. Based on the film's agenda, the prescription they give is to adhere to morality, since the reason that leads to the deterioration of Yan's predicament is essentially his moral decline. In this sense, the film's social concern works to reveal the significance of the moral dimension. Through using product placement to *tiaokan* immoral deeds, it achieves to infuse political promotion of morality into the social concern of extramarital affairs and technology ethics.



Figure 4.5: The three mobile types which appear in the film; Yan's 388C with touch screen (top left), Wu's E365 featuring recording and videoing functions (top right), Niu's A768 (bottom) which can locate users in Cell Phone (Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures), 2003.

[86] When explaining the intention behind the film's script, Liu spoke these words. Feng then borrowed these ideas and represented them through the words of the character Fei Mo in the film.

PRODUCING TIAOKAN FOR SOCIAL CONCERN

In addition to his roundabout narrative, the film also absorbs Liu's *ningba* style by inserting hints into the characters' names, in order to produce *tiaokan* with puns. For highlighting the *tiaokan*'s mockery and even sarcasm towards the characters, the film displays nonconformity between their names and behaviours, and conformity between their names and social positions. With the use of mockery and sarcasm, the *tiaokan* reflects an expansion of the film's concern from individual experience to social phenomenon. It uses humour to give consideration to the influence of the changing social environment on characters, which leads to their moral decline, i.e. it is money, facilitated by technologies, that corrupts human beings, and therefore suggests the necessity of promoting main melody spirits. For example, the nonconformity between Yan's deeds, and the implications of his name and his TV show's title construct the film's *tiaokan* to the character's dishonesty. His surname, 'Yan', literally means strictness, while his given name, 'shou' and 'yi' refer to 'obeying' and 'single-minded' respectively. When connecting these characters together, Yan's full name can be understood as 'strictly sticking to the one (the same partner in the film context)'. His show is titled as 'you yi shuo yi', which means 'Tell Things As They Are'. The implications of these names suggest that Yan and his life should have integrity. However, he deceives all those around him and '[talks] nonsense with an innocent face (in the show)' (*China Daily*, 2003). His character is not aligned with the qualities the names suggest.

The film attributes the nonconformity between Yan's deeds and the virtues suggested by his name, i.e. the inconsistency between his actions and statements, to the objectification of Chinese society. Feng and Liu's thinking around the social objectification's influence on daily life is visualised in the film's *tiaokan*. In China, 'parents often choose names that reflect virtues or talents they hope their children will possess' (Ferroa and Chan, 2002: 61). At the beginning of the film, when young Yan first appears on the scene, he is an innocent boy who uses his bicycle to transport his sister-in-law to the telephone office in town. The subsequent sequence displays that he becomes a famous show's host and uses various high-sounding excuses to cheat his wife. Yan's deeds set against his name makes a pun, mocking his disloyalty to marriage. As to Liu's writing, this often includes a large amount of description about life's trifles in order to untangle the *ningba* condition of characters' everyday life, exposing the hidden truth (Wang, 2007). In this film context, the *ningba* condition can be seen by the way in which characters are twisted or warped by money and technology. From the film's narrative structure — first describing young Yan's innocence, and then contrasting it with his immoral deeds as a host, the *ningba* condition is evidently attributed to the changed social environment, including the rapid economic development, the rich materialistic lifestyle, the migration from utopian countryside to big city, and the obsession with forever changing products and technologies. These social changes trigger and further facilitate Yan's metamorphosis from moral conformist into moral destroyer, which produce the pun out of his name as well as result in his miserable demise. From this point of view, the film no longer limits

the use of *tiaokan* to create humorous effect, but also uses it to drive the focus from single individual expression to the bigger context of social change.

Apart from the nonconformity mode, the film also uses the conformity between characters' names and social positions to produce puns, making *tiaokan* from their moral metamorphosis, such as the one based on the nickname of Yan's cousin Brother Brick (played by Fan Wei). The pun ironically represents how the social change erodes the traditional moral order. Different from Yan, Brother Brick is a peasant who still lives in Yan's home village. In the film, he buys a mobile phone for convenience in order to contact Yan. As he explains, 'calling you only costs two yuan; but coming to Beijing to see you costs two hundred yuan'. When other villagers purchase mobile phones, things change. The mobile phone becomes the tool that Brother Brick uses to deceive others, such as the villager who asks him for help (Figure 4.6). His preset mobile phone excuse, 'I'm busy', is quite similar to the one Yan uses, 'I'm in a meeting'. For a long time, the peasant and rural family units are regarded as the basis of Chinese society.[87] Correspondingly, in Chinese cinema, the image of the countryside is 'reidealized and reinvented as moral utopia not interrupted by history in the post-socialist China' (Liu, 2013: 233). In many films such as *The Story of Qiuju* (*Qiuju da guansi*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 1992), the peasant images work as 'reminders that the rural culture on which the socialist revolution depended still

[87] Historically, China consistently practiced the policy of *Zhong Nong Yi Shang* (encouraging agriculture and restraining commerce). In modern times, the revolution of China began with rural land reform. Around the time that the film was released, the Party introduced policies to improve the so-called 'Three Agriculture Issues (*sannong*) ' that related to agriculture, farmer and rural area. Solving the 'Three Agriculture Issues' is regarded as the most important mission of the CCP government.

existed, and that there was perhaps still a way back to the rural utopia it represented' (Xu, 2005: 435). Connecting with the symbolic meaning of countryside and peasant, the name Brother Brick can be regarded as a pun that teases the character's metamorphosis, while the conformity between his name and social position magnifies this pun's *tiaokan* effect. The person who is solid like a brick and lives in a 'moral utopia' should be a moral model, instead of deceiving others without any hesitation.



Figure 4.6: By using his mobile phone, Brother Brick gets used to deceiving others in Cell Phone (Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures), 2003.

The conformity mode for constructing *tiaokan* also corresponds to Liu's *ningba* style, which 'uses details and story turning points to engender humorous effect and therefore turns serious or solemn things into comedy' (Liu, 2007 cited in Wang, 2007). With the character of Brother Brick, the film reflects a contagion of moral decline of the countryside alongside the economic and technologic development. His metamorphosis can be considered as a symbol of the contagion, a degeneration of the 'moral utopia'. According to his identity of peasant, he can be read as an essential component of the 'moral utopia', a brick in the foundation of Chinese society. When the brick breaks, the 'moral utopia' collapses accordingly. With this character design and consequent *tiaokan* formation, the film metaphorically raises its concern from

individual behaviour to the social phenomenon of declining morality. The concern justifies the promotion of main melody spirits, and functions as a hegemonic discourse that creates certain consent and makes social stability possible. Following the scene of Brother Brick's deception, the film shows a conversation between Yan's grandmother and his friend Fei Mo (played by Zhang Guoli). The talking scene uses dialects to emphasise the symbolic meaning of countryside as a 'moral utopia'. It therefore *tiaokan* the hypocrisy of Fei Mo who refuses to speak standard Mandarin, which further reflects the impact of economic and technological developments on morality. This section will analyse this scene below in more detail.

DETERRITORIALISING TIAOKAN DISCOURSE FOR POLITICAL PROMOTION

Cell Phone uses various dialects to construct *tiaokan* clips, which breaks through the obstacles in understanding the humour based on northern Chinese culture. In addition, the dialects are associated with the countryside, a symbol of the 'moral utopia', which therefore improves the function of *tiaokan* discourse as a means of promoting main melody spirits. In other words, the film's deterritorialisation of *tiaokan* discourse facilitates its agenda of restoring morality. More specifically, the characters who speak in dialects are metaphorically shaped as moral adherent such as Yan's grandmother, moral advocate such as Fei Mo, and moral destroyer such as Yan. The film recognises the grandmother's statements and uses her behaviour to contrast with Fei's. It therefore *tiaokan* the hypocrisy of Fei who insists on speaking Mandarin with a Sichuan accent as well as the insincerity of Yan who abandons his Hanan dialect and speaks standard Mandarin in metropolis. Given the symbolic meaning of dialects in the film, introducing them magnifies the *tiaokan* discourses' satirical effect. It also enriches the expression mode of this humour style, which reflects the film's intention to expand its market from North to South and West China. In 2000, three years before the film was released, the government had issued a law to regulate the use of standard spoken and written Chinese language, which permitted the use of dialects in operas, films, TV programmes and other art forms if it is necessary.[88] Since then, use

[88] i.e. 'The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language'.

of dialects has increased in Chinese cinema. Many films featuring dialects emerged, such as Zhang Yimou's *Happy Time* (*Xingfu shiguang*, 2000), Lu Chuan's Missing Gun (*Xun qiang*, 2002) and Ning Hao's *Crazy Stone* (*Fenghuang de shitou*, 2006). These films have a number of points in common: the dialects are all used to associate with the moral utopia (Xu, 2005: 435 and Liu, 2013: 233), and to 'represent the living condition of marginal characters' and to 'make comic effect' (Zhou, 2007 cited in Wang, 2007: 9). Under this popular tendency of filmmaking, *Cell Phone* also embodies the first two features, constructing *tiaokan* that works to indoctrinate the main melody spirits.

This mode of making *tiaokan* can actually be read as an insertion of ideological promotion into the form of popular culture, in which process hegemony is constructed. Taking the characterisation of Fei Mo for example, as the producer of a popular show in the big modern city Beijing, he consistently uses a slow-paced tone to speak Sichuan dialect. Fei plays the role of Yan's teacher and advisor, educating Yan to be a sincere man. When helping Yan to cover up his extramarital affair, Fei even *tiaokan* him, 'this thing (the affair) is troublesome; is it the girl or your conscience that abash you?'. Further, he persuades Yan that 'everyone should be honest and kind'. Ironically, Fei himself does not follow such homily. He later starts a romantic relationship with his student. When Yan finds out about the affair, Fei entreats him to keep the secret with the same reason that 'everyone should be honest and kind' (Figure 4.7). The use of the Sichuan dialect suggests Fei's moral education is full of

sarcastic effect. As aforementioned, dialects are seen as a symbol of the moral utopia. Speaking Sichuan dialect reflects Fei's contempt for the moral decline that happens in modern big city. 'His provincial quality and clumsiness become his saving grace. He retains a measure of purity and has not descended to the lower depths of sweet talkers of *putonghua* in the postmodern metropolis' (Lu, 2007: 56). The things that Fei says accord with morality and reflect his superiority as a moral protector. However, his deeds break the moral principles he advocates. His talk, as implied in his name (literally meaning 'wasting words'), is nonsense. The mismatch between his statements and deeds creates a humour that carries criticism and sarcasm. He becomes a 'pseudo-cultural figure' (*wei wenhuaren*) that Feng aims to present (Peng, 2003). The Sichuan dialect enhances the *tiaokan* clips' ironic effect with its linguistic features which make speakers sound condescending and clever.[89] Meanwhile, associating the language's symbolic meaning with Fei's deeds points out the film's concern about the corruption of morality caused by the Chinese society's objectification.



Figure 4.7: Fei Mo first chastises Yan's extramarital affair (left) but later he gets into the same kind of trouble (right) in Cell Phone (Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures), 2003.

[89] According to Sang Qin's interview (2003), the Sichuan dialect was used by Feng to create a stereotype of a person who is condescending and full of wisdom, also someone who is nice and easy-going.

Using Sichuan Mandarin in the film breaks the domination of the Beijing-based Mandarin in constructing Feng's *tiaokan* clips. Partly because of the Beijing dialect, Feng's previous NYCFs usually performed well at the box office in Northern China. The introduction of Sichuan dialect into *Cell Phone* can be regarded as Feng's effort that breaks cultural and linguistic obstacles to disseminate his NYCFs to Southern China. Correspondingly, Feng and his team abandoned Beijing and chose Shanghai as the main battlefield for promoting the film. This adjustment of location reveals 'Feng's attempt to enter the market of Southern China' (Li, 2003). In addition, using Sichuan dialect can be considered as a selling point, which enhances the film's novelty to both the southern and northern markets. Although many films at that time involved dialects, few of them used Sichuan Mandarin. According to He Caihong's explanation, based on Viktor Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarisation (1917), the specific intonation and linguistic form of a dialect bring a sense of unfamiliarity and novelty that creates a comic effect in film (2010: 92). In this sense, the Sichuan dialect creates opportunities for *Cell Phone* to be accepted by Southern Chinese audiences, especially Sichuan audiences; it also makes the film consolidate and further expand the Northern Chinese market by bringing something new. Due to its linguistic features, the language produces a cultural stereotype of wisdom and friendliness, which fits with the characterisation of Fei Mo as adviser. Fei realises the crisis of moral decline and does his best to promote moral principles; however, his problem is that he cannot put his own ideas into practice. From this point of view, Fei is not only the object of the film's *tiaokan* but also assists the film in stating its agenda. Partly due to this function

of moral promotion, Fei has a relatively good ending compared with Yan: he chooses to leave the modern life in Beijing and moves to Estonia, a former Soviet Country unfamiliar to most Chinese, and a new remote area from his perspective. In connection with the film's earlier plot, the choice reflects Fei's nostalgia for the socialist society of the past and his disappointment with the rural area in which 'socialist ideologies were heavily invested' in China (Xu, 2005: 435), since Yan's innocence fades away with his Henan accent and even Brother Brick begins to deceive others in the village.

In addition to the use of Sichuan dialects and the *tiaokan* to Fei Mo, the film's concern for moral decline is further reinforced by the use of Henan dialect to establish the moral authority of Yan's grandmother and mock his metamorphosis. As both Grandmother and Yan speak the language, the contrast between their behaviours highlights the film's criticism of Yan's insincerity. In the film, after his divorce, Yan brings Shen and Fei back to his home village, to visit the Grandmother. Fei talks a lot with her and complains that his heart often feels uneasy (Figure 4.8). Later when Fei comes back to Beijing, Grandmother asks Yan to bring a bag of fruit jujubes and says 'jujubes restore the heart (*zao neng bu xin*)'. Meanwhile, she is the only one who directly criticises Yan's actions and the divorce. Grandmother speaks with a strong Henan accent to ask Yan to take the family ring back to his ex-wife Yu, 'tell Wenjuan, she is still my granddaughter'. At the end of the film, after Grandmother passes away, Yan cannot speak and therefore resigns from the TV station, giving his position to his

mistress Wu. Based on these plots, Grandmother can be read as the moral authority over Yan and Fei. According to Geng Hongwei's analysis, she holds traditional attitudes toward marriage and is against the divorce, which represents the power of traditional morals and ethics (2004: 3). She not only tries to help Yan to resurrect his marriage but also reminds Fei to halt his immoral deeds. This persuasion is embedded in her action of sending jujubes. The Chinese word for jujubes is *zao* (枣), which is a homophone of another character *zao* (早) that literally means 'soon'. As the words *xin* and *bu* refer to 'heart' and 'repair' respectively, her message, '*zao bu xin*', has a metaphoric meaning—'resorting your heart (conscience) as soon as possible'—and this indicates her wish for Fei to be a good example for Yan. Fei obviously comprehends the meaning and says to Yan, 'it is a big responsibility'. Therefore, the Grandmother's image is associated with the symbolic meaning of the countryside, which constructs the incarnation of moral integrity in the film.



Figure 4.8: Fei Mo complains of his heart problem to Yan's grandmother in Cell Phone (Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures), 2003.

As regards Yan, his accent change works as a metaphor for his loss of the traditional virtue of honesty. He even conceals the real reason that he divorces Yu from Grandmother and introduces Shen as his teacher rather than his new girlfriend. These dishonest deeds finally lead him into a predicament where all friends and relatives desert him. By comparison, many people come to attend Grandmother's funeral. In fact, when she dies (the moral authority collapses), Yan can barely recover after so many these frustrations (everything is in chaos). In other words, the film suggests that Yan does not actually earn others' respect regardless of his high social position. This contrast between the two endings magnifies the sarcastic effect of the film's *tiaokan* of Yan, and praises Grandmother as a moral example. The praise and *tiaokan* indicate the moral orientation of Feng's filmmaking. It again reflects Feng as 'a film moralist who spares no effort to use entertaining form and daily-life story to reveal the moral dilemma in contemporary Chinese society' (Zhu, 2005: 48). Therefore, it is easily understood why Feng arranges reclusive city life for both Yan and Fei (although Yan's is worse). The reclusion is a metaphor for their return to the moral matrix. Their miserable endings represent caution to the public, especially those who have similar experiences. In fact, the film triggered a long and wide discussion about the honesty and loyalty in everyday life and marriage, and also made the excuse 'I'm in a meeting' become a popular social joke (Magnier, 2004).[90] In this case, the film is in accordance with the promotion of politically approved morality. After it was released,

[90] In the film, Shen Xue and Fei's wife take Yan and Fei's ID to China Mobile to print their call log in order to check their secret affairs. After the film was released, China Mobil even made the statement that 'its users can rest assured their private information won't be disclosed as shown in the movie, unless there is a reason police or a court officials order it to be disclosed'. See C*hina Film: How Cell Phones Catch Cheating Spouses*, Xinhuanet, 2004.

Feng was later elected as the vice-chairman of the China Film Directors' Guild, a director association under the guideline of regulatory authority. This election is partly the result of his NYCFs' commercial success, but in a certain sense also reflects the recognition from the government of Feng's filmmaking style.

Conclusion

The two films *Be There or Be Squar*e and *Cell Phone* reflect the appropriation of popular humour styles in Feng's NYCFs. The appropriation facilitates the formation of Feng's signature style of *tiaokan*, which infuses political promotion of moral principles and social concerns of objectified sociality into the commercial consideration of market expansion. Due to the political tension and the film industry's economic imperative in the 1990s, Feng commercialised Wang's *tiaokan* style in *Be There or Be Square* by maintaining its comedic form based on the market demand for Wang's stories and his trademark humour but softening its critical edge in line with the implementation of the 9550 project. For example, Feng's filmmaking inherits Wang's narrative structure by representing *tiaokan* clips fragmentally and independently, i.e. these *tiaokan* clips are separate from the film's scenarios and appear randomly on the screen. This narrative structure leads the film to continuously produce comedic effect, and this reveals the primary function of the *tiaokan* clips in the film. Further, Feng continues to use the mode of Wang's *tiaokan* with political references. The difference between the two styles is that Feng's *tiaokan* celebrates the authority of the political discourses, while Wang tries to dissolve it since the political discourses he used were passé and did no good for the Party to improve its work style. In addition, *Be There or Be Square* displays another mode of Feng's *tiaokan*, that is, self-mockery of his previous popular works based on or inspired by Wang's stories. Thus, *tiaokan* becomes a marketing strategy that bridges Feng's NYCFs with his previous works,

consolidating his audience base as well as attracting Wang's fans. Therefore, it can be seen that Feng's signature style of *tiaokan* gradually formed at this stage, and displayed a tendency of combining political and commercial appeal.

The tendency developed further in the 2000s when the film industry's commercialisation accelerated and a state-led filmmaking framework was established. Private investment participated in the production of Feng's NYCFs. Accordingly, Feng's *tiaokan* turns to target social problems, e.g. the topic of extramarital affairs in *Cell Phone*. This transformation is attributed to the introduction of Liu Zhenyun's narrative and humour style. Under the impact of Liu's style, Feng's *tiaokan* clips are highly relevant to the film's narrative. In this way, Feng's filmmaking manages to use product placement and popular cultural elements such as dialects to construct *tiaokan* clips. These clips carry Feng's comments on moral corruption and technology ethics, and offer imaginary solutions based on his passion for socialist ideals. Using product placements as the materials of the *tiaokan* clips balances commercial appeal and sanctioned social critique. The *tiaokan* in *Cell Phone* facilitates an amusing and more reasonable advertisement insertion (or at least not abrupt interruption to the film's plots). Using dialects meets the film's purposes of expressing social concern and market expansion. It breaks the cultural and linguistic restrictions of the *tiaokan* discourse, creating possibilities for Southern Chinese audiences to understand the discourse's humour that featured Northern Chinese expressions. Thus, the film maintains Feng's trademark humour based on *tiaokan* to consolidate his original fan

base, and also makes innovative adjustments to increase the influence of his NYCFs in the southern Chinese market. In addition, the film uses dialects to establish moral authority, and subtly suggests the necessity of advocating morality in Chinese society dominated by an accelerated materialisation and objectification.

After *Cell Phone*, Feng's filmmaking continued to use this *tiaokan* style in *A World Without Thieves*. Then, Feng turned to make serious dramas such as *The Banquet* and *Assembly*. The use of *tiaokan* discourse became less and less frequent in his NYCFs until *If You Are The One* in the late 2000s in which he reuses the *tiaokan* with political references. The changes in using *tiaokan* show the correspondence between Feng's filmmaking and the film industry's state-led commercialisation. The next chapter therefore focuses on the genre shift of Feng's NYCFs, and investigates how the state-led commercialisation in conjunction with the government's cultural polices shape his filmmaking from comedy to multiple and hybridised genres in the 2000s.

Chapter 5 *Sigh* and *A World Without Thieves*: Genre Changes and Dynamic Negotiation in the 2000s

Introduction

In the 1990s, the stagnant Chinese film industry compelled regulatory authority to propose recovery strategies such as importing Hong Kong NYCFs. The films' popularity and the Chinese film industry's ongoing commercialisation jointly promote the formation of the mainland NYCFs that featured Feng's works. With support from regulatory authority, Feng made three NYCFs in the late 1990s, which were based on a similar narrative pattern and therefore were understood as a mini-genre. In 2000, Feng launched a family drama *Sigh* that centres on extramarital affairs. The film was not released in the New Year cinema season but still gained good box-office success. It unexpectedly won five awards from the Cairo International Film Festival, making Feng widely known for the first time. Partly due to the box-office performance and internationally critical recognition, *Sigh* affects Feng's subsequent creation of NYCFs and begins the transformation of his style in the 2000s. Compared with his previous NYCFs, the film offers a realistic rather than perfectly happy ending. Since then, the hilarious tone of Feng's stories dilutes, while the absurd quality enhances.

Two years later, the impressive box-office performance of Zhang Yimou's action drama *Hero* (2002) further facilitated Feng's creative transformation. The film was

released in the New Year cinema season that was usually arranged for Feng's films. Its commercial success broke down the Chinese film professionals' stereotype that the NYCF could only be comedy. Thereafter, Feng's NYCFs were no longer limited to comedies. He tried different subjects and genre elements from ethic drama to gangster, comedy and action drama. In his works up to the mid-2000s, these elements usually appear simultaneously in one particular film, but none of them dominates the narrative. The most prominent example is *A World Without Thieves* (2004) which comprises gangster fight, *tiaokan* and romantic sections. It is hard to classify the film accurately into any genres since the sections exist relatively independently. This design reflects Feng's attempt to expand audience groups in the burgeoning film industry. From this perspective, *A World Without Thieves* is like an assorted platter: different audiences can enjoy their favorite sections as they might pick and choose their favorite food from the platter.

In comparison with *Sigh*, the film retains a large amount of comic expression and provides a more melancholy ending with the protagonist's death. The operation completely breaks Feng's creative routine in NYCFs which usually end with happy and uplifting scenes. His subsequent films continued to present gloomy or noncommittal endings and turned to various genres, such as the costume drama *The Banquet* in 2006 and the war film *Assembly* in 2007. After these two films, the creative pattern with a mixture of various genre elements transitorily reappeared in Feng's works like *If You Are The One* and its sequel, at the turn of the 2010s. However, soon

after, Feng moved back to his previous pattern, making more serious NYCFs. Except for *Personal Tailor* (2013), a comedy aimed to cover the deficit caused by the box-office flop of *Back to 1942* (2012), the pattern becomes the keynote of Feng's creation in the 2010s.

As can be seen above, *Sigh* and *A World Without Thieves* are two important turning points in Feng's creative process in the 2000s. *Sigh* starts the transformation, eroding the comic property of Feng's production, while *A World Without Thieves* is a cross-genre work, which carries Feng's experimentation of narrative approaches and transitions his NYCFs from comedies to various genres. The two films both respond to the Chinese film industry's changes by evolving Feng's creative pattern, either from the aspect of investment structure, form of expressionor relation with regulatory authority. This chapter focuses on the two films to study the development of Feng's production which constantly adapts to the changing investment, regulatory and cultural environment. It manifests the changes' impact on domestic filmmaking and film professionals' subsequently dynamic adjustments. Through analysing Feng's creative pattern and its progression in the two films, I argue that the changing environment of Chinese film industry propels Feng's creation to transition from comic NYCFs to cross-genre NYCFs and to various other genres of NYCFs. The continuous changes engender an ongoing update of Feng's creative pattern, which promotes the dynamic negotiations between Feng's creation and the Chinese film industry, regulatory authority and popular culture to a new level. Under the negotiation, the

form of Feng's NYCFs embodies the component of investment and presents genre diversity in the 2000s.

During this period, Feng's films tended towards more commercial making and gave more attention to improving aesthetic merit. Making *tiaokan* was subordinated to storytelling. *Sigh* is the first film that Feng made entirely with Huayi Brothers. Under the framework of private investment, the film displays more tolerance to product placement as the characters usually openly call out the advertised products' names. The collaboration reflects Feng's sensitivity to the variation tendency of regulatory authority's management. He stayed one step ahead of the regulation change in 2001 which legally allowed the enterprises outside state film units to make films independently. The sensitivity was also embodied in Feng's choice of the film's theme. He built the story around an extramarital affair between a writer and his secretary. The subject was socially concerned but prohibited at that time. However, the censoring restrictions were relaxed partly due to the completion of the '9550 project'. With the regulatory authority's acquiescence, Feng subtly represented the commercially viable subject on the premise of maintaining main melody spirits. He shifted the focus from the unfaithful relationship to moral persuasion by highlighting Liang and Li's miserable situations. The serious motif generates changes in narrative expression. The film resumes the aesthetic style of Feng's early dramas, such as image code and new realistic narrative, to represent the two characters' dilemmas. Due to his sensitivity to the regulatory authority's adjustments, Feng became more active in the negotiation.

He moved along with the changes within the Chinese film industry and seized the opportunity to lead his creative pattern in the direction that emphasised critical intelligence. This pursuit laid a foundation for his subsequent NYCFs in the 2000s.

A World Without Thieves works as a bridge, which inherits the creative pattern moulded by *Sigh* and carries forward Feng's exploration of aesthetic style. It presents a creative feature that integrates aesthetic pursuit and commercial filmmaking, or in my summary, commercially aesthetic expression. When making the film, the main investor Huayi Brothers was in the process of restructuring during which it sought cooperation with Hong Kong capital under the framework of CEPA (2003).[91] This change facilitated Feng's high-concept filmmaking and aroused a genre-crossing phenomenon in *A World Without Thieves*. The film centres on a simple story of a pickpocketing couple who correct their way of life. It tells the story with diversified and appealing expressions, such as arranging action, romantic and suspenseful scenes, and using the celebrities who are popular in East Asia to enact protagonists. During the storytelling, product placements become more active. They often appear at obvious points in the film's plot, while the advertised products' functions assist to complete the narrative transition. This reflects the new and close bond between sponsors and Feng's filmmaking. The sponsors not only provided financial support

[91] CEPA refers to the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement, signed in September 2003. The agreement for film sectors was also issued at that time, which encouraged Hong Kong service suppliers to construct or renovate cinema theatre and to jointly produce films with their mainland counterparts. The Chinese language films that produced in Hong Kong are exempt from China's restriction on import quota. The coproduced works of Hong Kong and Mainland China are regarded as the Mainland China's motion pictures. For more details, see the Agreement on Trade in Services, 2003.

but also participated in the film's creation. Paralleling with the investors' demand is Feng's continuous use of commercially taboo subjects like crime and violence. He represented them in an ambiguous way in which regulatory authority neither permitted nor prohibited. More importantly, he praised rather than merely maintained main melody spirits as he did in *Sigh*. As a result of the commercial and censoring demands, his trademark comic expressions reappeared, working to bond the relevant independent film sections together and to neutralise criminal and other sensitive representations. Thus far, it can be seen that Feng's NYCFs were already different to those of the late 1990s. In order to figure out the relation between the film industry's changing environment and Feng's creative transformation, a retrospective look at the progress of mainland NYCFs in the 2000s is needed.

The Progress of Mainland NYCFs

THE FORMATION OF NEW YEAR CINEMA SEASON

Based on the popularity of Hong Kong NYCFs in the mainland, regulatory authority encouraged film professionals to make mainland NYCFs to enhance domestic films' competitiveness with foreign imports in the late 1990s. There emerged many mainland NYCFs in a short time, and some of them like Feng's trilogy, gained very good market response. The commercial success did not propel a formation of mainland NYCF genre due to the fast-changing environment in the Chinese film industry both commercially and politically. However, these NYCFs warmed the film market during New Year holidays and consolidated the formation of New Year cinema season. When introducing the idea of Hong Kong NYCF, regulatory authority emphasised more on the comic core and market positioning rather than the expression forms of such film genre. Accordingly, mainland film professionals used humorous folk expressions to make comic effect in their NYCFs, such as the Beijing *tiaokan* in Feng's NYCFs, the Tianjing dialect and crosstalk in *A Tree in House* (*Mei shier touzhe le*, dir. Yang Yazhou, 1998) and the Shanghai dialect and humour in *The Final Exam Drew the Family Closer* (*Kaoshi yijia qin*, dir. Liu Xiaoguang, 2001). Partly due to the technological disadvantage of the Chinese film industry, partly because regulatory authority had already imported popular action NYCFs starring Jackie Chan, the mainland NYCFs centred more on family themes. They humorously represent

trivial affairs in daily life and reflect the impact of social transition on Chinese traditional moral concepts from the perspective of common people. From here it can be seen that the creation of mainland NYCFs is localised and entertainment-oriented. This leads the progress of mainland NYCFs to revolve around the changes in the Chinese film industry and mass audience demands.

Compared with other film professionals' operations, Feng's localised practice of the Hong Kong NYCF idea is more commercially successful, which in turn facilitates the progress of mainland NYCFs. Early in 1996 when Hong Kong action NYCFs hit the mainland market, Zheng Xiaolong and Feng had transplanted the NYCF idea in making and promoting *All's Well* in which they continued using the humorous expression of *tiaokan* and borrowed the iconography of Hong Kong family NYCFs, ending the sequel with a hilarious scene in which all characters look directly into the camera and self-reflexively greet the audience for the Chinese New Year. The sequel was dubbed as the first New Year Celebration television programme and directly led to Feng's production of *Party A, Party B* which was regarded by many film professionals as the foundation of mainland NYCF. Its impressive box-office performance attracted many other film professionals to participate in making NYCFs. From 1998 to 2000, at least ten mainland NYCFs emerged in the market. Except for Feng's works, the others were not commercially successful. According to Xu Ying, the five NYCFs that were released in 2000 'only received a total of 3.2 million yuan box-office profit, one-third of Feng's [NYCFs'] box-office profit over a similar period in

previous years' (2013:140).[92] The respective grosses of the five NYCFs were all around 6 million yuan, which was even lower than that of Feng's *Sigh* that was released in September, with 18 million yuan receipts.[93] The production of mainland NYCFs was in such a situation: more and more film professionals launched their NYCFs, although only a few of the works performed well at the box office. Consequently, the New Year cinema season received more and more attention from both regulatory authority and film professionals. It became an important platform for domestic films' exhibition and competition around the year 2000. The success of only a few works narrowed the NYCFs' development and restricted its type to comedy. Feng's comic films therefore dominated the New Year cinema season and came to represent mainland NYCFs in the late 1990s.

The domination, on the one hand, advanced the formation of Feng's creative pattern for NYCFs and brought regulatory authority's extra support and interference; on the other hand, it enabled Feng to change the creative pattern when the conditions were right. His NYCFs at this time were all made with the semi-official film company Forbidden City and intended to display a storyline to promote main melody spirits. They all involve widely concerning social issues and depict common people's moral choices when confronting dilemmas in China's transitioning society. When

[92] The five NYCFs are *Beautiful House* (*Meili de jia*, dir. An Zhanjun, 2000), *Happy Times* (*Xingfu shiguang*, dir. Zhang Yimou, 2000), *Amateur Soccer Players* (*Fangshou fanji*, dir. Liang Tian, 2000), *The Final Exam Drew the Family Closer* (*Kaoshi yijia qin*, dir. Liu Xiaoguang, 2001) and *Storm in A Teacup* (*Da jing xiao guai*, dir. Ding Sheng, 2000).

[93] See the review about the NYCF box office from 1995 to 2004 on *Chengdu wanbao*, 2005. According to the review, *Beautiful House* received 6 million yuan in box-office revenue, *Happy Times*, 5.5 millon and *Amateur Soccer Players*, 6 million.

representing common people's dilemmas, Feng regularly used Ge You to play the male protagonists with bald images and let them play *tiaokan* on their encounters. In the films, the protagonists adhere to morals and ethics so that they gain the female characters' adoration and happy endings. Stable collaborative relationship, same casting and repeated narrative approaches indicated that Feng's creative pattern was following form. The forming process was constantly under regulatory authority's support and intervention. Apart from financial assistance, regulatory authority offered Feng a primetime slot for exhibiting his NYCFs, which moved from New Year's Day to the weekend before or after Christmas. The new exhibition slot was more profitable given the rising trend of celebrating western holidays in mainland in the late 1990s (Gao, 2009, in Zhang, 2009: 5). The consideration of market reflects regulatory authority's emphasis on Feng's creative pattern. It would not take any risk to allow the pattern to change since the Chinese film industry was improving with NYCFs and the '9550 project' was not yet accomplished. For this reason, regulatory authority rejected Feng's project of *Sigh* and asked him to make one more similar NYCF *Sorry Baby* in 1999. Feng was not completely passive during the compromise in which heobtained the promise that the regulatory authority would support his narrative changes in his next work. Therefore, in 2000, when the '9550 project' was complete and regulatory authority prepared to further open the film production sector to private capital, Feng made *Sigh*, which changed his understanding of NYCFs and of the New Year cinema season.

REDEFINING NYCFS IN THE 2000S

Sigh's success and the contemporaneous NYCFs' poor box-office performance made Feng rethink the relationship between the NYCF and the New Year cinema season. He started to regard them as two separate items. In his own words, 'the quality of NYCFs is primary, while the cinema season merely works as a pair of wings that is used to enhance the films' commercial performance' (Feng, 2000, cited Xinwen chengbao, 2003). These words reflect the changes in his understanding of NYCFs in that they should only be comedy, which engender the adjustments in his subsequent creations. Feng expanded collaboration with private capital. In addition to Huayi Brothers, there are Hollywood and Hong Kong film companies and other corporations outside cinema that came to invest or sponsor Feng's projects. The diversified investment structure brings more flexible creative space and more commercial pressure. From his subsequent NYCFs in the 2000s, it can be seen that Feng continues to use *Sigh*'s creative pattern and simultaneously introduces many popular narrative elements of his previous NYCFs, such as *tiaokan* and Ge You's image, to construct humorous expressions. The difference is that these elements no longer work to create a hilarious atmosphere in the new films but to highlight the characters' absurd deeds that are driven by inordinate desires. The dilution of the humorous tone relates to the change in film theme. Feng's NYCFs at this period are not limited to common people's daily life or widely debated social agendas, but to explore the tension between people's choice and destiny by displaying protagonists' reactions in

front of temptations. Some of the protagonists discard moralities, such as Liang's infidelity in *Sigh*, and Yan's deception in *Cell Phone*. Some of them keep their principles and moral faith, such as Yoyo's promise to Tyler in *Big Shot's Funeral*, Wang Bo's protection of Root in *A World Without Thieves*, Wu Luan's revenge in *The Banquet*, Gu Zidi's efforts for rehabilitating his comrades in *Assembly* and Qin Fen's goodness in *If You Are the One*. In these films, Feng arranges rewards for the defenders, and punishment and mockery for the destroyers. Different from his previous NYCFs, the rewards do not mean that the protagonists gain happy endings. These new NYCFs all provide more realistic endings despite the protagonists' moral attitudes. The defenders pay the price for their beliefs, while the destroyers who corrected their deeds probably make the same mistake again.[94]

The endings correspond to Feng's adjustment to his creative pattern in which he displays a more artistic and realistic tendency. Along with this tendency, Feng's verbal humour is marginalised. The transformation tendency is connected with Zhang Yimou's *Hero* whose commercial success validated Feng's rethinking of NYCF and accelerated the changes in his filmmaking by breaking the stereotypical understanding of NYCFs within the Chinese film industry. *Hero* was released on Saturday December 14 in 2002, a weekend before Christmas that used to be left for Feng's NYCFs. Feng intended to make *A World Without Thieves* that year but

[94] For example, in *A World Without Thieves*, Wang Bao dies for protecting Root; in *Assembly*, Gu Zidi spends a lifetime in rebuilding his comrades' reputation. In *Sigh*, Liang's extramarital affair is far from over since his mistress contacts him again after he returns home. In *Cell Phone*, Yan loses everything and lives a peaceful life, however, his niece brings a new phone with GPS function. The film ends with Yan's panic-stricken face and his story that seems 'to be continued'.

suspended the plan because of heart disease and the script's sensitive content of crime (Feng, 2003). In Gao's parlance, Feng's absence in the 2002 New Year cinema season indirectly boosted the box-office success of Zhang's *Hero* (2009, cited in Zhang, 2009: 5). Zhang's success challenged the dominance of comic NYCFs in the New Year cinema season, which led audiences, regulatory authority and film professionals to change their perception of NYCFs. '[They] suddenly realised that the NYCFs need not be comedy' (Wenchuang zixun, 2016). Film professionals endorsed this opinion. Filmmakers like Feng suggested that 'any movie can be called a [NYCF] as long as it is shown during the holiday season' (Feng, cited in Li and Moller, 2004). Film scholars like Yin Hong held a similar idea, 'the [NYCFs] have nothing to do with the genre of a film, but films shown over a particular period namely the Chinese New Year holiday season. Accordingly, there is no limitation fro whether the films should be comedies or tragedies' (ibid.). With these new perceptions, the connotation of NYCFs was expanded spontaneously. After 2002, mainland media were more likely to use the phrase 'the film for the New Year cinema season' (*hesui dang yingpian*) rather than the word 'NYCF' to name the works that were released in the period between December to February of the following year. The year 2002 was regarded by academia as the turning point of the progress of mainland NYCFs. At a seminar for NYCF in 2009, film professionals divided the progress into three stages: the phase of light-hearted comedies (1997 to 2001), the coexistence phase of light-hearted comedies and blockbusters (2002 to 2008) and the phase of diversified genres of

films (after 2009) (Yang and Zhou, 2009: 33).[95] As Feng's works usually represented mainland NYCFs, the division also defined the development of Feng's NYCFS to some extent. For example, since 2004, Feng started high-concept filmmaking and make *A World Without Thieves*, *The Banquet* and *Assembly*, three different types of blockbusters.

A World Without Thieves is the first work in which Feng completely used high-concept filmmaking mode. He involves many popular genre elements like gangster images and action scenes into the film, and draws on the filmmaking experience of Zhang's *Hero*, such as using Hong Kong famous actors and expanding collaboration with private capital. Feng's creative pattern at this time corresponded more to the 'look, hook and book', the high-concept filmmaking mode that Justin Wyatt summarised (1994). Based on this creative pattern, Feng later launches *The Banquet* and *Assembly*. In comparison with previous NYCFs, the two films adopt a serious tone and contain few comic scenes. From this point, *A World Without Thieves* can be considered as the transitional work of Feng's creation in the second phase of the NYCF progress in which comedies and blockbusters coexisted. When making the film, Feng collaborates not only with Huayi Brothers but also the Hong Kong based film company Media Asia Entertainment Group (hereafter abbreviated as Media Asia) and many other sponsors. The expanded investment framework led to a commercial pursuit for a wider market, which affected the film's theme, Feng's choice of actors

[95] These film professionals are Gao Jun, the vice-general manager of Beijing New Film Association, Professor Ni Zhen of Beijing Film Academy and Zhao Weifang, an associate research fellow of the Chinese National Academy of Arts.

and the film's promotion. As to the film's theme, Feng set a simple story about rehabilitation and upholding justice but from an unexpected aspect: a pickpocketing couple who protect an innocent migrant worker from being robbed. The aspect enhances the film's attractiveness by creating the contrast between the pickpockets' identity and deeds. Similar to Zhang's operation of casting, Feng also invited Hong Kong actors like Andy Lau and Cordon Lam to play the film's roles. The two actors already had high visibility in East and Southeast Asia and gained more attention at that time due to the popularity of the gangster film *Infernal Affairs* (2002). Furthermore, Feng asked Rene Liu, a popular Taiwanese singer, to enact the female protagonist, and retained his trademark humorous expressions by designing a comedic role starred by Ge You, his regular working partner. In order to highlight the role's identity as a reprobate boss of a pickpocketing gang, Feng designed him with a longhaired image that was used to describe the immoral protagonists in *Sigh* and *Cell Phone*. However, the role only works as a supporting part to highlight the virtue and wit of the protagonist played by Andy Lau. Feng arranged several action and humorous scenes to represent the contrast, such as the fights and tiffs between Lau and Ge. As 'audiences from different places can find what they want to watch in the film' (Tao, 2007: 58), these scenes enhance the film's appreciation and appeal.

With this series of adjustments, *A World Without Thieves* becomes a combination of various genre and cultural elements, and creative approaches. The combination indicates the abundance of investment resources for Feng's works.

Although he needed to carefully balance different investors' demands, such as choosing actors and setting product placements, the film's receipts no longer totally depended on the box office. The stable investment resources and the saturated NYCF market reduce the importance of New Year cinema season as a guarantee for films' expected revenue. In his subsequent creations, Feng and Huayi Brothers expressed a more flexible attitude towards the New Year cinema season and displayed an intention to develop a new cinema season. For example, Huayi Brothers intended to release *The Banquet* in the New Year cinema season, but later changed its mind and launched the film in September. According to Wang Zhongjun, the chairman of Huayi Brothers, 'the change may decrease the film's box office a bit, but it tests Feng's work in a new cinema season and avoids the competition with other films with similar theme, such as Zhang Yimou's *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006)' (Gao, 2009: 12). This commercially risky trial could never happen in Feng's previous NYCF career. It manifests the practicability of Feng's new creative pattern that was formed after he completed the creative transformation by making *A World Without Thieves*. This transformation is formed under multi impacts, such as the Chinese film industry's commercialisation, the regulatory authority's adjustment of management and the changes in popular culture. Before exploring these impacts, this study will focus first on *Sigh* to see how Feng seized the changing environment within the Chinese film industry around 2000 to start the transformation, in order to comprehensively understand the formation of the transformation under Feng's creative interaction with different factors in the process.

Sigh: Starting Genre Change along with the Revival of Feng's Early Narrative Style

Since 2000, the Chinese film industry has been confronted with a series of internal and external pressures. The '9550 project' had completed in 2000, yet the film authorities did not advance new political and productive prescriptions. Under the WTO agreements, China introduced foreign investment into its film production and exhibition sectors and increased the import quota from 10 foreign films a year to 20. The conditions brought the survival of domestic commercial films into question for the film authorities and film professionals. According to Zhang, the annual quota of ten foreign films in place since 1994 had wrecked the conditions for the development of the Chinese domestic commercial films which relied on emulating Hollywood modes, thus, uprooted the possibility of establishing a market that centred on these films (2001: 19). Then, when the quota was doubled in the 2000s, it literally reshaped the production of Feng's NYCFs which were essential in sustaining the Chinese film industry's functioning due to their great box-office performances. Given the new level of competition, the film authorities reacted accordingly. Wang Gengnian, the vice-director of the State Administration for Radio, Film and Television at that time, indicates that the priority for the Chinese film industry in the first half of 2000s pivoted on the 'market issue' (2001: 6). In respect of film production, the market issue embodies an awareness of an initiative in film planning and filmmaking. Domestic film enterprises ought to 'actively offer a service to audiences rather than wait their

request' (ibid.: 9). The regulatory directive not only approves the ordinary-people narrative (representing everyday-life tale from the aspect of ordinary people) of domestic commercial films like Feng's NYCFs, but also suggests that film professionals incorporate novel subjects or socially concerned topics into their projects.

Feng's film *Sigh* is a prominent example that accords with the two suggestions. It maintains the ordinary-people narrative mode that was used in Feng's previous NYCFs and tells a story of the sensitive but increasingly solicitous subject of extramarital affairs: Liang Yazhou (played by Zhang Guoli) falls in love with his secretary Li Xiaodan (played by Liu Bei) when they go on a business trip at Hainan. After returned home at Beijing, Liang still keeps in touch with Li and dates with her in the name of writing books. Liang's wife Song (played by Xu Fan) discovers this affair when folding his clothes. Liang therefore moves out from his home and lives with Li; their life does not go smoothly especially when Song is sent to hospital and Liang has to take care of her. The film ends with an open ending in which Liang finally breaks up with Li and returns his family but get a phone call from Li who is still missing him.

When representing this extramatial affair, Feng reused metonymy and the new realist style of narrative, the two aesthetic approaches that had often emerged in his early dramas. He combined them with his trademark *tiaokan*, which diluted the subject's sensitivity to reduce the possibility that censorship would prohibit the film's

release. These adjustments were strongly influenced by the sociopolitical context at that time. In the 2000s, the film authorities amended film regulations with a view to the film industry's development under WTO agreements. The new regulations encourages private capital investment in domestic filmmaking either with state film enterprises or independently, which brings more investment resources and consequently creative freedom to film professionals. Partly for supporting the development, the film authorities loosen censorship which enables film professionals to represent highly controversial issues. Under the combined impact of these factors, Feng makes *Sigh* in which he completes the adjustments to his aesthetic style and rebalances his filmmaking's commercial pursuit and political promotion. Due to the film's strong box-office performance, the new mode of Feng's filmmaking retains and further gains development in his later NYCFs. From this point forward, *Sigh* can be regarded as the work that started the transformation of Feng's filmmaking in the 2000s.

This section of the chapter focuses on these adjustments in *Sigh* and explores how the factors jointly prompt Feng to make changes to his creative pattern around 2000. It also considers Feng's corresponding measures under these influencing factors, to conclude the characteristics of his adjustments and identify the development of his filmmaking. Through analysis of *Sigh*, this section argues that Feng's adjustments are the outcomes of the commercial imperative of running market-oriented production of domestic films in the early 2000s. The adjustments

work more actively alongside the censorship's concession which loosened control on socially taboo subjects to facilitate the Chinese film industry's commercialisation. They dilute the comedic property of Feng's filmmaking and initiate its transformation in the 2000s from centering on comedic expressions to making cross-genre narrative. In the film, the adjustments are manifested in three aspects: the choice of film subject, the representation of taboo subjects and the revival of Feng's narrative styles that feature visual metaphor and new realist expressions. Feng revised his comedic expressions with his previous aesthetic styles and achieves the balance between preserving main melody spirits and fulfilling self-expression. The revision reduces the proportion of verbal humour in the film and makes Feng depend on images rather than language to complete the narrative. He turns to making humorous effect by representing characters' embarrassing reactions to their dilemmas. The humorous scenes carry Feng's moral persuasion that are based on main melody spirits. In these scenes, Feng does not straightforwardly express his attitude towards extramarital affairs; instead he highlights the characters' embarrassments and leaves audiences to make their own judgments. From the commercial perspective, the revision to comedic expressions expands the audience groups of Feng's films since people without knowledge of *tiaokan* or who are tired of the traditional main melody dramas' moral preach can also enjoy the film.

APPLYING TABOO SUBJECTS TO STATE-LED MARKET-ORIENTED PRODUCTION

Choosing an extramarital affair as the film's subject is in line with the film authorities' commercial prescription for boosting the market awareness and production capacity of domestic filmmaking. The private investment from Huayi Brothers not only increases the flexibility of Feng's filmmaking, but also helps to implement this commercial prescription. As aforementioned, the film authorities prioritised the 'market issue' of the Chinese film industry around the year 2000, in order to meet the increasing competition from Hollywood imports. It encourages film professionals to actively seek the narrative aspects and subjects that tallied with audiences' tastes and the issues with which they were concerned. When making *Sorry Baby*, Feng had realised the infeasibility of repeating his filmmaking mode of NYCFs due to its familiarity to audiences.[96] He thought 'the path for making NYCFs is jammed and therefore we need to find another one' (Wu, 2000). This perception reflects Feng's commercial awareness and explains his change of film subject and his regular leading actor Ge You in *Sigh*. As he mentions, *Sigh* is 'a response to the market demand, which was shot based on his investigation and judgment to audiences' areas of interest' (ibid.). The extramarital affair was no longer an unmentionable topic in the early 2000s, just like Feng's own observation, 'these days everybody seems to be getting a divorce. Everybody seems to have a mistress or

[96] See Chapter 3, the case study of *Sorry Baby*. In fact, even the leading actor Ge You felt bored with the film's farfetched story. He asked Feng many times whether they could stop shooting the project.

lover' (Pomfret, 2000). Due to the popularity of Feng's previous NYCFs, Ge You's image had already been associated with these comedies. This preconception 'would definitely distort audiences' understanding about *Sigh* and lead them to regard it as comedy' (Jing, 2000); therefore, Feng cast Zhang Guoli to replace Ge as the leading actor.

In the film, Feng's narrative adjustment is firstly reflected in using a single subject rather than multiple ones (the mode he used in previous NYCFs) to construct a film narrative. The core conflict of *Sigh* is Liang's extramarital affair with his secretary, which results in the subsequent embarrassing encounters between his family, lover and himself. Although the subject of extramarital affairs had been exposed to the public, it was still prohibited by film authorities at that time according to the 'Rules of Film Censorship' (1997). Under the circumstances, the film authorities could not openly support or encourage Feng's filmmaking on this subject despite having a production agreement with him.[97] The single subject inevitably limited audience categories, which further dampened the film authorities' willingness to invest in the project. For example, the officially invested film enterprises such as the Forbidden City Company expressed less interest in the project. The commercial and ideological pressure provoked the withdrawal of official funds but facilitated a more comprehensive cooperation between Huayi Brothers and Feng.[98] Huayi Brothers

[97] See Chapter 3, Feng accepted SARFT's suggestions to make one more NYCF, i.e. *Sorry Baby*, in 1999 in exchange for permission to make *Sigh* in 2000.
[98] Their cooperation started from making *Sorry Baby*. Huayi Brothers participated in the film project but with a small investment. After making the film, Huayi Brothers invited Feng to work with the company and promised him a high remuneration of 4 million RMB a year, which Forbidden City could not afford. After

became the main producer of Feng's subsequent films, which led to the further commercialisation of Feng's creative pattern, such as widely using product placements and blending various genre elements together in these films.

Admittedly, Huayi Brothers' involvement financed Feng's filmmaking and increased its flexibility and commercialisation, however, this involvement did not dissolve the discourse of main melody spirits that the film authorities promoted and fortified with regulations. Such commercial-political interaction impacts on Feng's direction in setting the film's agenda. He limits the level of description of the extramarital affair and dissociates the sensitive subject from the film's agenda. He therefore diverts the film's focus from the protagonist's immoral romance to their embarrassing encounters. The 110-minute film starts with a total of about eighteen minutes on the portrayal of Liang's affair, while the rest focuses on his abashed condition. Although the 18-minute sequence is continuous, the representation of Liang and Li's intimate relationship is disconnected and sketchy. For example, in one sequence, after he takes care of the drunken Li, Liang asks her to book a flight ticket home. In the next scene, they sit in a taxi holding hands and then go to Li's flat. Such shots of short duration accelerate the narrative of the affair. This edition reflects Feng's intention that the protagonists' extramarital affair is not at the core of the film's agenda. The film only uses the subject as an introduction, offering contextual information to construct the story. The film mainly aims to spotlight the necessity of

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Zhang Heping left the Forbidden City Company in 1998, Feng went to join Huayi Brothers. See, Zhang Yu's interview with Gao Jun, 2009.

advocating moral order by representing Liang's awkward situation. From this point of view, this representation of sensitive subject matter, dissociating the film's agenda and subject, is mainly for commercial reasons working in tandem with celebrating main melody spirits.

This operation of dissociation triggers the alteration of the narrative elements in *Sigh*, such as changing the protagonist's social identity and the film's ending pattern. Feng sets the protagonist as a little-known writer, but one who has a relatively higher social status than the characters in his previous works.[99] Though the film story is about everyday life, this character design still creates a sense of distance between the protagonist and general audiences. Liang is a common person and encounters the marital dilemma that anyone might come across. However, as a writer, he lives a life that separates him from most working- or middle-class audience members. He writes fiction and television scripts and has the financial ability to afford to purchase an apartment in Beijing at the turn of the century when real estate prices rose in China. Many film scholars notice the protagonists' identity transition in Feng's films in the 2000s. Some of them including Hu Ke (2006) and Jiao Yongqing (2011) count it as a commercial response to the rise of the middle class in China and their desire for consumption. Some, including Zhang Rui, interpret the transition as Feng's attempt to make a social critique on the 'moral decline in a money-hungry society' (2008:151). These statements do not give a specific connotation of middle class and neglect the

[99] These works include Feng's NYCF trilogy and also his early dramas, such as *Farewell My Love* (1994) and *I'm Your Father* (banned in 1996 and released in 2000, dir. Wang Shuo, starred by Feng Xiaogang). In the two films, the protagonists play the role of a driver and general office staff member, respectively.

sense of the distance. If taking Liang as the standard, then the protagonists in Feng's subsequent NYCFs can be hardly categorised as middle class, such as the freelance photographer in *Big Shot's Funeral* and the pickpockets in *A World Without Thieves*.

In fact, it is helpful to understand the change of character design if we associate it with Feng's adjustments in designing film endings. The film presents a dual ending: the protagonist receives punishment (suffering from his secret romance) and the moral order gains protection (Liang finally returns home). The ending is morally positive but not as happy as those in Feng's previous NYCFs. The protagonist is a tragic figure as his infidelity had already damaged the family ties and his mistress also left him. According to Downey, 'in a tragic narrative the characters are on a higher level than the audience in order to keep the distance that is essential to the tragic effect, and to allow the audience to become absorbed in the action and the character's plight without necessarily "identifying" with them' (2001:117). As to the film, the distance works to make audiences perceive Liang' s trouble without feeling frustrated. With the distance, the film leaves room for audiences as onlookers to make judgments about extramarital affairs themselves. On the whole, the character design is marketed-oriented and informed by the perceived moral standards. It enables Feng to represent the socially concerned subject from a sanctioned distance, which offers a punishment to the protagonist for conforming and acclaiming the moral order that had already bonded with the Party patriarchy under the humanisation of main melody spirits.

NEGOTIATING CENSORSHIP WITH IDEOLOGICAL MISMATCH

When representing Liang returning home, the film leaves suspense at the end, in which Liang picks up the phone and suddenly displays a terrified look. The call seems to be coming from his mistress who is watching him from somewhere. This design undermines the significance of the protagonist returning home. It reflects the mismatch of narrative intention between the film authorities and Feng, which is a secondary by-product of the interaction between censorship's supervision and Feng's creative freedom supported by private investment. The film authorities allowed Feng to address the subject with the premise that the representation must pass an explicit message of returning moral order. As to Feng, he intends to represent Liang's dilemma caused by his extramarital affair without giving any value judgment (Li, 2001). Under the compromise of the two intentions, the film's ending was constructed as an indefinite one: the secret romance between Liang and Li is seen to wither.

For the compromise, Feng revises the ending two times and found out a creative approach to bond the two narrative intentions together. In the ending sequence, the film visually completing Liang's returning to moral order but uses Li's phone call to create ambiguous spaces for the audience to interpret this family reunion. Feng initially ends the film with a scene where 'the husband snuck out to see his lover', 'a very moving and beautiful scene outside on a street lined with trees' (Short, 2000), which indicates his original viewpoint on this issue, or as he explained in an interview

with Li Baojiang, ‘extramarital affairs will not vanish, because they are a weakness of human beings’ (2001). However, this narrative intention is opposite to the censors’ idea that ‘after the husband returned home, the affair ought to be over, for good’ (Short, 2000). For passing the censorship, Feng revises the ending accordingly by making Liang’s family go to the seaside for a vacation, but simultaneously designs Liang picking up Li’s phone call which shows ‘she is obviously nearby, [...] bidding him farewell’ (Pomfret, 2000). The familial travel works to indicate Liang’s returning home and declares that the affair ends peacefully and completely. Although the revision took the censors’ requirements into account, it did not gain their recognition. The censors asked Feng to ‘excise [the] monologue’ of Li’s farewell and blessing to Liang (ibid.). He did so by using a close-up to portray Liang’s consternated face instead. Liang’s reaction implies that their affair is far from over. This revision was accepted by the censors since the film was distributed with the ending. It manifested that using images finally attained a productive tension between the film authorities’ supervision and Feng’s expression. Partly due to the successful compromise, this approach continued to be used in the endings of Feng’s subsequent films, such as Yan Shouyi’s terrified look in *Cell Phone*, Wang Li’s prayer and the child scene in *A World Without Thieves* and Queen Wan’s sudden death in *The Banquet*. Unlike the design in *Sigh*, these endings became more ambiguous as Feng left fewer visual suggestions for interpretations. This change corresponds with the Chinese film industry’s commercialised development and the changed censoring environment, which is discussed in more detail in the analysis of *A World Without Thieves* below.

The ideological mismatch and Feng's repeated revisions reveal the differences in attitude towards extramarital affairs and in the perspective of preserving moral order between Feng and the film authorities. The differences lead to the co-existence of the expressions required by the film authorities and Feng. This co-existence engenders many incoherent plots and paradoxical statements in the film narrative. The narrative indicates the role of film authorities in the initial stage of Feng's creative transformation, which loosened the control over the choice of film subject and at the same time oversaw the film subject's representation. The film authorities required a returning-home story that clearly conveys a moral message (a moral education). Feng sought a smooth way to suggest people should not engage in extramarital affairs by indicating them as trouble (a moral persuasion). In Feng's eyes, instead of eradicating extramarital affairs, the film only 'proposes to tell audiences that Liang's experience is a suffering, and then leaves them to decide what to do (when facing similar temptations); if the film portrays Liang as a bad man, it would cut down the possibility that audiences associate Liang to make self-examination' (Li, 2001). When the official and Feng's expressions acted in a same sequence, they made the narrative incoherent and sometimes caused nonconformity among plots, such as the aforementioned sequence of Liang and Li's extramarital affair. The sequence does not display why and how Liang and Li start the relationship, which is essential to the effect of Feng's moral persuasion. For example, the immoral reasons would invalidate Feng's statement, however, according to the 1997 censoring rules, films are not allowed to represent extramarital affairs with a positive attitude. Therefore, it becomes

hard to explain the causes of Liang and Li's relationship since they both have partners and live a happy life before they meet. As a negotiated result, the sequence's narrative often jumps from one plot point to another and provides few details about the process.

Although the narrative proceeds abruptly, it guarantees the relative completeness of Feng's expression under the impact of the official expression. In the narrative, Feng uses images to establish the necessary links between plot points, which helps to repair the abruptions which happen in the sequence that represents Liang and Li' relationship. In the sequence's beginning, Li gets drunk and cannot take off her jacket because of the stuck zip. Liang is touched but hesitant. He does not help Li and instead keeps a distance from her. Later in the coming-home scene, Liang and Li sit in the back of a taxi. He asks Li to come to his flat and meet his family. Li does not reply but fiddles with the zip of her coat. The zip is stuck again. This time, Liang uses his teeth to unlock the zip without any hesitation (Figure 5.1). Thereafter, they directly go to Li's flat. The zip image becomes a hook that connects the two loosely connected scenes, displaying the development of Liang and Li's relationship. Li's attempt to open the zip reflects her good feelings towards Liang, while Liang's action demonstrates his acceptance of Li's affection. The zipper's open state indicates the start of their romance and concomitant sexual relationship. From here it can be seen how this visual metaphor helps to complete the representation of Liang and Li's extramarital affair without displaying any sensitive content in detail.



Figure 5.1: Liang hesitates at first to help Li to open the stuck zip (left); when they return to Beijing, he actively helps Li to unlock the stuck zip (right) in Sigh (Huayi Brothers Advertising Company), 2000.

In addition to the zip image, Feng also uses the images of feet and shoes (Figure 5.2) to portray the protagonists' intimacy in order to achieve the necessary narrative transition in a sanctioned way. Following the scenes above, after entering Li's flat, Liang hugs her. Then the film switches to another scene in which Liang is putting on his shoes. The shoe message indicates there has been some intimate behaviour between Li and Liang, or as Feng explained, 'even though they don't see the couple in a sexual situation, [audiences] still have this feeling that something has happened between the two actors' (Short, 2000). Liang's foot can be considered as a phallic symbol. With the action of putting on shoes, the images of feet and shoes become a hook that helps the film maintain a continuous narrative and represent an implicitly sexual description without violating film censoring rules.[100] It is worth noting that the censors actually perceive the symbolism for sexual description if we connect the censors' comments with the subsequent scene in which Feng uses the image of 'leg' to describe Liang's relationship with his wife Song. In the scene, Liang emphasises that Song is important to him, 'when I sleep in bed at night, I touch your hand. It feels

[100] For example, the 'Rules of Film Censorship' (1997) prohibits inappropriate descriptions of sex and the naked body.

like touching my own and I feel nothing else; but if cutting down your hand, it seems to cut down my own, painful'. Feng initially used the word 'leg' rather than 'hand' in the conversation. However, the censors thought 'using "leg" here was too sexy' (Pomfret, 2000). Taking the context, 'in bed', into account, it is easy to comprehend the censors' comments, i.e. the leg is also a symbol of male sexual metaphor, just like the foot message. The comments indicate that the censors noticed Feng's symbolism and acquiesced; otherwise, they might have asked him revise or cut the shoe-wearing scene. The use of these images again reflects Feng's creative response to the censorship's requirements to the representations of sensitive subjects. This interaction makes Feng use an ambiguous way to integrate his commercial consideration and political promotion with the official one. He reuses the narrative modes that appeared in his early dramas and television programmes, such as metonymy and new realist expressions, to highlight the characters Liang and Li's dilemmas and therefore suggests his attitude towards extramarital affairs.



Figure 5.2: Liang is putting on shoes after a date with Li in Sigh (Huayi Brothers Advertising Company), 2000.

RECONSTRUCTING NARRATIVE STRUCTURE ALONG WITH THE REVIVAL OF FENG'S EARLY STYLE

In constructing Liang's dilemma of moral persuasion, Feng represented many trifles of his life, such as his writing habit and his wife's dominant role in family affairs. This approach relates to the mode of Feng's previous works that featured the narrative style of new realist literature, which '[utilised] a so-called "objective" narrative mode intended to restore life to its original state' (Hong 2009: 389). In the new realist fictions, descriptions of daily trivialities may initially appear rambling and unnecessary, but these details usually have a close connection with characters' fates. Partly due to the collaboration with Liu Zhenyun, a representative writer of the new realist literature, this narrative style often appeared in Feng's works in the early 1990s, such as *Farewell My Love* (1994) and *Ground Covered with Chicken Feathers* (1995). Similar to these works, in *Sigh*, the detailed descriptions of Liang's life whilst seeming to be casually thrown together, actually move the story along. Liang's life details expose his extramarital affair. They aggravate his dilemma further by obstructing his divorce and isolating him from his family and friends. The pressure prompts Liang to finally return home. In the opening scene when Liang first meets Li, the film casually displays Liang's writing habit and briefly introduces Liang's family information. Liang always messes about in his studio, while his wife Song is occupied with home renovation, dealing with everything from decorative design to furniture selection. Liang is not the one who takes care of family matters. He leaves Song to decide on the house decoration by herself. When delivered, these details seem no more important than as

to provide the audience with the story's background. However, following the story's development, the details become the key clues to expose Liang's infidelity. In the wife-visiting scene, Song comes to Liang's temporary studio, a hotel room, actually used for his date with Li. Liang deliberately messes up his desk that has been tidied by Li. When Song enters and subconsciously cleans up the room, the porter knocks on the door to offer a repair service requested by his 'wife' (Li). Liang is nervous and immediately denies ordering the service. Song does not suspect anything until she finds Liang's shirts are all folded neatly and put in order. As aforementioned, Liang is not one for general housework and order; therefore, there must be someone else. Unlike the fragmented narrative in Feng's previous NYCFs, these details connect the opening and subsequent sequences together, to form a logical and complete narrative structure. Under the structure, the narrative progress is similar to completing a jigsaw: only after all the pieces are put together can the whole picture be seen.

Similar to that in new realist fictions, the detailed descriptions of everyday life in the film also imply the authors' attitude towards protagonists. The details represent the invisible pressure from the whole society, which obstructs the development of Liang and Li's relationship and assists in Feng's construction of moral persuasion. According to Wang (1989), the new realist writers advocate a narrative strategy entitled 'writing with zero-degree emotion' (*qinggan lingdu xiezuo*), which objectively represents daily life without embedding within it the writers' emotion and attitudes. Admittedly, the writers claim that they avoid offering value judgments and leave

readers to make their own assessments based on the texts (Ding 1991:17). However, there already exists the relation of ideological power in the texts' discourses and narratives. In Barthes' words, '[power] always ends in creating an axiological writing, in which the distance which usually separates fact from value disappears within the very space of the word, which is given at once as description and as judgment' (1953, 20). Based on this idea, Nan identifies the narrative illusion of the new realist literature in which there also exists a power relationship that is embodied in the characterisation and plot devices (1992: 41). In *Sigh*, Feng's unsupportive attitude towards extramarital affairs is also embodied in the detailed descriptions of Liang and Li's encounters after they live together. The trifles seem common but reflect a wide opposition that accumulates from every corner of society to their affair. After Liang stays with Li, nothing around them is going well. Li is beaten by her boyfriend and is fired by her boss Liu. The boss later blames her when she insists on visiting the injured Song in hospital. The Civil Affairs Bureau refuses Liang's request for divorce since he cannot offer the introduction letters of his and Song's work units (*danwei jieshao xin*). The letter is an outcome of collectivism, displaying the units' confirmation that they know and 'agree' to their employees' divorce. The film is set in the late 1990s during which time staff would often use the letter as a persuasion strategy, making people think twice about their divorce. The strategy works for Liang, laying the ground for his family reunion. These descriptions are arranged in the following order, from the individual's (Li's boyfriend), to social group's (Li's boss), to the official's response (the Civil Affairs Bureau) and then to moral criticism (Liu's blame). With this

order, the film gradually exacerbates Liang and Li's situations, continuing to create obstacles to Liang's divorce, which creates an atmosphere where the whole society rejects the affair.

Since there are necessary connections among the detailed descriptions, Feng no longer needs to mould particular characters featured verbal humour to string different scenes together, as he did in his previous NYCFs. This change entails his adjustment to humorous expression. In *Sigh*, the humorous pieces do not casually appear. They are relevant to the story and correspond to the film's agenda. For example, in the sequence of anti-pornography inspection (*sao huang*), the humorous effect is caused not only by the witty dialogue between the police and suspects, but also by Liang and Li's embarrassing situation. After Liang moves out of home, he checks into a five-star hotel with Li. Later, they find themselves involved in the police's routine inspection for cracking down on prostitution. As they cannot prove their relationship, Liang and Li are treated as suspects, standing against a wall with other guests. One guest complains, 'isn't this a five-star hotel in which people can do anything as they please?'. The police reply, 'but this hotel is still under the five-star flag (the flag of China)'. From the aspect of narrative structure, this humorous piece is not independent. It is a natural conversion to occur in such a situation and does not run far away from the film's storyline. As to the film's agenda, the humorous piece serves rather than replaces it as the focus. It works as a barrier that impedes the development of Liang and Li's relationship. The police's appearance interrupts their

dating, while the anti-pornography movement embarrasses them. The *tiaokan* with the phrase 'five-star' celebrates the police that preserve the moral order as an official organisation. It simultaneously suggests that Liang and Li's affair is improper since Feng juxtaposes their dating with the pornographic activity.[101] The police's action represents a social disapproval to extramarital affairs. Although Liang and Li do not break laws, the official organisation can still shame them as a punishment, or just like the boss Liu mentions in the scene where he bails Liang out, 'the police actually help Song to vent her emotions'. The sequence's mocking effect is created more by Liang's embarrassing situations than by the characters' dialogue. Feng's constant emphasis on his unsupportive attitude is a response to his early banned experience of *Living a Miserable Life* (1996), an aborted project with a similar script to *Sigh*.[102] This emphasis is also embodied in his other narrative adjustments, such as using image code and mise-en-scene to shape characters and portray their situations.

Accompanying the dilution of verbal humour, Feng pays more attention to mise-en-scene and shots rather than dialogue to construct the film's narrative. These narrative approaches were often used in his early works in the mid-1990s and his NYCF *Sorry Baby*.[103] As for *Sigh*, he arranges characters' positions and uses rack focus to indicate the characters' emotional state of mind and their relationships to each other, and in this way, suggests his attitude to the moral order. For instance, in

[101] Feng continued to use this approach in his later NYCFs, such as representing the homosexual image Molly in *If You Are The One* (2008). See the analysis in Chapter 3.
[102] Since 'it delightedly portrayed inappropriate sexual relationships' (Feng, 2003), the project was immediately banned after Feng started to shoot in 1996. For more details, see Chapters 2 and 3.
[103] In *Sorry Baby*, Feng also uses shots to represent sensitive subjects, such as switching shots to set the sexual suspense between male and female protagonists. See the analysis in Chapter 3.

the family-visiting scene, Li comes to Liang's home after they have been separated for a while. It is the first time the wife, husband and mistress come together. Feng sets the wife Song in the middle. Liang is sitting on her left side (on the bottom right of the screen), while, Li, right (on the top left of the screen) (Figure 5.3). According to Ma (1994) who explores the spatial positioning in the Chinese film melodrama using case studies of Xie Jin's works, the spatial codes actually signify the social and ideological position of characters. Based on the ancient Chinese yin-yang cosmology and its influence on the layout of the traditional Chinese stage, Ma points out that the spatial positioning visually represents the hierarchy as male-female, insider-outsider, and as a moral-immoral dimension, i.e. the male character is positioned to the right side of the stage, which is associated with yang/insider/moral/positivity; the female character is on the left side, which indicates yin/outsider/immoral/negativity (1994: 16-21). 'The stage convention is adopted by Chinese filmmakers, especially those with a theatrical background' (ibid.: 20). Regarding Feng, he used to be a stage designer during the period he served in the military art troupe as well as his early film and television drama career.[104] This experience influenced Feng's filmmaking, which was embodied in his positioning of the family-visiting scene. With Ma's idea, the right-hand position can be regarded as the indication of Liang's domination. Song, on the left side of the screen, is subordinate to Liang. Li is sitting on the far-left side, which manifests that

[104] Feng joined the army in the late 1970s. At that time, stage shows such as *The Red Detachment* (*Hongse niangzi jun*, 1970, adapted from Xie Jin's 1960 film of the same name) were still the regular performances of military art troupe. Therefore, the stage convention with Xie's style necessarily impacted on Feng's filmmaking. In fact, there are many similarities between Feng and Xie's filmmaking: their works are both sensitive to the political-economic changes of the Chinese film industry. Xie's narrative pattern is summarised as four components, i.e. good people receiving unfair treatment, highlighting the people's virtue, expressing moral influence and offering a happy ending (Wang, 2015). These components also appear in Feng's narrative pattern.

her status is lower than Song's in their triangular relationship. By the marriage, Song becomes the insider of Liang's family, Liang's *neiren* (wife, literally means inside people), and therefore gains authority from him. The wedding photo with the same layout behind them further confirms the relationship and Song's legitimacy. If we regard Liang and Song as an integral (as they have not divorced each other), then, Li who sits to the right-hand side of the integral is the outsider, i.e. the immoral image. Such spatial positioning again reflects Feng's unsupportive attitude to the affair, which accords with the social consensus that regards the other people as home wreckers.



Figure 5.3: Li visits Liang's family in Sigh (Huayi Brothers Advertising Company), 2000.

Partly due to his purpose of moral persuasion, Feng does not cater to the public preconception to depict Li, the home wrecker, as a totally negative character. He connects the goldfish image with Li's appearance on the screen (Figure 5.4). The image was used in Feng's early drama *Farewell My Love* as a metaphor to manifest

the protagonist's predicament and despair.[105] In *Sigh*, it works to represent Li's insecurity and helplessness. These moods are reflected intensively in the family-visiting scene in which Liang's daughter embarrasses her. The goldfish image appears intermittently across the film and accompanies the scenes of Li's trysts with Liang. Feng usually uses close-ups to display a single goldfish suspended in water, which represents Li's anxiety. She is morally unacceptable, like the goldfish that is isolated from the outside world. After she lives with Liang, her anxiety is relieved and the goldfish image accordingly disappears. Partly for expressing his moral persuasion, Feng designs Liang's daughter to play a prank on Li, which brings her anxiety and helplessness back on the screen. In the family-visiting scene, Song asks the daughter to bring Li some water. With a close-up, we can see the daughter puts a lot of salt and monosodium glutamate into a glass; then, Feng utilises a rack focus to make the background vague which draws our attention to the glass (Figure 5.5). The daughter carefully passes the glass to Li and sits in the empty place between her parents, cutely lying against Song. The water is bitter, but Li has to drink under the circumstances, just like she has to endure people's teasing and antipathy due to the affair. The daughter's prank indicates her hostility towards Li who almost wrecks her family, while her positioning suggests that she is the adhesive that can fill the crack between her parents. These designs underline the obstacles and pressure that trap Li into a more serious dilemma. They correspond to Feng's moral persuasion: extramarital affairs are not worth it as they cause only suffering.

[105] The two films have many similarities in term of mise-en-scene. Except for the goldfish image, they both present a scene of house decoration, appearing in the films' plot points.



Figure 5.4: The goldfish image appears intermittently across the film before Liang lives with Li in Sigh (Huayi Brothers Advertising Company), 2000.



Figure 5.5: The daughter puts salt and monosodium glutamate into the glass in Sigh (Huayi Brothers Advertising Company), 2000.

With the support from private capital, in *Sigh*, Feng balances his filmmaking and film authorities' political demands. He could represent the sensitive but commercially viable subject of extramarital affairs by highlighting its moral orientation. Feng's moral persuasion is the negotiation between the moral preach that the film authorities required and the marked response that the investors' considered. Feng emphasises the completeness of the film's narrative structure. The elements involved such as humorous pieces of *tiaokan* have relevance to the film story. Accordingly, this relevance changes Feng's narrative styles, which turn to depend on mise-en-scene

and images rather than characters' dialogues to complete the transitions among plots. These adjustments manifest the changes in Feng's filmmaking, which intend to break through the creative pattern of his previous NYCFs. They are also a response to the criticisms within the Chinese film industry that usually regard Feng's NYCFs as lacking artistic merit. However, *Sigh* does not do well in this aspect. Unlike his previous NYCFs, it did not gain any domestic awards, such as the Golden Rooster Award (selected by film professionals) and the Hundred Flowers Award (voted by audiences). Although the film won five awards at the Cairo International Film Festival, many domestic film critics did not change their attitude towards Feng's films since the film festival was less influential from their perspective.[106] As to Feng and Huayi Brothers, the film's commercial success made them continue to use, revise and improve the creative pattern in Feng's subsequent films, such as integrating product placement into film narrative in *Big Shot's Funeral* (2001), *Cell Phone* (2003) and *A World Without Thieves* (2004), and intensifying the new realist expressions in the last two films. In this sense, *Sigh* can be considered as the start of Feng's filmmaking transformation in the 2000s. Since *A World Without Thieves* absorbs many other genre elements, Feng's filmmaking presents a hybrid genre tendency, which further leads his NYCFs to be of diverse genres in the late 2000s. From this point of view, *A World Without Thieves* can be read as the second turning point of Feng's filmmaking in the 2000s, as this chapter will examine in the next section.

[106] There are many news reports and interviews that indicate domestic critics' deprecating attitude to the five awards and the Cairo International Film Festival. For example, some film professionals explained the awards were easy to get and the film festival was not influential since it belonged to the Third World. See Xie Xiao's interview (2000) and He Long's report (2001).

A World Without Thieves: Transforming Feng's Filmmaking into Cross-genre Mode

After *Sigh*, Feng strengthens the cooperation with Huayi Brothers and his production accordingly presents a tendency for high concept filmmaking, which, as Justin Wyatt argues, aims to 'maximize marketability and consequently the economic potential at the box office' (Wyatt, 1994: 15). When making films, Feng leans to appealing visual forms (look), for instance, action scenes, film stars and glorious landscape settings, and portrays stories relating to everyday life with concise narrative structure but from the perspective of moral promotion (hook and book). Regarding *A World Without Thieves*, this trend is more conspicuous, as the film amasses many high-profile celebrities and bankable stars from both the mainland and other Chinese ethnic areas, and creates a new record in using product placement with at least 12 brands involved. The film's theme is succinct, telling a widely accepted story of moral rehabilitation in which a pickpocketing couple protects an innocent migrant worker from being robbed. The story is set on a train where the head Uncle Li (played by Ge You) directs his subordinates to steal the saving from the migrant worker Shagen (played by Wang Baoqiang). Another pickpocketing gang, the couple Wang Bo (played by Andy Lau) and Wang Li (played by Rene Liu), decide to safeguard Shengen since they are moved by his virtue and also want to accumulate merits for their unborn kid. All the actions of the two gangs are actually under the surveillance of the policy officer (played by Zhang Hanyu) who later arrests them. Wang Bo asks Wang Li to escape, whilst he dies during his fight with Uncle Li for

seizing Shagen's money back. The film ends with a montage sequence juxtaposing two scenes in which Wang Li prays to Buddha and Tibetan shepherds check a baby's condition. This ambiguous ending changes the cliché happy-ending format of Feng's NYCFs, leaving room for possible interpretations, which reflects the filmmakers' purpose of expanding audience base to maximise the film's marketability.

This ending's adjustment is closely associated with the change in the film's investment structure, which corresponds to Huayi Brother's conglomeration under the WTO agreements and the CEPA. The company expresses interest in building distribution organisation after its collaboration with Columbia Pictures for producing *Big Shot's Funeral*, which comes true in 2003 after it merged with the non-film enterprise Taihe Property Investment Company as the Huayi Brothers and Taihe Film Investment Corporation (hereafter Huayi Taihe). The new company set up two subsidiaries — Huayi Brothers Culture and Artist Agency, and the joint stock Xiying Huayi Film Distribution Company — based on the government's policies of industrialising cultural sectors such as the 'Provisional Rules for Operational Qualification Access of Film Production, Distribution and Exhibition Enterprises' issued by SARFT. Except for exhibition agencies, Huayi Taihe has ability to independently accomplish film production and release, and therefore actively seek collaboration and development outside Mainland China.

A World Without Thieves is an outcome of this attempt, which produced by both

the company and the Hong Kong based film corporation Media Asia. According to Justin Wyatt, conglomeration and the rise in marketing and merchandising are two factors that encourage filmmakers to develop high-concept projects (ibid.: 18). For Huayi Taihe, the restructuring and increasing transnational collaboration contribute to a 'diversification of risk for the conglomerates through an increased capital base' (ibid.: 69), and also strengthen the bond between film expression and investment. In Feng's NYCFs, the bond is prominently manifested in the use of product placement and the choice of actors. These actors to some extent have relations with Huayi Taihe and its cooperative partners, as well as their market positioning and attempt of market expansion[107]. For example, unlike Columbia Pictures which gives consideration to both the mainland and global market — this can be seen from the cast of *Big Shot's Funeral* containing mainland China, British and Hong Kong actors and actress as well as the cast of *Cell Phone* involving high-profile actors such as Zhang Guoli and Fan Bingbing, Media Asia pays more attention on the Chinese ethnic market and shapes the storytelling of *A World Without Thieves* to be more pertinent to these specific areas. Accordingly, the film uses many cinematic elements of Hong Kong cinema especially those relating to Media Asia, such as inviting the actors of the company's popular gang film *Infernal Affairs* (2002), such as Andy Lau and Gordon Lam, to enact protagonist and supporting part respectively but belonging to opposing pickpocketing groups.

[107] Due to the lack of sufficient information, it is hard to find out how many Huayi Brothers contracted artists participated in *A World Without Thieves*. However, these actors and actresses were more or less associated with Wang Jinghua, the leader of Huayi Brothers Culture and Artist Agency, e.g. she used to be the agent of the male supporting actor You Yong who played the vice-leader of Uncle Li's gang; and she also helped Huayi Brothers to sign many Hong Kong actors and actresses, like Carina Lau and Rosamund Kwan Chi-lam.

The greater the range of capital resources invested in the filmmaking, the more diverse the expression of genres appears in Feng's films. This phenomenon can explain the various expressions with genre and cultural elements, or the cross-genre narrative as aforementioned, in Feng's *A World Without Thieves,* in which he gives consideration to different investors and sponsors' demands. The film was produced amid Huayi Taihe's new round of restructuring in 2004, and therefore unprecedentedly received investment from many sources, including Huayi Taihe, Media Asia, Forbidden City, Nokia, China Mobile, BMW automobiles and so on. After the restructuring, Huayi Brothers suspended the collaboration with Taihe and became more specialised as a media group in both enterprise structure and development direction. Correspondingly, Feng's subsequent works are diverse, trying different genres. From this point of view, the cross-genre narrative in *A World Without Thieves* is like a trial in which Feng integrated different expression demands (required by different capital sources) under the basic NYCF framework (for the consideration of maintaining the original mainland market).

This section of the chapter focuses on Feng's adjustments to his creative pattern under the conglomeration process of Huayi Brothers in *A World Without Thieves*. It investigates the factors that trigger the conglomeration and their impacts on Feng's creative pattern. In addition, this section addresses Feng's balancing of the different demands for expression caused by the conglomeration. Through analysis of *A World Without Thieves*, I argue that Feng's creative pattern presents the features of

cross-genre narrative and high-concept filmmaking along with the conglomeration of Huayi Taihe, and argue that Feng's filmmaking displays a tendency from pure genre towards hybrid genre in the mid-2000s. Under the combined effect of regulatory authority and capital, domestic producers increasingly emphasise films' marketability, since their political agenda has been fixed due to censorship. Accordingly, in *A World Without Thieves*, it presents a creative feature that integrates aesthetic pursuit and or in my summary, a commercially aesthetic expression. Feng's filmmaking displays a feature of what I call 'commercially aesthetic expression', i.e. a technique that infuses aesthetic pursuit into commercial filmmaking. The technique is certainly formed on the premise that the film's theme corresponds to main melody spirits. Within the fixed political framework, investments and sponsorship involve into Feng's narrative construction and shape his expression. In the film, product placements are more connected with the story than in his previous NYCFs, integrating into its plot points and participating in the narrative. Alongside *tiaokan*, many new popular cultural elements appear in the film. The appearance corresponds to the film's investment structure, such as the corresponding relation between the use of popular Hong Kong actors and Media Asia, the use of verbal humour and Huayi Taihe, and the involvement of visual humour and the negotiation of Media Asia and Huayi Taihe. Partly for gaining permission to represent criminal subjects, Feng sets the film agenda that promotes rather than simply accords with main melody spirits. The setting is mainly accomplished by highlighting the police image based on censors' requirements. This interference moulds the film narrative, which reflects again the

regulatory authority's idea of developing the Chinese film industry that aims to integrate political promotion and commercial performance together. As the conglomeration of Huayi Taihe temporarily came to an end in 2004, Feng's creative pattern was stable in the late 2000s during which time he began production on two different genre films *The Banquet* and *Assembly*. Although Feng's works presented some new changes in the 2010, the idea of genre filmmaking was retained in his creative pattern. Thus, *A World Without Thieves* can be seen as Feng's transitional work from cross-genre filmmaking to genre filmmaking.

DESIGNING CHARACTERS UNDER THE COMPLICATED INVESTMENT STRUCTURE

Huayi Brothers' conglomeration and the altered investment structure relating to Media Asia's involvement drive Feng's making of *A World Without Thieves* into high-concept mode, which engenders cross-genre storytelling and first manifests in selecting the film's subject and narrative angle. This selection is closely associated with the two companies' expectation of market expansion. The increased market targets result from this film's diverse funding resources which ranges from mainland private and semi-official film companies (Huayi Brothers and Forbidden City Film Company), Hong Kong film company (Media Asia), to non-film enterprises both at home and abroad (Taihe Property and various advertising sponsors such as Nokia phones, China Mobile Communication Group and BMW automobiles). This complicated investment structure in turn leads the filmmakers to choose the simple, widely accepted and commercially viable subject of crime and self-redemption, in order to adapt to different markets' contexts. For example, regarding the mainland market, this selection ponders the censorship as well as commercial return since pickpocketing is less violent compared with other crimes which rarely allowed to appear on big screen. Also, a self-redemption story is easily applicable to a wide range of societies, whist the film's novel narrative angle — designing the pickpocketing couple to protect the victim as an atonement for their previous guilt — further increase the story's commercial viability, which two points can be corroborated from Feng's discussion with producers for preparing the film project. Huayi Brothers

initially planed to produce this project with Columbia Picture after *Big Shot's Funeral*, therefore Feng introduced the story to the foreign company's co-vice chairman Gareth Wigan who is regarded as having astute perception of the potential of Asian cinema in the global market due to his operation of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). Despite the fact that the discussion relies on translation, Wigan showed interest in the project and decided to finance it as Feng's next NYCF (Feng, 2003). This manifests the project's applicability to multiple markets, which overcome cultural and language barriers. Although Columbia Pictures finally did not fulfill the production plan partly because using the criminal subject still collided with the censorship in the early 2000s, the project still remained on Huayi Brothers' list by virtue of its market applicability and later hit cinema screens under the company's collaboration with Media Asia.

The market positioning of different producers engenders corresponding modalities of film storytelling. Considering that Lau and Lam also play gangsters in *Infernal Affairs*, this similar role allocation and crime subject actually establish a connection between the two films, which increases the possibility of expanding audience base. This way of market expansion indicates a prominent feature of the Mainland-Hong Kong collaboration at the early stage of CEPA, that is, the two parties first consolidate their original market, respectively, and then utilise their partners' influence to enter each other's markets.[108] To illustrate, Lam is Media Asia's

[108] Except for cooperating with Media Asia in 2004, Huayi Brothers suspended the collaboration with Taihe and turned to work with Tom Group, a Hong Kong-based media company mainly invested by

contracted artist while Lau frequently appears in the company's works. This close connection alongside the two films' similar scenario reflect how Media Asia takes its local market into account, whilst, as for Huayi Brothers, this similarity allows Feng to use familiar cinematic elements to construct an unfamiliar story, for example, making defamilarisation effect by reversing Lau's role from a gang member who infiltrates the Hong Kong Police Force in *Infernal Affairs* to a pickpocketing who sacrifices himself to protect victim *in A World Without Thieves*. This role change increases the film's narrative novelty, from which can be further seen from this collaboration's principle for integrating targeted market demands.

The narrative approach — constituting a new story with familiar elements — corresponds to the collaborative principle of Huayi Brothers and Media Asia and facilitates the hybridisation of the film's storytelling. One prominent manifestation is to transplant Feng's trademark humor featuring Ge You's performance into Andy Lau's role, Wang Bo, namely, to endow this character with Ge Yo-esque humor of *tiaokan* (means 'banter or mockery'). This combines the saleable Northern Chinese humor expression and popular Hong Kong actor's performance, for seeking a general narrative solution to achieves market integration. In *A World Without Thieves*, Wang Bo is designed as a right-minded person wearing a poker face, whose characters are similar with those played by Ge You in Feng's previous NYCFs, for instance, Wang

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Cheung Kong-Hutchison Group. In the November 2004, Huayi established Huayi Brothers Film and Media Company. According to Qiu (2011), the chairman Wang Zhongjun intended to rely on the Tom Group to make Huayi Brothers list on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. For more details, also see Ma's interview with Wang Zhongjun, 2005.

acts like misdoubting morality, but simultaneously embarrasses others' bullying and hypocritical deeds, such as the following examples in which he teases security guard and makes a mockery of Uncle Li (Figure 5.6). In the opening sequence, Wang intentionally stops the BMW car that he extorts from a rich man, in front of a security guard who obstructs him from entering the high-grade residential district when he first comes to the rich man's house. At this time, the security guard salutes him, which leads Wang to tease him as 'you think criminals don't drive expensive cars so you don't check them, huh?'. This *tiaokan* highlights Wang's righteousness covered by cynically emotional protection in that it indicates the consistency of Feng's NYCF style at very beginning. From then, the film continues reinforcing this personality, designing Wang to embarrass Uncle Li especially when Li disguises himself as an old disabled man for using Shagen's sympathy to steal from him. Wang exposes the trick, parodies Uncle Li's totter and teases him as 'how to play lame, like this?'. Uncle Li replies with 'dragging this leg a bit more', which makes their conversation like performing traditional Chinese crosstalk that features *tiaokan* expression. In other words, this crosstalk-like conversation remains or even strengthens Feng's humor style since it connects Ge You and Andy Lau's performance for comic effect. Therefore, it is evident that the collaborative principle of Huayi Brothers and Media Asia is to consolidate local markets first, or in Feng's own explanation, this film prioritises northern Chinese audiences and then the southern (Zhao, 2004), while the Ge You-esque characterization of Lau's role is a negotiated outcome of the two parties'

market consolidation.[109]



Figure 5.6: Wang Bo (Andy Liu) mocks Uncle Li (Ge You), who disguises himself as a disabled man in A World Without Thieves (Huayi Taihe and Media Asia), 2004.

This negotiation actually illustrates that both the two companies value Feng's style of NYCFs, which suggests their collaborative orientation revolving around the mainland market under the CEPA. Correspondingly, Ge You's role Uncle Li works as a supplement to the representation of Feng's humorous style in the film, whilst Wang Baoqiang's role Shagen achieves continuation of Feng's characterisation used in his former widely concerned NYCF *Cell Phone*, which reflects a productive intention of exploiting his works' mainland market potential. When representing Uncle Li's image, the film revives political *tiaokan* — Feng's signature style of his early NYCFs in the late 1990s — by designing the character to speak political rhetoric and traditional poetry on irrelevant occasions, for example when using a bureaucratic tone and

[109] Peter Lam, the founder of Media Asia, suggested Huayi Taihe invite Andy Lau to enact the protagonist of *A World Without Thieves*, in order to use his influence to attract Hong Kong and overseas audiences. See Li Chun, 2017b.

phrases to exhort the gang members to unite. Making such connection is a result of market consideration, as Feng states, 'to attract the fans of his NYCFs' (Tan, 2005: 26). In addition, the image of Shagen is highly similar to that of young Yan Shouyi in *Cell Phone*, both which are innocent rural juveniles wearing 'Lei-Feng hats' and speaking Henan dialect (Figure 5.7). This hat is the standard service cap of the People's Liberation Army in the 1960s and later associates with Lei Feng, a soldier who is regarded as an incarnation of communist morals and virtue after his death in the line of duty in 1962, so that wearing it becomes a symbol of moral inheritance from the perspective of political promotion. In fact, both Shagen and young Yan persist in good virtues, and considering the sequence between the two films, the two roles' common points create an effect of 'stock characters' which forms, as Loukides and Fuller argue, 'cultural assumptions' (1990: 4), in that Shagen symbolises moral purity in the film. Meanwhile, the similar characterisation saves room of building Shagen's personality and therefore accelerates the film's narrative towards the novel section of how the pickpocketing couple protects him. It is a typical operation of high-concept filmmaking, which, based on Wyatt's idea, features 'a simplification of character and narrative' (1994: 16) and aims to expand the film's market shares. Of particular note is that, through Wang Baoqiang's naïve screen identity and shy image, the film establishes a connection between Shagen and another character of innocent migrant worker in *Blind Shaft* (*Mang jing*, 2003), a drama attracting much attention commercially and critically, for example, with his performance in the drama, Wang won the Golden Horse Award for Best New Actor. Also with a view to the release

sequence between the drama and *A World Without Thieves*, the same actor and characterisation reflect Feng's exploration in terms of filmmaking, in which his NYCFs gradually presents a genre shift from comedy to hybrid genre by, for example, introducing the elements of serious drama, and then to multiple genres, such as his subsequent works, the *wuxia* costume drama *The Banquet* (*Yeyan*, 2006) and war film *Assembly* (*Jijie hao*, 2007).

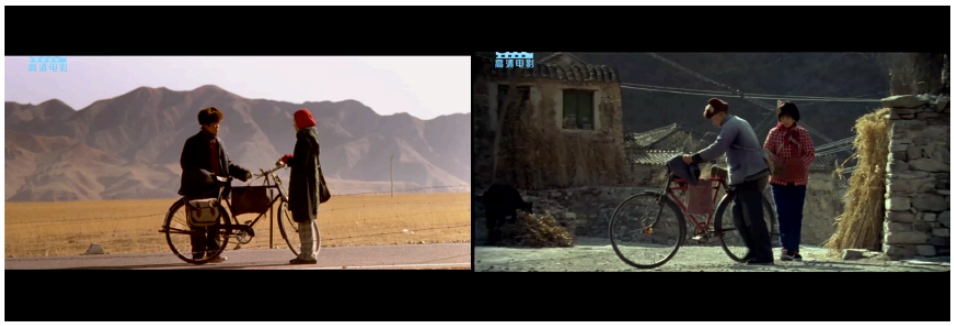


Figure 5.7: Shagen (Wang Boqiang) with the Lei-Feng hat helps Wang Li (Rene Liu) in A World Without Thieves (Huayi Taihe and Media Asia), 2004*; Young Yan Shouyi with the hat drives his sister-in-law to post office (right) in* Cell Phone (Huayi Taihe and Columbia Pictures), 2003.

HUMOROUSLY REPRESENTING SENSITIVE SUBJECTS

Apart from character design, the narrative of *A World Without Thieves* displays a cross-genre tendency resulted from the negotiation of economic and institutional forces alongside censoring imperatives. In light of the sensitive subject of pickpocketing, Feng's filmmaking involves many elements of other genres such as main melody films to soften the criminal representation in the film, and simultaneously remains the basic icons of gangster films including violent fighting, robbery and pilfering scenes. The introduced elements reconstruct the pickpocketing story by commercialising its violent and criminal plots and highlighting the importance of the police in the characters' self-redemption. This narrative indicates that the collaboration between Huayi Brothers and Media Asia moves towards implementing state propaganda. In other words, the approach of reconstructing story politicalises the commercial filmmaking in response to censorship, for neutralizing the film's possible overpraise of the pickpocket couple. Therefore, this filmmaking achieves to balance the requirements of the mainland market that emphasises political promotion and the other markets that pay more attention on investment return, by reducing the film's political expression without weakening its political compliance.

As regards achieving this balance, the film first weakens the sensitivity of the criminal subject through blurring the characters' pickpocketing deeds and turning the focus to their personalities reflected therein. It then sets a comic tone for these

violently criminal representations by using the common narrative techniques of main melody films. Case in point, the film starts with a montage sequence of two gangs pilfering at a Tibetan Temple, in which it quickly switches the scenes between the prayer of Wang Li and the pickpocketing of Wang Bo and Xiaoye (played by mainland actress Li Bingbing), fragmenting and discontinuing the criminal representations. During this intersection, the film introduces the characters' identities and moral attributes through their deeds, such as caring Wang Bo who distributes candy to Tibetan children, penitential Wang Li who prays piously, and hardhearted Xiaoye who steals mobile phones from pilgrims when they are praying.[110] These moral attributes are closely associated with the characters' endings, for example, Wang Bo dies for protecting Shagen while Xiaoye betrays Uncle Li, which manifests how Feng's filmmaking infuses politically moral promotion into commercial representations of gangster crime — praising righteousness, encouraging people who have made mistakes to correct their behaviors and punishing those unrepentant. This narrative can be regarded as a political revision to commercially viable content, or a commercial revision for the mainland market supervised by censorship. Therefore, this pickpocketing sequence merely works as a setting, displaying the story's background in an appealing way.

The storytelling — presenting distinct element forms of gangster films but dissolving their cultural meaning — corresponds to the mainland film regulation 'Rules

[110] Xiaogye's image is easily associated with a stock character of film noir, femme fatale, since she is also seductive and dangerous, for example, she tempts Wang Bo and Uncle Li but betrays them when it is needed.

of Film Censorship' (1997) which prohibits 'representing criminal activities and violent contents in detail'. Under the combined pressure of censorship and marketing forces, representing the form of gangster films overweighs telling a criminal story, which therefore creates a decoration effect that makes *A World Without Thieves* look like a gangster film. By way of illustration, the film designs characters to speak in slang when discussing criminal schemes such as using 'cut' (*qie*) to denote 'rob' (*tou*) and 'sheep' to 'the targeted people', which not only creates an atmosphere of gangster films but also conceals specific criminal activities in content; it also softens the violent gang fight between Wang Bo and Xiaoye into lover-like dancing, which drives the focus from the violence to Andy Lau and Li Bingbing's performances. These two storytelling approaches actually break the link between the inner and outer forms of the involved elements of gangster films, or based on Edward Buscombe's definition of 'inner and outer forms' (2003:14), they break the relation between a film's themes and its objects that appear repeatedly in particular genres. Barry Keith Grant further states that the repeated objects, or the icons, have symbolically cultural meaning 'because of their use across a number of similar previous texts', in other words, iconography as an indicator 'provides genres with a visual shorthand for conveying information and meaning succinctly' (2007:12), therefore, the iconography in this case associates *A World Without Thieves* with gangster genre films. The association does not mean that the film's icons have culturally determined significances since 'the representation [marks] the relation of outer form to inner form and are indicators of [its] attitude and theme' (ibid.). In this sense, the film's cross-genre storytelling serves a dual goal of

which is to prioritise political promotion and give due consideration to investment return, so that the film can adapt to the commercially potential mainland market under the censorship's supervision.

For this cross-genre storytelling, the difficulty in achieving the market adaption is to deal with the relation between the pickpockets and the police in the film, since it needs to distinguish the pickpocketing couple from Uncle Li's gang and praise the former's goodness without ignoring the role of the police officer who supports their atonement, namely, to simultaneously balance commercial and political practices. As a solution, Feng's filmmaking appropriates many conventions of main melody films, for example, the one used to deglamorize the characters serving as foil to revolutionary heroes, to discriminate between the two pickpocketing groups. In the main melody films, these foils are usually depicted as physical ugliness compared with the hero protagonists, which work as 'a visual signifier of [their] stupidity and anti-revolutionary political views' (Lin, 2014: 132). Regarding *A World Without Thieves*, Feng's way of deglamorization leans towards making the film's foils of criminals clownish relating to the violent level of their deeds, that is, the more violence the characters displays, the more clownish they seem, and the more easily they can be arrested. Taking the mugging sequence for example, the two robber characters who carry guns and axes perform more stupid and comic than the pickpocket characters who only use a small blade, as robbery (*qiangjie*) is more violently aggressive than pilfering (*touqie*) in the Chinese context. Correspondingly, the

mugging is organized by the vice-leader of Uncle Li's gang, in which the thin robber (played by Feng Yuanzheng) asks victims to keep quite with a feminine hand gesture of orchid fingers (*lanhua zhi*, Figure 5.8)), and the fat robber (played by Fan Wei) is stammering, clumsily asking them to hand over the impossibly existent IQ (intelligence quotient) cards. The robbers' stupidity and violence mean that they can be and need to be arrested immediately, since mugging is more damaging to social security compared with pilfering and it is not permitted to appear on screen in detail according to the 1997 censoring rule. Therefore, the police officer's appearance is well reasoned, since the character works as a reference standard of righteousness and, through the two pickpocketing groups' reactions to the mugging — Uncle Li's gang members conduct the mugging, whilst the couple tries to protect others, highlights their difference which leads the police officer to support the couple's self-atonement. In this sense, it can be said that this characherisation of the police officer is the crucial factor for achieving the representation of the commercially viable icons of gangster films, though this representation is politically sanctioned for increasing the dramatic effect of the couple's commendable self-atonement.



Figure 5.8: The two criminals (Fan Wei and Feng Yuanzheng) rob passengers on the train in A World Without Thieves (Huayi Taihe and Media Asia), 2004.

In fact, highlighting the police officer's image in the film is directly required by the censorship which states that 'the description of the pickpocket Wang Bo's death is too affecting and the police's function in the story is not well represented' (Zhang: 2005).[111] This requirement indicates that censorship as a constituent of the market economy with Chinese characteristics reinforces the tendency of cross-genre storytelling in the Mainland-Hong Kong coproduction. Admittedly, overpraising the police officer will erode the film's widely accepted theme of encouraging people to correct their mistakes, since this characterisation probably turns the film into the cliché form of main melody films, in which morally perfect protagonists are rewarded with a happy ending and their rivals are foolish. However, without enough representation of the character, the film can hardly get a permit for release. In

[111] As Feng mentioned in the interview with Zhang Ying, the project was suspended until regulatory authority launched the industrialisation policy within the Chinese film industry in 2002. The film bureau contacted Feng in 2003 and basically approved the project on the basis of promoting the industrialisation policy. The only things Feng needed to revise were the police's function and the descriptions of pilfering. See Zhang's interview, 2005.

response to this situation, Feng's filmmaking designs the police officer as an all-knowing character who stands behind the curtain to surveil the two gangs' actions and protect Shagen secretly, for example, he switches Shangen's money with fake notes in advance, immediately after detects the pickpockets' identities. As the police officer is unnamed, this character can be regarded as a representative of the police force, an incarnation of the defender of social order. Therefore, combining the police officer's surveillance and the couple's safeguard suggests that the latter's self-atonement is based on the current social order that the police protect, or to be exact, the police officer is capable of arresting the couple at any time, but, as the character explains in the film, he 'likes to let their atonement be done'. Meanwhile, this filmmaking designs Wang Bo to work with the police officer to seize the runaway Uncle Li, and to die in this cooperation, which therefore creates an open ending differing from the regular ones of main melody films where rehabilitated characters also receive a positive result as a reward, as well as from the ones of the classic Hollywood gangster films under the Hays Code where criminal characters usually gain punishment. From this point of view, the film is close to Hong Kong gangster films such as the aforementioned *Infernal Affairs*, leaving the unsolved conflict for audiences to interpret, namely, this ending is a negotiated outcome of the producers' consideration of multiple markets. Simultaneously, either Wang Bo's death, Wang Li's legal immunity from criminal prosecution due to her pregnancy, Uncle Li's arrest or the police officer's success, signifies a victory of the morals and ethics corresponding to the government's political promotion of Chinese social stability and civilisation.

Therefore, it is the marketability, alongside the directly administrative engagement, that propels the film's storytelling toward hybridisation as a politically sanctioned and commercially viable mode for Mainland-Hong Kong collaboration.

Designing the police's support caters to the public approval of rehabilitation, corresponding to the humanised main melody spirits that integrates political promotion with moral education. The integration offers an accessible and popular aspect to create encouragement of maintaining social order. This point is embodied clearly in representing Wang Li's awakening. Feng borrows the popular cultural elements of Tibetan Buddhism and uses them to decorate moral ideas as Wang Li's motivation for change. In the mid-2000s when the film was in production, traveling to Tibet became popular, and discussing or practicing Tibetan Buddhism became a fashion icon in China.[112] Urban people in East China usually regard Tibet as the Holy Land, a place with an untainted morality. Accordingly, in the film, Wang Li's rehabilitation starts from her prayer at the Tibetan temple. She is pregnant then and intends to give up pilfering for her unborn child. She believes that good deeds will bring good results and therefore decides to take care of Shagen. When explaining her motivation to Wang Bo, she says '*ji dian de*', which literally means 'accumulating virtuous actions', or as the subtitles interpreted, 'I want to improve the child's karma'. The word 'karma' (*ye*) is a Buddhist term, which describes the causality that people's

[112] Many Chinese people come to Tibet and become '*zang piao*' (Tibet drifter) in order to pursue 'a slow-paced lifestyle, undistorted social relations and spiritual fullness' (Qian and Zhu, 2016: 894). Some Han Chinese, especially young people, treat Tibetan Buddhism as a way to reach enlightenment, find themselves and balance their stressful urban lives (Global Times, 2014).

previous deeds will affect their future lives. This phrase is actually secular to many Chinese, since they usually use it as a guideline for moral persuasion in daily life and rarely associate it with religion.[113] From here one can see that the introduction of Tibetan Buddhism is to commercialise the moral persuasion, enhancing its attractiveness by giving it popular cultural form. The thing that really triggers Wang Li's change is a moral not a religious idea. This design is in accordance with the government's official attitude towards atheism and consequent film censoring rules that prohibit the promotion of feudalistic ideas and superstition, such as taking a long time to portray the worship of Gods and objects, and advocating that religion is omnipotent.[114]

[113] In Chinese culture, the Confucianism Buddhism and Daoism had been integrated for a long time. They influenced each other and formed the China's philosophy and moral system. It is hard to classify a particular moral idea to one of them. If a religious origin is to be found for the idea Wang Li mentions, it is probably from Han Buddhism. The Tibetan Buddhism has only become popular in recent years, however, the Han Buddhism has spread for a long time. From this point of view, the Tibetan Buddhist elements work more like the decorative forms for the film's commercial performance.

[114] See the 'Rules of Film Censorship' (1997).

INFUSING AESTHETIC PURSUIT INTO COMMERCIAL FILMMAKING

When representing the couple's rehabilitation, Feng's filmmaking involves advertisements to construct the film's plot points, in which the advertised products' feature functions become the necessary conditions for facilitating the connections and transitions between different story sections. This advertisement narrative technique has been early used in his former NYCF *Cell Phone* where he uses three types of Motorola mobile phone to building the turning points of Yan Shouyi's embarrassing extramarital affair.[115] Partly because this film revolves around mobile phones, inserting product placements for Motorola does not cause prominent conflicts in the narrative logic. Things become complicated in *A World Without Thieves*, since both the amount and type of advertisements are increasing — including BMW automobiles, Nokia mobile phones and the company China Mobile — and some of them show little direct correlation with the self-atonement story. This change is relating to the film's investment structure containing various fund sources, in other words, it is a result of the mainland film industry's state-led commercialisation which actually propels the conglomeration among private film enterprises and encourages these conglomerates' collaboration with their Hong Kong counterparts under the CEPA. The increasing advertising sponsorship and investment can be regarded as a reaction to insure against the possibly commercial failure caused by the test of using cross-genre storytelling to make this Mainland-Hong Kong coproduction. The multiple sources of

[115] For more detail, see the analysis of *Cell Phone* in Chapter 4.

investment mean a complicated intersection of genre elements, advertisements and market demands in the filmmaking, which drives Feng's filmmaking to form his version of high-concept mode featuring using product placement to construct narrative.

In practice, this narrative adjustment is manifested as the combination of product placements and characters' deeds for connecting the film's sections. This does not mean a fully fusion of the two categories, since there still exist certain points being less relevant to the story's theme in certain advertising sequences. This heterogeneous condition or 'cinematic excess' (Kristin Thompson, 1986) is common in high-concept filmmaking since different narrative motivation leads to different priorities of representation, for example, advertising sequences works for product promotion while others for story construction. The more disparate the narrative motivations of the two types of sequences are, the more easily the cinematic excess creates. Therefore, many filmmakers choose to make product placement attractive by for example, appropriating advertising aesthetics, and simultaneously restore their films' motivational thread for narrative continuity. In this way, although creating excess, this operation maintains 'an appreciation for the [films'] formal composition' or for their 'look' (Wyatt, 1994: 27), through which, advertisements can bind with the films' presentation of lifestyles and are exhibited by the characters as each moves through the narratives' (ibid.: 25). This combination obviously requires a close association between the features of characters and advertised products. Conceivably, using

products with actors or actresses' endorsements is a simple and effective approach to fulfill the association. Regarding *A World Without Thieves*, it however can be difficult to enforce, considering its purpose of market integration since each of the producer has their own actors or actresses and corresponding market targets, such as Ge You for the mainland market, Andy Lau for Hong Kong and other East Asian area. Amassing their commercial endorsements at the same time increases the possibility of diluting the story's theme as well as breaking its narrative flow.

Accordingly, Feng's filmmaking chooses to insert product placement into the film's turning points where it displays how the advertised products assist characters' deeds and therefore naturally introduces the products' features and functions through narrative. In certain cases, this inserting approach leads advertising sequences to be relatively independent from other sequences for story narrative; however, this independence does not break the story's narrative flow, as the advertising representations appears across the two types of sequences and link them together. As illustration, the film uses a large amount of space to display a new model of BMW automobile in the opening sequence where the pickpocketing couple drives the stolen car across cities, wasteland, plateau and snowfield, from East China to Tibet for disposal. Apart from the car's reliable performance, the sequence depicts few details about the two characters. Connecting this description with the car model's announced date in the mainland market which was 5 months before the filming, the sequence manifests a combination of the BMW's merchandising and the film's narrative —

which receives a good market response, as China's BMW manufacturer states, the sequence impresses spectators that 'BMW produces good cars' (Zhongguo Qichebao, 2005) — and indicates how non-film sponsorship reshape the storytelling, that is, the car's high value as the couple's criminal motivation triggers the story and its good performance makes their disposal possible, which leads the story to the subsequent sections where they take train back to East China.[116] In other words, although the sequence has different narrative motivation from others for telling the story, the two types are not mutually exclusive. The former one works as a preface to initiate and promote the story's progression.[117]

In addition, there are another two conspicuous manifestations of this advertisement narrative in the film, which both relate to the product placements of Nokia and China Mobile. Different from the former example, Feng's filmmaking focuses on using cinematic technique to connect the two sets of advertisements with the film's turning points. The first connection happens in the sequence where the pickpocketing couple discusses how to tell Shagen that his money is stolen. The film uses a set of close-ups to show the contents of their discussion via text message,

[116] In his early career, the Huayi Brothers' chairman Wang Zhongjun also rana dealership to sell BMW automobiles in mainland China. This collaboration probably led BMW to sponsor this film project. The car model is 325i, the first cooperated product of the company and Chinese automobile factories. It was launched on 18th October 2003, while Feng started filming the project on 14 April 2004. See Zhongguo Qichebao, 2005. In the sequence, Wang Bo claims that the car is worth 1 million RMB, which leads he to blackmail the rich man,however, in reality it actually sells for 0.3 million RMB.

[117] Inserting this advertisement here can be also treated as an operation with a rebellious undertone, since the sequence may be seen, in effect as saying 'here is a car for criminals' or 'this car is easily stolen'. In this sense, it may be guardedly called subversive, an intention of anti-product placement in response to preempted criticism about Feng's abuse of product placement. However, considering the long-term collaboration between Huayi Taihe and BMW company (the company sponsored many of Feng's NYCFs, especially in the 2000s), it is hard to verify the 'subversive intention'; but at least, this operation reflects Feng's filmmaking need to balance requirements from various parties, in which it is hard to avoid paradoxical situations.

which is about Wang Li's worry and Wang Bo's comfort and suggestion for alighting from the train at the next station. During representing their texting conversation, the camera moves from the bottom to the top, shifting the focus from the China Mobile's logo to the message content, then to the Nokia's logo, Wang Li's facial expression and Wang Bo's message content and the Nokia's logo (Figure 5.9). This representation not only meets the characters' pickpocketing identity which leads them to avoid discussing their activities in public, but also highlights Nokia's good performance and China Mobile's good service — such as they can be used in plateau — without breaking the story narrative, and this texting conversation drives the story to the turning point in which Wang Li tells Wang Bo her pregnancy and motive for safeguarding Shagen at the station. Since then, the story revolves around safeguarding victim and achieving self-atonement, which is fully reflected in the subsequent sequence, the second conspicuous manifestation of this advertisement narrative, where Wang Bo dies for assisting the police to stop Uncle Li robbing Shagen's money. Also, the sequence contains a set of close-ups for completing narrative alongside presenting the images of Nokia phone and China Mobile. The close-ups show the unsent text message of the dying Wang Bo who knocks on the ceiling to inform the police about Uncle Li's escape. In addition to his conforming words to Wang Li, these shots exhibit the message's sending process (sent by the police) in which the China Mobile's big logo always appears on the screen. The message leads the story to the next section where the police officer meets the escaped Wang Li and explains Wang Bo's sacrifice as well as the punishment for

Uncle Li. In a word, the advertisement narrative indicates the influence of investment structure on narrative in the context of increasing transnational collaboration, and considering the pressure from market, sponsors and censorship, it is a natural response to the he mainland film industry's state-led commercialisation, as this narrative balances storytelling, product merchandising and even political promotion, through showing the police officer's different attitudes towards Wang Bo, Wang Li and Uncle Li.



Figure 5.9: Wang Li (Rene Liu) is texting messages to Wang Bo (Andy Liu) (from top left to bottom right) in A World Without Thieves (Huayi Taihe and Media Asia), 2004.

In addition to the advertisement narrative, the film has another narrative strategy that manifests the formation of Feng's commercial aesthetics in his NYCFs in 2000s. It is the dual-level narrative structure: one level aims to provide an accessible and fluent story for commercial demands, while another intends to compete Feng's self-expression to enhance the film's aesthetic dimension and carry his promotion of

morality, in response to preempted criticism. Accordingly, in the film, apart from the literal sense, Feng highlights many images' figurative sense by linking story clues and setting mise-en-scene. However, at the figurative level, these images only fragmentarily offer subtexts, which lack necessary connections to form a completed structure for hidden narrative. These relatively independent subtexts only increase the film's critical intelligence in terms of form, since they are not coherent in the film which make them hard to be read. Some images with figurative sense even disappear abruptly, such as the talisman of Tibetan vajra dagger that Root gives to Wang Li as a gift. These two strategies complicate Feng's cross-genre narrative and make him form his own features of high-concept filmmaking.

The film presents a characteristic of commercial aesthetics, which achieves a tension between commercial demand and self-expression. The characteristic is easily associated with Todd Berliner's idea of Hollywood aesthetics (2017), an aesthetically productive balance designed to please multiple viewerships. According to Berliner, there are two tendencies in Hollywood production. The first one 'relies on formulaic structures and easily mastered artistic devices' (ibid.:17), which emphasises films' accessibility to please mass audiences. The second one offers cognitive challenges, which 'stimulates audiences with more demanding aesthetic properties that can lead spectators to a more elated response' (ibid.). As to many Hollywood films, these two tendencies usually mix and appear in same work, which 'offer mass audience visual novelty and fantastic story, and intellectual and metaphorical narrative structure at the

same time' (Zhu, 2012). [118] In other words, the mixture satisfies different audience groups' expectation of particular films and therefore completes an exploration into aesthetic expression under the production mechanism of film industries. As to Feng, the condition is a bit different. Except for commercial consideration, his commercially aesthetic expression, especially the dual-level narrative, can also be regarded as a response to the criticism of his previous NYCFs. The critics have questioned the artistic quality of Feng's works since he made his first NYCF in 1997.

With the dual-level narrative approach, Feng firstly guarantees the film's 'look' and 'hook', fluently telling an accessible story with appealing forms. In addition to the story, the film has a second narrative level for expression with more aesthetic property. It endows certain images with a figurative sense by repeating them in different scenes and establishing correspondence among them, such as the images of the wolf couple and the pickpocket couple, and the vajra dagger talisman. At the beginning, the film shows Shagen feeding a wolf couple and becoming their companion. The wolves never hurt him and protect Shagen in the desolate plateau. In parallel, the pickpocket couple often call themselves wolves when negotiating with Uncle Li. Accordingly, in front of them, Shagen easily expresses his trust, 'if wolves wouldn't hurt me, I don't believe people would'. The repeated wolf imagery links the wolves and the pickpockets together and completes the dual-level narrative. On the first level, the sequences display novel elements, e.g. wolves can follow Shagen's instructions.

[118] There are many examples, such as the film *Jaws* (1975, dir. Steven Spielberg), *Inception* (2010, dir. Christopher Nolan) and *Life of Pi* (2012, dir. Ang Lee).

From the second level, it indicates the film story's development that the pickpockets will protect Shagen. The two narrative levels are complete in structure. They therefore have the ability to reach Feng's attempt to respond to critics and to expand the audience base from the fans of his NYCFs to viewers interested in film content beyond character and genre elements.

However, as for most dual-level narratives in the film, the structures of their second narrative level, i.e. their sub-textual narrative, are not completely established. The imagery of the vajra dagger talisman is a prominent example. It appears three times in the film. The first time is when Wang Li forces Shagen to accept her money for his help. Shagen gives the talisman in return and says nothing. When Wang Bo decides to protect Shagen, the film represents a scene where Shagen puts the talisman on Wang Li and explains its meaning (Wang Bo is absent). As Shagen explains, the vajra dagger could help people get rid of troubles, put their heart at ease and defeat demons. In this sense, people who wear it can be regarded as the incarnation of the saviour. The third time occurs before Wang Bo's final fight with Uncle Li. Wang Li puts the talisman on him and says nothing. This pass guarantees a fluent story since Feng makes many descriptions of the talisman before. However, this design undermines the pass's significance, as Wang Bo does not know the talisman's meaning. Therefore, it is impossible to connect the pass with Wang's protection of Shagen, i.e. the hidden narrative's structure is not established.

The loss of the talisman's meaning can be attributed to the regulatory authority's influence. As aforementioned, the use of religious elements needs to accord with the promotion of main melody spirits, while censorship forbids the overemphasis on religious power that may arouse superstition. As for Feng, he also remedies the loss by using imagery of blood and light as symbols of righteousness to add thematic weight to the vajra dagger. In the sequence in which Wang Li passes the talisman to Wang Bo, he uses the two images to classify Wang Bo, Shagen and the police officer into the same type. The three characters all bleed as a result of saving others. Shagen and the police officer donate blood for a sick passenger, while Wang Bo bleeds to death after he defeats Uncle Li. The appearance of the light imagery usually accompanies that of the blood. When Wang Bo is dying on the floor, a light from the frame's top right-side shines on him from head to toe (Figure 5.10). The frontal lighting eliminates shadows and contributes to a visual metaphor of Wang Bo achieving salvation through self-sacrifice. As a pickpocket, he can finally appear under the sun (justice) and the darkness (crime) is eliminated. The light on him can be considered as a symbol of social recognition, if connected with the use of light to represent Shagen and the police officer. In the scene of blood donation, when the pickpockets take care of the unconscious Shagen, the police officer reveals his identity to them. Light appears from the top right of the frame, illuminating Shagen (the incarnation of moral purity) and the police officer (the guardian of moral order). This design defines the light as the symbol of the humanised main melody spirits. The dual-level narrative, the incoherent sub-textual narrative and Feng's countermeasures

can be regarded as his response to the requirements of regulatory authority, investors and critics. When making films, even his early dramas, Feng uses image codes that appear widely in art-house films. This operation at least enhances the film's aesthetic appreciation, which also facilitates or even complicates Feng's cross-genre narrative.



Figure 5.10: The light hits Shagen (Wang Baoqinang) (top left), the police officer (Zhang Hanyu) (top right) and Wang Bo (Andy Liu) (bottom left) in A World Without Thieves (Huayi Taihe and Media Asia), 2004.

Conclusion

Feng's artistic process took new forms in the 2000s. His NYCFs were no longer limited to comedy but developed towards genre diversity. This transformation paralleled the changes within the Chinese film industry. Regulatory authority launched the policy that turned filmmaking into an industry, which worked in tandem with the WTO agreements to promote the Chinese film industry to open up the film production sector to external capital. The diversity of capital resources encouraged or demanded market expansion. Accordingly, Feng's works involved many new elements of popular cinema, such as Hong Kong actors and action scenes, and gradually diluted the trademark verbal humour of his previous films. In addition to the capital resources, the loosened censoring environment also supported Feng's creative freedom, which allowed his films to address sensitive subjects for commercial purpose, such as the widely discussed taboo subject of extramarital affairs and the violent and criminal descriptions. Partly due to adequate financial support, partly as a response to film critics, Feng changed his creative pattern and enhanced the aesthetic property of his films. Under the combined effect of these factors, Feng began production on *Sigh* in 2000, which ignited his creative transformation. Following the commercial success of Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, the recognition of NYCF within the Chinese film industry was changed, which accelerated Feng's creative transformation. *A World Without Thieves* demonstrates consideration of both market and investors. The film uses the creative pattern of high-concept filmmaking and makes cross-genre narrative. It initially

manifests the features of Feng's genre filmmaking and tests his many approaches that were used in his subsequent works, such as *The Banquet* and *Assembly*. In this sense, *A World Without Thieves* is a transitional work in Feng's creative transformation from comic NYCFs to generally hybrid ones.

Conclusion

Feng's NYCFs can be read as a product of the negotiation among the Chinese film industry, regulatory authorities and the Chinese popular culture, popular humour in particular. The negotiation pivots on rejuvenating the Chinese film industry and converting its operation into a market-driven but government-monitored mode. The goal of industrial rejuvenation led regulatory authorities to introduce the Hong Kong film industry's concept of the NYCF and therefore facilitated the emergence of Feng's mainland NYCFs in the late 1990s. The common commercial goal led Feng's NYCF production to follow the film industry's development, which can be also seen from the genre shift of his NYCFs in the 2000s and the average box-office performance of his works in the 2010s. In this sense, it is easy to understand the government's financial and administrative support for Feng's filmmaking, especially at the initial stage when the government involved in the industry's commercialisation in the mid-1990s: the impressive commercial success of Feng's NYCFs at that time attested to the credibility of the 9550 project and promoted its implementation. The industry's means for rejuvenation became various in the 2000s, with increasing numbers of film imports, the rise of kung fu blockbusters, the appearance of low-budget comedies featuring local cultures, and the influx of Hong Kong films under the CEPA agreements. In this context, Feng's NYCFs accordingly switched genres rapidly and frequently, for example with the costume action drama *The Banquet* (2006) and the war film *Assembly* (2007) the following year. Most of these transformations followed the trend

of popular culture in response to commercial pressure.

Partly due to the diversification of film choices, partly the result of the rising of new popular culture, the commercial and administrative advantages of Feng's filmmaking began to diminish in the 2000s. A direct manifestation is the box-office performance of his NYCFs, which no longer took a dominant position in the market. In the years following, Feng's filmmaking has arguably failed to adapt to the changing landscape in popular culture and the film industry. For example, on his Weibo account he criticised certain popular cultural phenomena, such as the catchphrase *diaosi* (a self-satirising expression of 'loser' among young adults). Ironically, his signature style of humour, *tiaokan*, is also a satirical discourse, which similarly received reproach twenty years ago when he began to use it in NYCFs. From the late 2000s, Feng's filmmaking has emerged as a counterpoint to the popular trend of commercial filmmaking in China. When most domestic film professionals, including some known for art-house films and independent films such as Zhang Yimou and Guan Hu, participated in making commercial films, Feng turned to make films with art-house characteristics and nostalgic tones, such as *Aftershock* (*Tangshan da dizhen*, 2010), *Back to 1942* (*Yi jiu si er*, 2011), *I Am Not Madame Bovary* (*Wo bushi Pan Jinlian*, 2016) and *Youth* (*Fang hua*, 2017). In 2017, Feng claimed his intent to use his limited time remaining to make the films he had wanted to make but was unable to do in his early career, citing his age and his aversion to further compromise (such as with

investors, regulatory authorities, and perhaps audiences).[119] However, these words arouse suspicions that his statement could be a marketing strategy, since the production of his films in the 2010s still followed the previous filmmaking philosophy — negotiating with regulatory authorities, the film industry and popular culture — that this thesis investigates and discusses. These films all involve sensitive subjects, such as the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and petitioning deeds (bureaucratic interactions with local governments), but represent them in a commercial and politically approved way, i.e. Feng continues to use the subjects as selling points since those historical events are less mentioned in textbooks, and simultaneously drives the stories to the themes of social stability and the victory of main melody spirits.

These characteristics of Feng's films in the 2010s further manifest the principle of his filmmaking, the integration of political promotion and commercial return. His works are the outcomes of the intersection between state power and popular culture under the goal of commercialising the film industry. Along with the deepening of the collusion, this principle has become the kernel of his filmmaking. The establishment of such a principle reflects the philosophy that the government directs the film industry's market-oriented reform and commercialisation, and also the strategies of political promotion formed according to this philosophy. The government leads the film industry into the track of commercialisation it sets, and then leaves the development

[119] Feng mentioned these when talking about his retirement at the 7th Beijing international Film Festival. See Zhang Rui's news report, 2017.

to the industry itself. From the progress of Feng's NYCFs, one can see that his filmmaking had turned from corresponding to political promotion to proactively implementing it in company with the establishment of the state-led filmmaking framework. Accordingly, commercial consideration is at the forefront of his filmmaking, which leads him to introduce integrated marketing strategies and a high-concept mode, using taboo and socially sensitive subjects as selling points. As a result, these operations facilitate new narrative styles, such as constructing *tiaokan* episodes with commercial elements such as product placement and sensitive subject matter to serve film themes. Sometimes, his films even incorporate dominant political discourses as materials into the *tiaokan* construction. These *tiaokan* episodes admittedly can be read as ironic rebellion against the social order, calling attention to problems such as bureaucracy and dishonesty. However, this rebellion is limited, and more importantly compliant with state propaganda, since these *tiaokan* episodes increase exposure to the political discourses they appropriated and promote them as the only solutions to the problems that occur in the films.

This creatively compliant use of political discourses reflects the conditions and strategies of commercial filmmaking in China. To see the development of Feng's filmmaking more clearly, the three categories that this thesis focuses on can be compared to the three points of a triangle whose shape metaphorically represents the form of Feng's NYCFs. When one point changes position, the whole shape of the triangle changes. Similarly, as any of the three categories adjusts, the forms of Feng's

filmmaking and NYCFs accordingly change. However, the center of the triangle is never altered, i.e. for the progress of Feng's NYCFs and also the Chinese film industry, the core task is always to achieve commercial growth. Due to the state-led framework of commercialisation, the Chinese commercial filmmaking develops two strategies in completing the task: commercialising main melody films and politicising commercial films. The two strategies are usually integrated and therefore cannot be simply distinguished. Feng's NYCFs completely represent the use of the two strategies and the transformation between them. This thesis finds certain features of the two strategies in his filmmaking, e.g. the commercialised main melody films feature happy endings in which characters committed to mainstream ideology achieve victory, while the politicised commercial films represent victory of main melody spirits regardless of whether characters' stories conclude affirmatively.

Along with the formation of the state-led filmmaking framework, the Chinese film industry presents a diversification in commercial film production in the 2010s. Many other commercially successful films appeared, while some of them surpassed the box-office receipts of Feng's NYCFs of the same period. This situation undermined the significance of his NYCF production to the government which used to rely on the films' impressive box-office performance to promote the film industry's rejuvenation. One indication of this attitude change is the regulatory authorities' suspension of the release of *Youth* (scheduled to be released in October 2017 but delayed to December of that year) and *Cell Phone 2* (*Shouji 2*, scheduled to be release in 2019 but still

suspended, with no new release date announced). The suspension partly attributed to the sensitive subjects of *Youth* such as the Cultural Revolution and the Sino-Vietnamese War, and to the tax scandal of Fan Bingbing, the leading actress of *Cell Phone* and *Cell Phone 2*. Many people regarded this scandal as a continuation of the dispute between Feng and Cui Yongyuan which was caused by *Cell Phone* in 2003, since it was Cui who reported Fan Bingbing's avowed tax evasion. However, the dispute had little influence on Feng's creative use of taboo subjects in his subsequent films in 2000s, especially before 2006 when regulatory authorities had not yet adjusted censoring rules to ban references to those subjects. As this thesis has stated that regulatory authorities undertake a dual role of constitutor and adjudicator of film regulations, this attitude change suggests that Feng's filmmaking is losing its advantage in balancing or rebalancing the requirements of government and market in the 2010s, when the film industry overall displays commercial prosperity. Therefore, further study is warranted to explore the new relationship among state, film industry and filmmakers in this more recent context. As it has explored how Feng's NYCFs balance commercial and political appeal under the mutual constitution of the film industry, regulatory authorities and popular culture, this thesis, I hope, contributes to understanding the production culture of Chinese commercial cinema in the context of industrial commercialisation with Chinese characteristics since the 1990s, as well as the practice of cultural hegemony in this commercialisation process.

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