

New Year Film as Chinese Blockbuster: From Feng Xiaogang's Contemporary Urban Comedy to Zhang Yimou's Period Drama

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Chinese New Year Film as Domestic Blockbuster

For almost a decade now, Chinese cinema has cultivated a unique brand of film that caters to the Lunar New Year market. Originated in Hong Kong, New Year films quickly caught on in the People's Republic of China, owing to the imperatives of China's new market economy. Markets, obviously, like films that turn a profit, and the bigger the better. New Year films cash in on the Chinese winter "holiday economy," an annual period of lavish consumption when the available audience is so massive that any major film release is a potential blockbuster. Leading the charge in cultivating the New Year film is the television soap opera director-turned-filmmaker Feng Xiaogang. The lucrative New Year market has inspired regular crops of New Year films by other filmmakers, but most have been box-office flops. Feng owned the New Year film market until 2002, when Zhang Yimou's martial arts debut *Hero* (*Yingxiong*) became the number one box-office film, cashing in on Feng's absence from the New Year market that year. Two years later, Zhang's martial arts epic, *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shimian maifu*, 2004) overtook Feng's *A World Without Thieves* (*Tianxia wuzei*) as the number one box-office film.¹ The box-office success of Zhang's third period drama, *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Mancheng jindai huangjinjia*, 2006) sealed his status as the domestic box-office king, deposing Feng, who had held the title since his New Year film debut, *Party A, Party B* (*Jiafang yifang*) in 1997.

None of Feng's New Year comedies were big budget films, and while they performed like blockbusters at the box office, marketing was primarily via word of mouth. Zhang's big budget, epic-scale period dramas and their Hollywood-style marketing campaigns transformed the Chinese New Year film and added a new season to the blockbuster

* A different version of the chapter that centers more on Feng Xiaogang, "Feng Xiaogang and Chinese New Year Films" appeared on *Asian Cinema*, 18:1 (Spring/Summer 2007): 43–64.

cycle. *House of Flying Daggers* was released in July and August of 2004, targeting the Chinese summer season previously associated with animated films for children. Thanks to Zhang, the popular domestic films once dominated by Feng's urban comedies and linked to the New Year season now imitate the Hollywood blockbuster in terms of style, budget, marketing, and even release seasons.

In Hollywood, most box-office blockbusters are so-called "high concept" films.² The origin of the term is often associated with Barry Diller, a programming executive at ABC in the early 1970s. Diller introduced the made-for-television movie format, which thrived on stories that could be easily summarized in a sentence or two.³ The summary sentence would then appear in the *TV Guide* synopses. Thus, "high concept" designates a narrative that is relatively straightforward, easily communicated, and readily comprehended. Common elements of high-concept films include seasonal subjects, star actors and/or directors, a condensed three-act structure, and an arresting visual style. This chapter traces the evolution of the mainland Chinese New Year film from its origins in Feng's modest urban comedies to Zhang's Hollywood-style high concept blockbuster films, then back again to Feng, who now seems to be taking the high concept road himself. It explores the success of Feng's New Year films with Chinese audiences and then compares Feng's textual strategies with Hollywood's "high concept" formula and Zhang's period dramas, revealing an inconclusive but suggestive narrative of industrial and, in Feng's case, personal transformation.

Chinese New Year Films and Hollywood Blockbusters

China's winter holiday season, running from early Christmas to the end of the Chinese Lunar New Year, has been a golden period for domestic film releases for the past decade.⁴ Such was not the case before 1995. Theaters used to close down for the Lunar New Year week under the assumption that people would prefer traditional Spring Festival activities such as window shopping, family reunions, and nature outings. This assumption was instantly shattered by Jackie Chan's *Rumble in the Bronx*, released at the end of 1995. Billed as a New Year celebration film, *Rumble* made a big splash in Mainland movie theaters, setting a new box-office record of RMB 80 million. Four more Jackie Chan New Year films conquered the Mainland market in succession: *First Strike* (1996), *Mr. Nice Guy* (1997), *Who Am I? (Wo shi shei)*, (1998), and *Gorgeous (Boli zun)*, (1999). Chan's success alerted the Chinese film industry to the box-office potential of the New Year season. In 1997, Feng Xiaogang made China's first domestic New Year film, the satirical comedy *Party A, Party B*.

To avoid direct competition with Jackie Chan's New Year film and to cash in on Western holidays newly fashionable among urban youth and yuppies, *Party A, Party B* debuted ahead of the Lunar New Year on Christmas Eve. The film earned at least RMB 36 million in box-office revenues nationwide, a comparatively huge return in the fledgling Chinese commercial film market. Feng's subsequent New Year films *Be There or Be Square (Bujian busan)*, (1998), *Sorry Baby (Meiwan meiliao)*, (1999), *A Sigh (Yisheng tanxi)*, (2000), *Big Shot's Funeral (Dawan)*, (2001), *Cell Phone (Shouji)*,

2003), and *A World Without Thieves* (*Tianxia wuzei*, 2004) all led the domestic box office.

Sorry Baby, for instance, grossed RMB 20 million at the box office nationwide after its release on Christmas Eve in 1999. In Beijing alone, the film raked in RMB 8.5 million to overtake the Hollywood blockbuster *Enemy of the State* (Tony Scott), which grossed RMB 4.3 million. It is worth noting that *Sorry Baby* was financed by a pioneering private production firm, Huayi Brothers. The film earned Huayi Brothers around RMB 10 million in total advertising income, a financial breakthrough for the fledgling private company. Riding the success of Feng's New Year films, Huayi Brothers soon established itself as a leading private enterprise in the Chinese film industry, and later co-produced Feng's *Big Shot's Funeral* with Columbia Pictures Asia. The film topped the domestic box office for domestic films in 2001 and was distributed in the United States in selected theaters. Because of the success of this co-production, Huayi Brothers and Columbia Pictures Asia co-produced a number of additional films including *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* (*He Ping*, 2003), *Kekexili* (*Lu Chuan*, 2004), *Kung Fu Hustle* (Stephen Chow, 2004), and Feng's *Cell Phone*, all of which ranked at the top in box-office receipts. *Cell Phone* alone earned Huayi RMB 20 million in ad revenue before it was distributed to theaters. The ascendance and solidification of private film financing and distribution in China owe much to the New Year film practice.

It is worth noting that Feng's *Party A*, *Party B* came at a time when the Mainland film industry was in a prolonged funk owing to the loss of state support, the arrival of blockbuster Hollywood pictures, and thriving alternative entertainment options. The depressed market for domestic pictures called for drastic measures and the New Year film became the perfect vehicle for the Chinese film industry to tap an emergent middle class brimming with disposable income and ready to be entertained during the holiday season. *Party A*, *Party B* announced its "New Year" status by attaching, at the beginning of the film, a brief image of an animated tiger that wished all an auspicious "Year of the Tiger."⁵ Feng's subsequent New Year films, and later Zhang Yimou's, have likewise flaunted their status as event films built for the holidays.

Release timing has long been a key calculation in Hollywood. Hollywood event films are crafted for two golden release periods, summer and Christmas. Since the phenomenally successful release of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg) in the summer of 1975, summer has been increasingly seen as the most favorable release time. Currently 40 percent of Hollywood box-office revenues are derived from the summer season. This pattern has developed in conjunction with the targeting of youthful audiences as youth have increasingly come to dominate the theater-going public. Now in second place in the U.S. market, the Christmas vacation period has remained a very important release season. Traditionally the Christmas season brings prestigious, Oscar-hopeful movies, but blockbusters may also appear around Christmas. Both release seasons have been expanding so that summer now begins before Memorial Day in May and Christmas slightly before Thanksgiving in November.⁶

In China, the introduction of Hollywood-style distribution has contributed to the formation of a golden release season running from Christmas through the Lunar New

Year holiday, and since *House of Flying Daggers*'s summer release in 2004, the summer season previously dominated by Hollywood action movies is now witnessing more competition from domestic action pictures and A-class dramas. A third lucrative release season for the Chinese filmmakers is the short Valentine's Day weekend when studios release romantic date films catering to young urban professionals.

Feng Xiaogang's New Year Films as "Talk of the Nation"

Movies do not get to be box-office blockbusters without some immediate cultural relevance to their audience. Helped no doubt by his television experience, Feng's solo success in the early years of the New Year film market stemmed in large part from his ability to check the pulse of Chinese culture. Feng's films all deal with sensitive and seasonal issues including private entrepreneurship (*Party A, Party B*), life in the Chinese diaspora (*Be There or Be Square*), extra-marital affairs and the collapse of the traditional domestic sphere (*A Sigh* and *Cell Phone*), commercialization's excesses (*Big Shot's Funeral*), and the widening social and economic gaps between the rich and the poor (*Sorry Baby* and *A World Without Thieves*).

Party A, Party B (1997) tells the story of a service company called "For One Day Dreams Come True" that strives to help its clients realize their bizarre fantasies by offering staged realities. The film came at a time when private entrepreneurship was in vogue and successful, and adventurous entrepreneurs were fabled heroes. The film derives considerable humor from the idiosyncratic requests of clients and the innovative solutions that the service company comes up with, which parody classic moments in Chinese revolutionary films as well as canonic Hollywood films. One theme that emerges from the flamboyant operation of the service company is aiding strangers in need, and this is echoed years later in *A World Without Thieves*. In one of the service company's deals, the leading man, Yao Yuan, loans his apartment out to a couple in a long distance marriage who wish to share their last moments together before the gravely ill wife succumbs.

Be There or Be Square (1998) is a comedy about an on-and-off relationship between two Chinese living in Los Angeles. The protagonists have adapted to American cultural and economic life. The exotic diasporic experience holds endless fascination for the majority of Chinese who have yet to set their feet outside China. The daily routines of living in the United States, such as loading groceries in a supermarket parking lot, pumping gas and washing windows at a self-service gas station, and even encounters with petty crime, are revelations that play to popular Chinese fantasies about living abroad in the world's most powerful (albeit corrupted) nation. The living space occupied by the two protagonists when they are still struggling new immigrants is plagued by random crime and their own feelings of cultural alienation. As they climb the economic ladder, success comes with a vengeance, with the Los Angeles Police Department apparently at their service. The film's sketch of America is distorted, colored by the same strong sense of Chinese chauvinism that runs through Feng's popular television serial, *A Native of Beijing in New York*. This sense of Chinese cultural superiority mixed with a romantic

version of America as a land of opportunity and social mobility appealed powerfully to Chinese audiences in the late 1990s.⁷

Feng's third New Year film *Sorry Baby* (1999) is another topical film. It tells the story of a private chauffeur who tries to get ten thousand yuan in back pay from his employer, the wealthy manager of a travel agency. Desperately needing the money to help his hospitalized sister, the driver kidnaps the rich man's girlfriend. The man refuses to pay, betting that the driver is only bluffing. Predictably, the driver falls in love with his captive and the two conspire to punish the rich man. The film captures two of the most disturbing aspects of contemporary China, the division between the poor and the rich and the collapse of social morality, a topic that would be revisited in *A World Without Thieves*.

Feng's fourth New Year film, *A Sigh* (*Yisheng tanxi*, 2000) is a melodrama that deals with one of China's most touchy topics, the extramarital affair.⁸ With marriage breaking down partly as the result of philandering husbands, the extramarital affair has entered public discourse in contemporary China. *A Sigh* taps into this popular interest. Married for ten years, middle-aged television soap opera scriptwriter Liang loves his wife and their six-year-old daughter and is perfectly happy with his life until he falls for a young woman with whom he had a one-night stand. The film opens as a light romantic comedy but the mood soon becomes dark. Torn between his family and his lover, Liang tries desperately to please both. The torturous triangle between Liang, his lover, and his wife captivated millions of Chinese viewers and Feng's non-judgmental approach encouraged public discussion of the topic. The film is at once tragic and comic, a tension keenly felt by Feng in his effort to balance the genre's demand for happy endings and his desire to explore the dark side of the human experience and psyche. *A Sigh* was Feng's first attempt to seriously engage in the moral and ethical debates surrounding love and marriage, themes that would be revisited in his sixth New Year film, *Cell Phone*.

After taking a detour for an ambitious transnational project, Feng returns to the domestic sphere in *Cell Phone* (2003), once again probing into intricate spousal and romantic relationships. The film tells the story of a successful television anchorperson whose extramarital affairs are exposed when his wife accidentally comes across some of the amorous mobile phone messages he has sent to his mistress. Eventually, the multiple deceptions facilitated by his mobile phone lead to the breakup of his marriage and the loss of his job. Around him other people's lives are also adversely affected by their cell phones. *Cell Phone* was a smash hit in China, tapping into the country's obsession with mobile phones as well as its concern about philandering husbands.⁹ The film became the talk of the nation, creating a public stir. It was reported that desperate wives started to check on their husband's cell phones and that the phone companies had to reassure their customers about privacy concerns. *Cell Phone* created a sensation, arguably unmatched by any film or television production since *Yearnings*, the first Chinese telenovela from a decade and a half ago.

Before *Cell Phone*, Feng made *Big Shot's Funeral* (*Dawan*, 2001), an acute commentary on Chinese society's rampant commercialism and a metacinema exercise that dissects not only the artifice of filmmaking but also the film's own status as a

cultural commodity.¹⁰ When Hollywood director Don Tyler, played by Donald Sutherland, collapses in the middle of shooting a remake of *The Last Emperor*, his dying wish is to have a comedy funeral so that his death and reincarnation will be a joyous rather than sad occasion. The cameraman hired to document the process of shooting Tyler's new masterpiece, Yoyo, is entrusted with the task of arranging a fitting tribute to the great master. Yoyo decides to turn Tyler's funeral into an international TV event. To raise money for the proceedings, he manages to sell advertising spots to various sponsors. As in *A Sigh*, what opens as a hilarious comic situation soon disintegrates into a series of semi-coherent dark sequences. Released only days after China formally gained its WTO admittance on December 11, the film was Feng's first international venture, backed by Hollywood money and stars.¹¹ The film did extremely well, particularly in Shanghai, which is unusual as Feng's films are strongly inflected by Beijing Mandarin speech and affectations and can be off-putting to the more cosmopolitan audience in Shanghai.

The success of *Big Shot's Funeral* in the south solidified Feng's status as a blockbuster filmmaker at a national level. Yet the film performed poorly in Hong Kong, grossing a mere \$93,266 in its first seven weeks.¹² Aside from the film's strong Beijing accent, it is possible that the overtones of Chinese chauvinism in Feng's pompous parody of Hollywood popular culture and his satirical take on commercialism did not sit well with Hong Kong audiences who enjoy their popular and consumer culture. Internationally, the film remains obscure, far short of bringing to the award-starved director the same critical recognition that Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Jia Zhangke have enjoyed. The film's overseas distributor, Columbia Pictures, did not make much of an effort to promote the film. Indeed, as Stanley Rosen notes elsewhere in this volume, *Big Shot's Funeral* only played in two theaters for six days in the United States, accumulating a box office total of \$820! McGrath (2006) speculates that Westerners might be far less inclined to consume images of a China that look too much like their own societies, particularly when such images are packaged in a farcical comedy associated with contemporary Hollywood rather than in the somber art or exotic martial arts films associated with "the (Chinese) other."

Feng's seventh New Year film, *A World Without Thieves* (2004), touched yet another national nerve, this time concerning the widening social and economic gap between the rich and the poor, an issue very much on the minds of the Chinese public. Recent research by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) shows that the disposable income of the richest families, who account for 10 percent of the population, averages eight times that of the poorest. This growing disparity has given rise to strong feelings of resentment toward the rich in Chinese society, well captured in the fictional universe of *A World Without Thieves*.

The film is a tale of two thieves in a romantic relationship who try to shake off their disgraceful profession by protecting a potential victim from other thieves. The con-artist couple, Wang Bo and Wang Li, head to the mountainous west after relieving an urban businessman of his BMW. A chance encounter with a naive young carpenter pits their professional instincts against their moral compass. The young man, Shagen, a country boy from Hebei province who has spent the past five years repairing Buddhist

monasteries in Gansu province, is about to return home with his life savings, 60,000 yuan, in cash. After selling the BMW, Wang Bo and Wang Li board the same train as Shagen. As it happens, a group of organized thieves led by the legendary Uncle Li also boards the train. Touched by the young man's kindness and his unwavering belief that there are no thieves in the world, the two pickpockets fend off the other pickpockets in an attempt to keep the imaginary ideal world together for the young man. The pair succeeds, at the expense of the life of the male thief, Wang Bo, played by Hong Kong pop star Andy Lau.

The film proclaims loudly and clearly that the real thieves are the urban upstarts who amass their outwardly legitimate fortunes illegally and brutally. The first segment of the film witnesses the con-artist pair acquiring the BMW by scamming it out of a rich man. As Wang Bo drives the car out of the man's heavily guarded upscale villa, he shouts at the guard who salutes him, "Are you blind? Why don't you stop me, because I drive a BMW? Does driving a BMW make me a good person?" Wang Bo's ironic comment and the caricature of the rich man position the filmmaker squarely with the socially disenfranchised yet morally superior thieves. The film's heroes are these idealized thieves who make it outside the corrupt system and redeem themselves by protecting the innocent.

Some Chinese critics suggest that *Thieves* speaks to the moral and existential anxiety of China's emerging upper middle class. As the film opens, the female con-artist is tutoring a rich CEO in English, which immediately puts her in a culturally superior position since speaking English signals sophistication and status. The couple's knowledge of English suggests that they are well equipped to participate in China's new economic transformation. They are, as their antagonist Uncle Li puts it, talented people who should be cherished by China in its march towards modernization. Li openly laments the crudity of his own understudy and attempts to recruit the couple by staging a thievery competition. The battle over Shagen's life savings thus has more to do with Li's desire to win over Wang Bo than with Shagen's money. Indeed, the English-speaking con-artists are would-be members of an exclusive class of knowledge-based professionals that includes stock brokers, IT-savvy entrepreneurs, and MBAs employed by transnational firms. To a certain extent, the battle between the two groups of thieves on the train and one group's chivalrous conduct represents the fantasy of enlightened professionals who imagine a better society protective of small people. In speaking to this class of skilled, newly rich people, the harsh reality of the country boy Shagen and his contemporary rural dwellers is cast aside in Feng's romantic version of a world without thieves. Indeed, Feng's characters are always in the lifestyle vanguard, and generally reckless in the pursuit of alternative and risky pleasures.

A World Without Thieves: Feng's High Concept Turn

Robert McKee calls the classical three-act story structure the "archplot," as opposed to the "miniplot" of modernist films and the "antiplot" of postmodernist cinema.¹³ As McKee puts it, in an archplot the story builds around an active protagonist who

struggles against primarily external forces, through continuous time, within a consistent and causally connected fictional reality, to a closed ending of absolute, irreversible change. Often seen in European art films, the “miniplot” prefers open endings, internal conflicts, and multiple and/or passive protagonists. The “antiplot” drifts even further, into coincidences, non-linear time, and inconsistent realities. An archplot or classical narrative structure is at the core of a high concept film. High concept’s emphasis on simple and definable storylines derives from the belief that films with confusing narratives do not usually fare well at the box office.

Feng Xiaogang’s filmmaking practice has witnessed an intuitive move toward the high concept approach: cultivating seasonal subjects, gradually turning away from broken episodic narratives, utilizing transnational stars, and developing a sleek visual style.¹⁴ With the exception of *Sorry Baby* (1999), Feng’s New Year films prior to *A World Without Thieves* swung between miniplot and antiplot. *Party A, Party B* follows the four co-founders of the company as they provide dream realization services to their clients. The narrative is thus loosely constructed around a series of episodes playing out the customers’ individual fantasies: from becoming the American General Patton to being a victim of domestic abuse; from a rich man burdened with fancy banquets and keen to experience meager food in the poor countryside, to a long-separated couple enjoying a newly decorated apartment in their last months together. The film employs an episodic narrative structure that moves the story ahead via a series of miniplots randomly pieced together by satirical threads. The sprawling narrative and ensemble casting allow for a deliberate display of various aspects of contemporary Chinese society.¹⁵ They also make *Party A, Party B* more akin to European art film than to Hollywood’s high concept film.

In *Be There or Be Square*, a series of contrived (co)incidences link the two romantic leads together in a chain of events that set off their fickle relationship. As the attraction between the two grows, so does the apprehension. She is furiously independent and he is not ready to settle down. The narrative again progresses episodically, with the two protagonists’ passive courtship punctuated by three incidental separations and subsequent chance encounters. They eventually move in together and set up a lucrative Chinese school. Financial success fails to solve their cultural alienation. As another new year approaches, they must decide whether to build a permanent nest together in Los Angeles or to return to China. The film’s open ending, passive protagonists, reliance on random collisions of characters, and fragmented narrative put its narrative structure somewhere between miniplot and antiplot.

Sorry Baby was the first Feng Xiaogang film with a straightforward if not so tightly woven plot, clearly defined protagonist and antagonist, and narrative closure. As Feng himself has suggested, this was his first attempt to move away from the European films so influential with Chinese filmmakers in the 1980s and toward the Hollywood-style story structure so popular with Chinese audiences in the late 1990s.¹⁶ His Hollywood turn hit a speed bump in his next project, *A Sigh*, a dense melodrama dealing with extramarital affairs and the breakdown of a family. The dark tone and pensive approach that follows, simultaneously, the disintegration of a family, the breakup of an affair, and

the painful journey of a man who desperately wants to hold on to both, make the film yet another low concept drama, more European than Hollywood in its deliberate pacing and its non-judgmental perspective that offers no psychological closure.

Big Shot's Funeral took a decidedly messy narrative turn. The interplay between metacinematic parody of transcultural exchange and farcical depiction of commercialism sprawling out of control leaves little room for a classical narrative to settle in. In a typical antiplot fashion, the story of *Big Shot's Funeral* jumps inconsistently from one "reality" to another in an effort to create a sense of absurdity. As many critics have noted, the film is indecisive, abrupt, and incoherent.

Feng's next project, *Cell Phone*, was more precise in its thematic probing and more focused in its narrative structure. Depicting spousal cheating and the role of modern cell phone technology in facilitating the old habit, the film follows its protagonist through several short-lived affairs and the dissolution of his marriage. The cell phone deployed as cheater's companion and potential bomb of revelation adds many funny twists to the domestic drama, making it a much lighter version of *A Sigh*. The complexity of the human relationships involved does not fit easily into a classical narrative, however, and the film returns at times to episodic sequencing to map out the evolution of multiple affairs.

The Chinese narrative tradition has tended to place equal emphasis on overlapping events as well as the interstitial spaces between events, in effect placing non-events alongside events in conceiving of the human experience in time. Chinese authors and readers have been interested in how a large number of individual characters are depicted in detail rather than in the continuous flow of a story line. In short, episodic structure and elaborate depiction of discrete characters and events are characteristics of traditional Chinese narrative, seen as a contributing factor to Chinese cinema's perceived slow pace. Feng's New Year films have to a varying degree carried this legacy.

A World Without Thieves was the first Feng Xiaogang film to make a clean break with this narrative mode. The film's fast-paced and straightforward narrative structure is a clear departure from Feng's earlier episodic approach. The plot of *A World Without Thieves* builds around Wang Bo, the master con artist who actively engages in a battle against rival thieves to protect Shagen's life savings. The Uncle Li character is not in the original novel, yet the addition of Li, portrayed by Ge You, contributes significantly to the film's narrative intensity. In turning the funny-faced Ge You into a cool and composed criminal mastermind, Feng located the antagonistic force and action arc essential to an archplotted, high concept movie. The plot fills the film with fast-paced fist fights as thieves clash on the train, picking pockets and trying to outwit each other. Each battle raises the stakes as the train moves closer to its destination and the thieves move closer to a final confrontation. Wang Bo ultimately sacrifices his life in his determination to outsmart Uncle Li and save Shagen's money. Wang Bo's death, albeit played out in a low-key fashion, seems to defy the classical call for the hero to walk out triumphantly. Yet triumph via death as ultimate redemption is hardly new in popular crime genres in Hollywood and Hong Kong. What matters in an archplot is not so much a happy ending as a closed ending.

The straightforward narrative in *A World Without Thieves* is enriched by a romantic subplot between the two protagonists. Subplots in classical narratives function to move the plot, carry the theme, and dimensionalize an otherwise linear and action-oriented story. Frequently, classical subplots revolve around heterosexual romance that helps to reveal extra dimensions of the characters. The subplot in *A World Without Thieves* revolves around the romantic relationship between the lead characters Wang Bo and Wang Li. Their partnership is at a crossroads early on in the film as she discovers that she is pregnant with his child. She is determined to quit the life of thievery so their child can start afresh. Her decision becomes the inciting incident that sets the story in motion. Unaware of her pregnancy, Wang Bo is unwilling to call it quits. The tension mounts as she involves him in the fight for Shagen's life savings. Her persistence together with the innocence of Shagen eventually turns him around and the two reconcile.

The subplot fleshes out the psychological trajectory of Wang Bo's redemption, which complements the main narrative arc involving the deadly competition between Wang and his antagonist. With its chain-linked causalities laid bare in linear time (as linear as travel by train!), its plot driven by external conflict, its active protagonist and forceful antagonist, and its closed ending, *A World Without Thieves* is a consummate specimen of an archplot in the service of a high concept film. The tightly woven plot and subplot are further enriched by funny sequences including an uneven battle of wits between the sophisticated Wang Bo and Uncle Li's goons that momentarily reduces the goons to laughing-stocks before their fellow travelers on the train. The funny sequences and witty dialogue are the only elements carried over from Feng's earlier New Year films. Otherwise, *A World Without Thieves* is a decisive break — a high concept, action-driven gangster film.

A World Without Thieves is also the only Feng Xiaogang film so far to move out of the cityscape and into the wilds of beautiful northwest China. Most of the movie takes place aboard the train, which traverses starkly beautiful terrain as the thieves circle their prey. This gives the film a spectacular visual aspect unseen in Feng's previous films. And again, for the first time Feng uses special effects to enhance the visual illusion. While Zhang Yimou's penchant for lavish visual stylization is commonly acknowledged (Zhang got his start as a cinematographer), Feng's sleek look is less commonly noted yet equally compelling, particularly in *A World Without Thieves*.

Textual strategies aside, the near-Hollywood-style marketing campaign and saturation release strategy employed by the movie's distributor warrant special consideration. A saturation release requires wide public awareness and interest in the film ahead of its opening weekend. This is normally achieved via a comprehensive marketing approach including print, trailers, television commercials, merchandising, and music tie-ins. While the marketing machinery of the Chinese entertainment industry is not up to speed yet on merchandising and music tie-ins, *A World Without Thieves*'s marketing effort was otherwise a creditable imitation of the Hollywood high concept marketing campaign.¹⁷ The film's total advertising budget for TV, newspaper, Internet, and other media exceeded 15 million yuan (US\$1.8 million). To prevent box-office ticket sales from being affected by VCD/DVD copies, especially pirated ones, video copies of

the film were not released until fifteen days after the theatrical premiere.¹⁸ For cinema chains in southern China, Cantonese copies were released.¹⁹ With a trendy topic, stars with trans-regional appeal, a condensed classical narrative, a sleek visual presentation, and a Hollywood-style marketing campaign, *A World Without Thieves* is a decisive high concept turn for Feng.

From Feng Xiaogang to Zhang Yimou

Zhang Yimou's blockbuster turn had its roots in the action films he made since the late 1980s. Zhang is convinced that the action-oriented blockbuster (*dapian*) is the only genre that can raise Chinese cinema out of its prolonged recession.²⁰ Along the way to establishing his international reputation as an art film director, Zhang twice tried his hand at male-oriented action films, first with *Codename Cougar* (*Daihao meizhoubao*, 1988), and then again with *Shanghai Triad* (*Yao a yao, yaodao waipo qiao*, 1995). Both films received mixed reviews, and neither was conceived in the blockbuster mold.²¹ It was only with *Hero* that Zhang began to put his action blockbuster theory into action, with an ambitious turn into the historical martial arts form — the most popular and the most convention-bound Chinese action genre of all. Since *Hero* appeared shortly after Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* had transformed martial arts from international cult genre to international sensation, it was widely assumed that Zhang was simply following the leader; but he insists that this was simply a coincidence, that both films were in production at about the same time, and that he had long cherished the idea of making a martial arts film.²² Moreover, *Hero*'s financiers had stipulated a martial arts film from the beginning.²³

To keep the door open to a potential best foreign language film award at the Oscars, which has repeatedly evaded him, Zhang focused his martial arts debut on the spirit of chivalry and humanism and reined in the excessive violence and unmotivated fight sequences traditionally associated with the genre.²⁴ But the watered-down, “arted-up” fight scenes provoked anger and irreverent laughter among Zhang's domestic audience. Criticized at home for this genre disloyalty and abroad for its perceived endorsement of collective goals (achieved by brutal means) at the expense of individuality, *Hero* raked in critical ire and box-office success: everybody saw it, and almost everybody complained about it. A few Chinese critics did at least endorse Zhang's resort to the blockbuster format. Leilei Jia, for one, proclaimed *Hero* a historic first instance of fighting fire with fire — putting a massive Hollywood-style marketing campaign in the service of the Chinese film industry's struggle *against* Hollywood for supremacy in the Chinese domestic market and a more competitive position internationally.²⁵ As Jia put it, *Hero* pitched a regimental, systematic, and international challenge to imported blockbusters, and better yet, it did this on the back of a multi-million dollar foreign investment.²⁶ The film's massive marketing campaign coupled with China's best known director, an all-star cast, and the promise of a major new martial arts spectacle did bring audiences into theaters, making *Hero* the number one domestic box-office performer in 2002, the year that Feng Xiaogang went on his cinematic hiatus.

The first Zhang Yimou film to rival a Feng Xiaogang film (*A World Without Thieves*) head-to-head at the domestic box office was *House of Flying Daggers* (2004). This second martial arts effort combined Zhang's trademark dazzling imagery with transnational stars, a more linear narrative, and more conventional characters, making *House of Flying Daggers*, like Feng's *A World Without Thieves*, a fair facsimile of a Hollywood high concept film. Meanwhile, with a budget of \$45 million, Zhang's third martial arts film, *Curse of the Golden Flower*, is another high concept film, and reportedly the most expensive Chinese film to date.

The fundamental difference between Zhang and Feng until very recently has been the former's international bent and the latter's domestic bent.²⁷ Zhang's films targeted overseas art house markets from the beginning, while Feng's are just now attempting to branch out. While Feng's films have performed well domestically, most of Zhang's films have received a lukewarm response from their native audience. The box-office success of *House of Flying Daggers* may owe more to its "front-loaded" marketing and saturation release strategy than to its actual audience appeal. Indeed, it faced a flood of criticism from both press and public in China for its thin storyline and overt, genre-offending stylization. A random sampling of audience reactions finds that Zhang's martial arts films have largely failed to win the hearts of Chinese viewers.²⁸

Zhang's penchant for (especially visual) stylization has consistently met with skepticism in China. High concept films typically include slick and arresting images designed to capture viewers' attention, yet the excessive stylization of *House*, coupled with its thinly established plot, failed to engage audiences emotionally. The thin plot may have been a response to domestic criticism of the overtly convoluted plot structure of Zhang's previous martial arts epic *Hero*.²⁹ At the same time, Zhang's desire to maintain a global presence also makes him susceptible to the expectations of global art house audiences. Zhang's ability to balance culturally opaque, translatable, and fully universal cinematic elements served him well in the 1990s, making him an art house sensation internationally and a box-office force domestically. Yet as he has made a more conscious effort to combine art and commerce, the gap between the two has seemed to widen beyond his grasp. The era of "killing two birds with one stone" might be over, and Zhang might have to invent a cinematic language that will speak to his own countrymen if he is serious about keeping his hand in the domestic market.³⁰

Feng's contemporary urban films, on the other hand, have regularly succeeded with ordinary Chinese, and except for *A World Without Thieves* these have all been films that do not conform to Hollywood principles — they are not high concept, and they do not set out to be blockbusters, much less the action-oriented blockbusters that Zhang prescribes. The combination of irony, sentimentality, and reflexivity in Feng's often personal films has proved entertaining enough to achieve blockbuster status at the domestic box office without resorting to an imported formula. The entertainment value of Feng's New Year films rests primarily upon their cultural proximity to a Chinese society caught in chaotic transformation.³¹ Feng has created a formidable oeuvre of texts that document the transformation of Chinese society during the post-Mao, post-Deng era. This "current affairs" quality of Feng's films is what sets him apart from Zhang Yimou, whose martial

arts epics have retreated to China's dynastic history. Feng's seasonal treatments specific to contemporary Chinese society and the strong regional flavor of his films make them more relevant to Chinese moviegoers but difficult to travel globally.

Instead of being content with his domestic success, it seems that Feng too is "cursed" with the desire to go global. Feng's 2006 feature, *The Banquet*, a Chinese version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is an epic swordsman picture.³² Leaving his familiar urban terrain, Feng may be falling into the trap of the Zhang Yimou-style epic drama, characterized by lavish production values and highly stylized kung fu sequences. *The Banquet's* melodramatic narrative, sparse dialogue, and the whisper-quiet delivery contrast sharply with Feng's accustomed witty urban satire. The film came out in September 2006 to a lukewarm reception.

The turn to martial arts period dramas by Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and even Feng Xiaogang on the heels of Ang Lee's success seems to have relegated Chinese cinema to the global "ghetto" of martial arts flicks. Even Hollywood feels uneasy about the fact that most Chinese films competing at the Academy Awards these days are of a single type.³³

While Feng's early New Year films defied the textual conventions of Hollywood blockbuster films, he is gradually moving toward the high concept, blockbuster formula, or at least toward Zhang's Chinese variation on that formula. This transformation from New Year urban comedy to action-packed period drama released during the summer season eventually cut the critical and popular tie between Feng and his ardent followers that depends so much on contemporary cultural relevance. Feng did return to the domestic market by making *Assembly* (2007), a heart-warming drama about a PLA captain's quest for honor and justice for his falling soldiers. The film was endorsed by both the public and the state, making Feng the real turn-around hero. Feng's most recent New Year's film, *If You Are the One* (*Feicheng wurao*), set a new box-office record in 2008.

