

Cultural Review

Viewing *Hero*: A Conversation about History, Art and Responsibility

BY SHARON HOM AND HU PING

Sharon Hom: One of China's "Fifth Generation" filmmakers,¹ Zhang Yimou is one of two mainland Chinese directors² who have achieved artistic acclaim internationally. His work has been banned, criticized, lionized and debated domestically within China, most recently following the release of *Hero*.³ In addition to his international stature, Zhang Yimou has also assumed a prominent role in the Chinese film community.⁴ Within the context of his entire body of work to date, and his trajectory as an artist, how are we to evaluate and critically view *Hero*? Who is this "we"? Why and how are debates about a film or about any work of art relevant to our work as human rights activists?

TWO OPENING INTERPRETATIONS:

HU PING: AN AHISTORICAL FANTASY

Is *Hero* merely entertainment?

The film *Hero*, directed by Zhang Yimou, has attracted censure both inside and outside of China. Many people have written articles criticizing the movie for praising violence and catering to authority. Of course, there are also those who defend *Hero*, but what is surprising is that few directly confront the criticisms aimed at the film. Instead, they blame *Hero*'s critics for unreasonably focusing on the film's thematic ideology and political inclinations.

The film's defenders make no attempt to refute criticism of the film's theme, and merely respond, "*Hero* is just an entertainment film, why do you keep criticizing its ideology?"

In fact, this question should be turned around and aimed not at critics, but at the director: "If you're only producing an entertainment film, why did you choose a script with a thematic ideology that is bound to raise such strong feelings of antipathy? It is a truism that the average entertainment film, in its desire to appeal to a mass audi-

ence, will assiduously avoid any topic or theme that might offend the values of its target audience. The theme espoused by *Hero* is an affront to traditional scholarly thought, as well as to modern human rights mentality; it does not conform to the values and standards of Chinese or of foreigners. If Zhang Yimou failed to consider how provocative the theme of *Hero* would be to the values of others, he was acting in ignorance. If he knowingly violated these values, this suggests that what he was producing was not an entertainment film, but a morality play.

Defenders of *Hero* also say that it is merely a commercial film aimed at making money. This defense can also be asked right back: "You can make a commercial film about almost anything. Why chose *Hero*? There are many Chinese martial arts novels that would make terrific films, and the vast majority would conform entirely to the values of the mass audience, and would not contain details so offensive to public sensibilities as those in *Hero*. The fact that Zhang Yimou chose *Hero* inevitably leads one to suspect that the director had more in mind than making money. The defense might be made that if a different story had been chosen, the authorities would be less tolerant and would withhold their support and assistance, and without the support and assistance of the authorities, *Hero* would not be such an enormous commercial success. If that claim is made, it is a tacit confirmation that Zhang Yimou filmed *Hero* to please the authorities.

On the ahistorical fiction of *Hero*

The historical vision and values espoused by *Hero* have both been subjected to severe criticism. The film's defenders say that the story is fictional, so why should it be taken so literally?

That question, too, can be thrown back at the film: It is especially because it is fiction that it must be convincingly realistic, otherwise it would betray the director's creative efforts. Generally speaking, there are three types of historical fiction or historical films. The first kind, such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, is a spiced-up version of real persons and events. The second kind uses fictional characters and events, but conforms to genuine feelings and reason. *Hero*'s fiction is of a different type than

either of these. Its story takes place against a real historical backdrop (as the director has made a point of emphasizing), but the story itself is fictional. The crux of the matter is that the attempted assassination of the Qin Emperor, which is *Hero*'s main storyline, does not conform to either emotional or historical reality. Not only is it not historical, it is actually ahistorical.

An artistic fiction that counters history typically expresses its creator's extreme dissatisfaction with history, and indicates that real events have violated the author's values and standards. When the creator's dissatisfaction with historical reality is so strong that he feels that producing a work in conformance with historical fact or historical sensibilities, even with fictional elements, cannot fulfill the values he needs to express, he feels obliged to depart from historical reality and sensibility to create an ahistorical fictional work through which his value inclinations can be projected. "Revising" history is, in effect, using one's own values to change history, and the revised history laid out before us is not history, but the values of the artist himself. The myth of the assassination attempt against the Qin Emperor has been circulating for more than 2,000 years (from the *Annals of the Warring States* to Chen Kaige's film *The Emperor and the Assassin*). Anyone watches *Hero* with an understanding of the relevant historical facts and a familiarity with the various depictions of the Qin Emperor and his social influence will be immediately aware of the director's use of ahistorical fiction in attempting to make the past serve the present.

History must be held in reverence

History is the religion of the Chinese people. Chinese people lack genuine religion or a transcendent faith, but they have moral standards and still search for the meaning of life. What is offered to others through religion is offered to Chinese through history. Others rely on religious teachings; we rely on history.

Chinese history has at least two special features: one is an insistence on fact, "Writing the truth, without fear or favor," the other is its stress on moral judgment, "Offering praise and criticism with in the context of righteousness." In China, evil people do not believe in Hell, so they do not fear it; what they dread is the judgment of history. For that reason, China's history has



Director Zhang Yimou: creative quandary.
Photo: Reuters

been obliged to bear the function of moral judgment.

In the post-authoritarian era, rulers have had to use the old methods of weaving and constructing their portion of history, while at the same time beginning to encourage a cynicism toward history, and to the best of their ability dissipating the reverence with which Chinese people hold history. Movies such as those released a few years ago about the Qing Dynasty rulers, and *Hero* more recently pay subtle tribute to autocracy; anyone who criticizes them is reminded that they are only entertainment and not meant to represent reality. It is comparable to someone who berates another while pretending to be drunk. Because he is sober, he is aware that his behavior is inappropriate, but if you attempt to reason with him, he will lurch back into his drunk act and make it look as if you're raising a fuss over nothing. Depriving history of its sacred character is a means of making people "live in the present," so that current values become the only yardstick of existence; in this way, it serves those in power and works against their opponents and the general public—in other words, benefiting the evil and harming the good.

For Chinese, with our lack of religion, if history is deprived of its sacred character, what is there that remains sacred? If the Chinese people lose what is sacred in their lives, what kind of life is that?

For that reason, as Chinese we must show reverence for history.

SHARON HOM: EMBEDDED SUBVERSION

Despite my past interest in the work of Zhang Yimou, I was actually not very interested in seeing *Hero* when it was released in the U.S. But your excellent essay about *Hero*, which first appeared in *Beijing Spring*, raised interesting questions for me about the role of art, history, and ethical obligation. Your essay has outlined clearly the various debates on the film. These debates have played out essentially along the fault lines of whether it is a Chinese apology or defense of fascism or violent authoritarianism; whether it is merely entertainment, a commercial box office movie, beautiful art or a sell-out by Zhang Yimou to the Chinese regime. These debates tend to fall into polar arguments and positions, taking as their starting point the filmmaker's intent.

To frame or introduce this exchange on *Hero*, I want to suggest a few questions and themes about history, interpretation, and the relationship between art and its challenges for the audience, viewer or reader. What is interesting is the possibility of a subversive reading of *Hero*, one that may or may not have been consciously planted in the film by Zhang Yimou, though I want to suggest that a subversive message is coded in the structure of the film. There is also an interesting sidestepped question: what do these debates and the way they are carried out reveal about the possibility for democratic discursive space inside China and in the overseas Chinese diaspora communities?

Multiple simultaneous histories

A nation has a history, or more accurately, every nation has contested histories written and rewritten by those who aim to rewrite the past in order to control the present and shape the future. Film, perhaps like all art, is culturally and historically situated and marked by these struggles, and therefore debates about a particular film should not be only carried out only within the isolated frame of a single film. Each human being also has a history, which often undergoes the revisionist process of autobiography or memoir. Each artist also has his or her artistic trajectory, mapped by a body of work, each work in dialogue or even tension with previous work.

The visual beauty of *Hero* echoes Zhang Yimou's signature use of color palettes to paint his lush cinematic images. Like *Red Sorghum*, *Ju Do* or *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Hero* runs the risk of domesticating the violence depicted, romanticizing each version of the truth, or clothing deadly power with awesome beauty. There are the billowing colors of oceans of silk—deadly red swirls, white swirls wielded by Maggie Cheung—so powerful that she does not even need a sword to stop the rain of steel tipped arrows. There is the last image of the lovers—two white figures, bound in life, bound in death, on a desolate barren plain of earth. And there is the cavernous hall of power where the Emperor sits amidst stunning columns of green silk filled with dangerous invisible winds.

The different versions filmed in dominating tints of red, blue, white and green literally color the truth asserted, signaling the different paths ending in deadly choices. Each time the "story" is retold, or to use political reference, each time the story and the characters are rehabilitated, their "true" natures are flipped, reversed or undermined. But in each version, the characters are faced with a choice—a choice that has momentous consequences.

The possibility and challenged subversive choice

Hero can also be seen as raising the challenges and possibilities of multiple truths and the complex issues of ethical investments in different narratives, each claiming to convey the "truth" of the road to the aborted assassination of a tyrant. Is Zhang Yimou embedding the real question the film is exploring in the space between the different versions? Does the "message" and significance of *Hero* lie perhaps not in the obvious or surprising ending of each version, but in the space of choice that exists between each version, in the space of interpretative choice between artists and viewers?

Why authoritarianism and violence triumphs is perhaps not due solely to the victory of brute military force, or the seduction of militarism, or the power of spectacle. Does it matter that that Zhang Yimou has "violated" history because of the gap between *Hero's* story and facts as enshrined in established history? It might matter if *Hero* were presented as documen-

tary, but it is shot as fiction, as a feature film. The subversive reading/interpretation of *Hero* lies not in resolution of the arguments posed in its defense or in the criticisms of its ahistoricity or in its appropriation by the Chinese Communist Party. The subversive potential of *Hero* lies in that ultimate moment of choice, when Nameless has paid the heavy price to get within striking distance, then is faced with the individual choice to carry out or abort the mission. In Zhang Yimou's mythologized fractured "history," the brutal tyrant survives because of the choice made by an individual who holds in his hand the power to topple him. The question is why does he choose not to do so? That is the subversive element embedded in *Hero*—the suggestion that there is a choice to accept, to embrace at the cost of one's own life, the Tianxia ideology, or the propaganda offered by the Emperor, that allows tyranny to endure.

In the context of present-day China, where there is growing unrest, where the accountability and silenced truths about June 4th still demand a public judgment day and healing process, perhaps the most subversive reading of *Hero* lies not in each color-coded version of the truth, but in the space of choice between the different versions. Perhaps the most subversive suggestion is that even in the face of a powerful and seductive ideology and the control of propaganda, choice is still possible, and that the ability of tyranny to endure depends upon each one of us—nameless and yet powerful—carrying the possibility for heroism against all odds.

NOW A CONVERSATION

Hu Ping (HP): It's always possible to view any piece of art from different viewpoints and explain it in various ways. There is an ancient Chinese saying: "You can never reach the ultimate interpretation of a poem." The movie *Hero* can provoke a wide range of opinions. My article was really trying to only focus on the analysis of the main idea behind the film, and didn't really go beyond that. There have been other articles commenting on the movie from other points of views. A friend of mine first watched *Hero* on video, and he agreed with the opinions I expressed in my article. But after he saw the film in a theater he devel-

oped a different feeling. He told me he was so impressed by the artistic effect of the film that he preferred to evaluate the movie from the aesthetic viewpoint.

Now you have presented me with your view of the movie from a different angle. But I'm afraid that few of the film's viewers in China would share your view. On the other hand, I'm pretty sure that many would agree with me. In modern China, the Qin Emperor has been become a powerful symbol of tyranny. Mao Zedong referred to himself as "Marx plus Qin Shihuang." In fact, during China's April Fifth movement in 1976, people used the slogan, "The time of the Qin Emperor has gone forever," to hint at Mao Zedong. Another example is that the Hong Kong actor Tony Leung Chiu-wai actually said in a press conference right after the movie was released, "The crack-down on June 4th was necessary for a stable China." As an actor in the film, Leung understood *Hero* in this way, and most of the audience in China would understand it the same way. It's very important for us to remember this.

Zhang Yimou, as the movie's director, anticipated that there would be a lot of criticism of *Hero*, and he basically defended the movie from an artistic point of view. He explained that a movie could not carry a heavy, serious topic as its main subject. He said the most important quality of a movie is to make people feel good. He also insisted that most people would carry little lasting impression of the film apart from its beautiful scenery. However, he still did not answer the question I raise: You could show your artistic talent through any number of means. Why did you choose to demonstrate this talent by beautifying the Qin Emperor?

There have been many interesting stories involving assassinations in Chinese history. For example, there was a person named Zhao Dun during the Spring and Autumn Period who was the target of an assassination attempt. When the assassin arrived at Zhao's home and saw him peacefully reading books, he realized that Zhao was a good gentleman and decided not to kill him. Instead, he revealed the whole assassination plan to Zhao. There was also a story at the end of Qing Dynasty about how Wang Jingwei was planning to assassinate the prince regent, and how after the plan failed, the prince regent did not retali-

ate against Wang Jingwei. There are lots of such dramatic stories in Chinese history, but Zhang Yimou chose the story of the Qin Emperor. He even made a point of selecting a script that violated the truth of history by saying that the assassin was given the opportunity to carry out the assassination but gave it up. How can this be explained? We can't get away with saying that the subject of *Hero* is not important.

Sharon Hom (SH): I'm not rejecting an interpretation of the film that relates it to a present-day political imperative asserted by the Beijing regime to maintain social stability. What I am suggesting is a possible subversive reading of the film, one that transcends even the filmmaker's intent, even re-appropriating the film from the Chinese government's politicized use of it to provide implicit justification for June 4th and promote nationalism. I'm also suggesting that it's possible for people to see the same film differently, and for the same person to see the same film differently, thus raising the possibility of a change in perception. So even if in all of China only a handful of people see the subversive message I suggest, it doesn't mean that interpretation or understanding of the film is static or cannot change. After all, we engage in human rights work, the goal of which is social change for the protection of human dignity and potential, and social change is impossible without the capacity of individuals to change their worldviews.

Chen Kaige also made a movie about an attempt to assassinate the Qin Emperor. It appears to be better grounded in historical fact, but also portrays the Emperor somewhat sympathetically as a tortured, lonely soul. As far as I know, this film did not raise the kind of huge debate and negative flood of criticism that *Hero* has engendered in the Chinese community inside and outside China. Can you say something about why you think this is true?

Also, many Chinese artists, such as the writer Wang Shuo, explore the tension between the artistic forms they create and the messages or visions embedded in their work. If we think critically about the role of critics, and I mean not just formal critics such as cultural critics or academics and scholars, but a critic as anyone who thinks and feels rigorously about works of art, be it film or literature, isn't there the danger of

using criticism to limit the artistic space for artists? What are we suggesting is the role of art if we ask artists to bear moral, ethical and political responsibility? What are the human rights implications of this?

HP: I've heard of Chen's movie, but I've never had a chance to see it. I've watched *Hero* twice. I think that Zhang Yimou himself didn't really take the subject and the main idea of the movie seriously. He was mainly seeking to express the beauty of visual art. He put a lot of effort into it, and really did impress his audience. Zhang has always wanted to make a big-scale movie like those produced in Hollywood, with a cast of thousands, a major masterpiece. However, these kinds of movies require the involvement of a lot of people, and can only be produced openly. In China, there have been some small movies touching on social problem that were basically put together by one person. Such movies don't need much in the way of funding or human resources, so the directors have a lot more freedom. Producing a major film in China requires permits from the government.

I think Zhang could defend himself by saying, "Hey, all you writers need to start with is a pen and a sheet of paper, and you can create any work you like. You can hide your work in a mountain cave, or send it abroad for publication, or post it on the Internet if that's the only way to get it published right away. But I'm a movie director. I can't present a battle on a piece of paper. I have to express my artistic thoughts and my aesthetic goals through the shooting of a film. I have to get a government permit; I have to compromise and choose a subject that the government can accept so they'll give us the green light." But these aren't the days of the Cultural Revolution any more. The Chinese government is more tolerant now than it was before. It's even possible to satirize social problems in a roundabout way without getting into a lot of trouble. Why doesn't Zhang want to contribute his effort in this direction?

As a matter of fact, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* is quite unusual in the amount of support it received from the Chinese government during production. The premier of *Hero* was held in the Great Hall of the People. Everyone who attended the showing was searched for video equipment to prevent

unauthorized duplication. The walls of the Great Hall of the People were hung with posters proclaiming, "March *Hero* toward the Oscars!" Chinese television presented *Hero* during prime time, and all of the other movies had to make way for it. This kind of dominance can only be imposed by the government, and only in China. Zhang Yimou knew that very well, and the price he paid for this dominance was compromise.

Maybe he thought that compromise wasn't that important, and that the audience wouldn't care about the issues where he compromised. He might have believed that the audience would only be watching the film for entertainment and for the aesthetic experience. Last year, when Zhang Yimou told *Reader's Digest*, "There is no such thing as one hundred percent freedom in art," he was basically admitting that he didn't have creative freedom. He also made a point of adding, "In China's current social climate, an artist needs to preserve his single spark and maintain his creative mentality." This is suggesting the need to avoid offending the government. You will lose your opportunity if you do so. An artist has to compromise with the government in order to protect himself.

SH: I agree with your points that there are economic and political constraints and demands upon a filmmaker to be able to realize his or her vision and creative visions, and that these affect the production and distribution of their work. But I think it would not be completely fair to consider the responses Zhang Yimou or any artist gives in a public Chinese magazine interview as fully reflecting his intent. And you point out yourself that he *is* saying that artists are constrained and need to make compromises in order to create inside China. But all this is still focusing on what Zhang Yimou intended or how the Chinese government politicized and used and promoted the film for its own purposes. Is this the whole universe of possible interpretation for the film? Isn't it possible that *Hero* is like the Trojan Horse of the ancient Greeks, carrying a whole internal subversive force that is ironically welcomed in by those completely unaware of its full contents?

HP: Zhang Yimou once said that he wanted very much to make movies about the Cultural Revolution. As we all know, the Cultural

Revolution concentrated the full force of Chinese Communist Party tyranny. The Cultural Revolution is still a forbidden subject in China today, and it's not easy to touch on it, even though the official line has become critical of that period. If Zhang really wants to make a film about the Cultural Revolution, it's quite possible that he could obtain a government permit now that he's gained more and more trust from the government in the past few years. He produced China's closing ceremony for the Athens Olympics, as well as directing the promotional film for the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Zhang Yimou was well aware that many excellent artists before him had been left out in the cold and had never been able to put their talents to use because they didn't obey the government. Zhang took that as a lesson and concentrated on expressing his talent through the pure artistry of composition and color.

SH: I agree that Zhang Yimou making a promo for the Olympics is deeply disturbing, especially from our human rights point of view. The nationalism invoked by the Olympics makes it much more complex and challenging for HRIC as a Chinese international NGO to develop effective Olympics-related advocacy. What you're also suggesting is that Zhang Yimou may have wanted to build up the government's trust in him so he could eventually produce a film on the Cultural Revolution. But he actually has already made a Cultural Revolution film—*To Live* (1994)—which I think is a powerful depiction of the tragic costs on a daily human level. As the film critic Rey Chow pointed out, the film is rich with subversive messages and criticism of the suffering and abuses endured by those who survived, those who did not survive and those who may have chosen not to survive, to continue to live. *To Live* was beautifully suffused with the quiet dignity of ordinary people as opposed to the lush visual beauty of his other films. So it may not be a simple matter of compromises made, but a constant negotiation of the limits of living under a system of censorship and control.

HP: I have different opinion from you on this. I believe that few people in China would view the movie from the same perspective as you. The majority would be caught up in the movie's main subject matter. The Chinese government was also con-

fidant that this movie would be completely harmless and non-subversive to them. Let me give you an example: among the members of the “Gang of Four” during the Cultural Revolution, Jiang Qing was the one most loathed by the Chinese people. However, it’s only Jiang Qing’s revolutionary operas that have survived after nearly forty years. Nobody reads any of the articles written by the other three. Even some dissidents enjoy singing tunes from Jiang’s operas during group sing-alongs. They enjoy singing them, because those are the tunes they know best, and the fact is, a lot of these songs have real artistic merit. People can look at the revolutionary operas in different ways, too. Most of the lead characters in the operas were women, so they offer a great range of interpretation from the perspective of women’s rights.

Some artists became famous for their roles in the revolutionary operas, and this inspired many others to ignore politics and only concentrate on art. For example, if someone happened to have a good voice, but found out he could only perform on stage by singing “Long live Chairman Mao,” he would go ahead and sing it, rationalizing that the audience would mainly be enjoying his voice, not the words.

It’s clear from a number of comments that Zhang Yimou has made that he didn’t really like *Hero*’s subject. He wanted us to pay less attention to the subject than to the aesthetics of the film. There’s another detail I’d like to bring up here—when Zhang Yimou complained that there is no such thing as one hundred percent freedom in art, he was criticizing not only the Chinese government, but also western countries. This kind of cynical attitude pleases the Chinese government. The Chinese government knows that Zhang Yimou doesn’t really approve of it, but that’s all right as long as Zhang indicates that ultimately there is no government or system on earth that he does approve of.

Zhang Yimou’s attitude suggests that there’s no substantive difference between free society and dictatorship, that there’s no difference between the inside and outside of a cage. This is the kind of attitude the Chinese government most welcomes, and is the ultimate reason why Zhang has become the most popular movie director in modern China.

Of course, we understand Zhang Yimou.

He compromised with the government in order to give full play to his artistic ambition. He doesn’t want his artistic talents to go to waste. The problem is that it would be a tragedy if all other artists decide to mimic Zhang’s strategy. The more artists who join in the competition to please the government, the higher the price the government will demand of them. And the less independent artists are, the more dictatorial a government will become. Soon we’ll be back to the Cultural Revolution again.

SH: I don’t think we have different opinions about the same issue. What we’re really diverging on is the framework and focus of our analysis. You’re focusing on the intent of the artist and the government shaped by and informed by the deep understanding you have of China’s history and cultural context. I don’t disagree that the government has exploited *Hero*, in part with Zhang Yimou’s complicity and compromises. I also agree that if artists or everyone in China or in any system jumps on the bandwagon to please an authoritarian government and never says “no” to compromise, the cost will be an erosion of the independent voices necessary for art and for a democratic and open society. What I am suggesting is that it may be just as important to ask what kinds of messages may be encoded in the context of this kind of system of control?

I also don’t see criticism of the lack of artistic freedom in western countries as necessarily cynical, but as an unfortunately true description of the state of the world—that no country has a truly free society in which individuals are not faced with constraints. This is why human rights violations exist in every country in the world, but differ in the degrees of egregiousness and range of abuses. The fact that the Chinese government views this as good for them does not change this fact of pervasive human rights violations worldwide.

On your point about content versus artistic expression, I think that’s an issue we’ve seen in many contexts, and in the work of a number of great filmmakers, writers and composers who either in the content or in the process of creation have made compromises or taken positions that support or legitimate the forces of tyranny, fascism, racism and so on. The debate about whether this diminishes the value of

their work is ongoing, in any case does not really address the questions I’m posing, which have to do with the ethical obligation of interpretative choice imposed on the viewer, the audience or the reader. I think the ethical integrity of the artist is an important but separate, though related, question. Both questions present implications for human rights work.

HP: Actually, I believe that the Chinese audience is capable of identifying and understanding the hidden meaning of a work of art, given that they have lived under Communism for more than fifty years. Your different opinion comes not only from a different point of view, but also from the different background you engage in understanding those symbols. When a mainland Chinese reads a story about the Qin Emperor, he automatically relates it to Mao Zedong. So when a writer gives the Emperor a negative role in his story, the reader immediately knows he’s criticizing the Communist Party. Understanding the hidden meaning of a work of art really depends on an individual’s personal experience and habits. Wang Shuo is a great writer in China. His figures use serious political terms to chatter about daily trifles and turning them into a kind of blasphemy. His books are very popular in China, but I doubt they’d appeal to foreigners in translation. I don’t think foreigners would be able to extract these subtle flavors – even many Chinese may not be able to. Wang Shuo packaged his thoughts very well, and I believe these thoughts are quite subversive. But if you can’t understand his symbols, you won’t discover his subversion.

What I’m trying to say about Zhang Yimou is that he wouldn’t have come under so much criticism if he had selected some other subject matter. The Qin Empire has over the course of a thousand years become a symbol that’s hard-wired into the Chinese consciousness. Even if an attempt is made to present a different meaning for this symbol, few in the audience will be able to follow it. We could assume that an artist is merely pretending to make his work look harmless to the government while actually criticizing the government strongly. Many Chinese artists have done this, but that’s not what Zhang Yimou was doing in *Hero*. He actually did the opposite. That’s why Zhang has urged people to disregard the movie’s subject matter and theme

and only pay attention to the art. He knew very well that what he had done was wrong, and that he was not on solid ground.

SH: You point out, and I agree, that growing up a controlled society trains people to “read between the lines” for implicit messages, often messages that may undermine the explicit ones. So the question is still, why would the majority of viewers in China not see the subversive potential in *Hero*? What is the role of ideological control in shaping how and what people see, and in creating the gaps between what people see and what they feel they can express publicly? Or the more important question—even if the majority did NOT see a possible subversive interpretation on first viewing, what are the possibilities for seeing it differently when viewing it again?

There are at least three quick examples that suggest that fundamental changes in social perceptions are possible or underway.

First, we can see the dual responses to patriotism and nationalism in the Chinese government’s handling of the recent anti-Japanese protests that the government first exploited then shifted to take control of these sentiments. At the same time, there are already forces within China that are challenging the government’s dominant definition and invocation of a patriotism that does not allow criticism. As China becomes increasingly integrated into the global economy and international community, what kind of nation will China be in the twenty first century? How will we define “Chinese”? Secondly, for thousands of years it could be said that Chinese culture reflected a very clear and negative social view of women, but this view is now undergoing change—slow and uneven, but change nonetheless. Chinese women themselves are demanding and creating these changes.

Thirdly, the concept of human rights has been developing within the international community and within China. There are many debates on China’s politics, economy and human rights in international settings such as the UN, and human right conditions in China have improved in some respects, while there are still many serious problems and violations. I think the Chinese government, Chinese GONGOs and NGOs have also become more sophisticated in using human rights concepts and language. So we

can see that shifts in perception, language and attitudes are not only possible in China, but are actually happening.

HP: There have been many novels and movies about China’s ancient empires in recent years. Two years ago it was Kang Xi, now it’s Han Wu Di. This all started happening in the 1990s. These kinds of movies wouldn’t have been so readily accepted in the 1980s, since people at that time were still climbing out from under the shadow of the Cultural Revolution and would have viewed such works negatively or critically. It was only in the 1990s that praising power gained popularity. *Hero* is part of this trend. I think we should remember that to a great extent, there is no alternative voice in China, and that it is only through debate and discussion of different opinions that we can form a real mainstream view. If the majority of people only hear one side, that viewpoint will become the majority voice of the people. The Chinese Communist Party knows this well, and that’s why they’ve always maintained tight control over the people. At the same time, the Chinese people are also well aware of this. You can try to ask an ordinary Chinese an incisive question on the street, and I’m sure he will not dare to answer it.

I’ll give you an example. Two years ago, a philosophy professor from New York University visited Peking University. The students were very familiar with the professor’s work, and they asked him lots of questions. But the students immediately went silent when the professor asked them about schoolmates who had been arrested by the government. The students knew this was a problematic topic. They would admit on one hand that freedom and democracy are good, but on the another hand they would tell you that this was not yet the right time for China. They used this as a rationalization. They knew clearly what they could or could not ask, what they could or could not do and even what they could or could not think. They were conscious of a line it was dangerous to cross. We can easily find out that the students are not as open as they claim by casually asking them some sensitive questions.

Another example is the recent demonstrations in China against Japan becoming a permanent member of UN Security Council. They were quite different from the

demonstrations in South Korea. First of all, the South Korean government clearly stated that it opposed Japan joining the Security Council, and some Korean citizens took to the streets to express the same view, since they hate Japan. But the Chinese government never said it opposed Japan joining the UN Security Council. The Chinese people should have immediately demanded that the government take a clear-cut stand on this issue, since this is a diplomatic issue and the ordinary Chinese have no right to vote in the UN. At least they should have written open letters to the government, asking government to represent their views. Strangely, they didn’t do this.

The matter of Diaoyutai Island is also quite strange. There’s an island called Du Island that’s under dispute between Japan and Korea. Last month, a Japan reconnaissance plane flew over the island, and the Korean government immediately sent four fighter planes to intercept it and force it to leave. Chinese who believe Diaoyutai Island belongs to China should call on the government to maintain its sovereignty by protecting the island. Yet we’ve never seen any reaction from the Chinese government when the Japanese carry out activities on the island. Instead of protesting to the Chinese government, you just have some Chinese taking a boat to the island themselves. Clearly, the Chinese know they can’t make any demands of their government, and for that reason Chinese demonstrations and protests are very different from real ones. They’re not logical and don’t really stem from patriotism or nationalism, unlike those of the Koreans, who are expressing their true feelings.

Chinese do a lot of play-acting. Sometimes we say one thing, sometimes something completely different. We all have our own considerations and purposes that are clear in our own minds. It is very important to understand this. Once you do, you will realize that it is meaningless to carry out a public opinion survey in China today. Just think about it: if you were a Chinese in China, would you express your true feelings for a survey?

SH: I completely agree with you. A recent report by a Chinese scholar on the development of the Internet in China concluded that based upon opinion surveys, Chinese people today feel they’re freer to express

their opinions than before. Given the methodological and political challenges of soliciting reliable and frank opinions in a society like China, the validity and reliability of this kind of research is problematic. But many western observers have pointed to this report as supporting the view that things are not that bad for ordinary people and that there is a growing independent civil society in China. This ignores the whole system of censorship and control in China and undermines the human rights work we do to raise freedom of expression and access to information issues.

HP: You're right. I have a friend who's a professor here who carried out a survey in China showing that the Chinese have more confidence of their government than Americans and Britons. It's ridiculous! We know that many American newspapers and magazines dislike the American government—it would be very difficult to receive even a 50 percent satisfaction level. There's no way that the Chinese Communist Party is any better than the American Democratic Party

or Republican Party, so how could it receive a 70 or 80 percent confidence level from its people? Actually, the Chinese government doesn't believe any of these surveys. What they truly fear is what we're doing. It's very important for us to speak up, because we can influence others. Even if someone carries out a survey today showing that 90 percent of all Chinese support the Communist Party, if I had a chance to go back to China and speak to the Chinese people for one month, I'm sure that 90 percent of the Chinese would take my side. Every public commentator knows that they can influence and change others by their words. The Communist Party also knows it, and that's why they don't dare let us go back.

SH: That's the work and challenge for us as human rights workers. I agree that words are powerful, and that if you or others were free to speak back home in China, you would be able to influence the views and perceptions of others. That's why I'm suggesting that the key question is how to change people's perceptions. I still think

nobody can totally control the meaning of a work of art, whether it's the Communist Party or even the artist himself. Zhang Yimou created a film, but the film is like a child—once created, it takes on a life of its own. That's why art has the power to affect history, the present and the future.

HP: So those who persist in their ideals and refuse to compromise end up looking like fools, because they're not allowed to leave anything to history.

SH: In the human rights work we do, there are also choices facing activists, governments, the business community and other actors: to engage in dialogue with the Chinese government to build up trust and mutual understanding, or to push for stronger monitoring, transparency and public accountability? To support in-country programs of exchange and training, or to work from a more independent "outside" position? What are the compromises being made? I think, though, that sometimes the choices are presented as too either-or—



The National Ballet of China rehearses Zhang Yimou's "Raise the Red Lantern." Photo: AFP/Getty Images

that actually it's helpful to have different strategies in progress simultaneously so they can create overlapping ripples of expanded political space. At the same time, I think the test for any strategy, separately or in conjunction with other approaches, should be whether this work contributes to supporting independent voices and expanding and legitimating greater civil space inside China.

HP: This is not a choice only for an artist, but for every citizen: whether or not to maintain your principles; to what degree you maintain them; if you feel a need to compromise, how far will you go. It's not easy to measure these questions. Sometimes we have to make comparisons between similar situations before we can reach a conclusion. For example, a certain choice may not look that bad, but it would be very bad if everybody made the same choice. On the other hand, we can say that being a dissident is another kind of choice, but one that does not benefit one's personal interests.

SH: We've made our way back to June 4th and the way the Chinese government only allows one version, their version, of what happened and why. But no matter how hard they try, and despite the passage of almost 16 years now, there are still courageous voices like those of Ding Zilin, Dr. Jiang Yanyong and others calling for a full accounting. No matter how brutally the government suppresses these voices, people will not forget what they witnessed, or the loved ones they lost. Although ordinary Chinese people don't dare to speak out, there are still choices for them to make, otherwise with the passage of time there's the danger of historical amnesia.

HP: Mainland Chinese do have some choices, actually, but the range of choices is very limited, and there is a higher price extracted for alternatives. That's why the majority prefers to obey the government. All the same, the actual space in China is not all that tiny. People could do a little more, speak a little more and in that way enlarge the space. If everyone is willing to do a little more and say a little more, the risk will gradually decrease. In a sense, life for people such as Ding Zilin and other dissidents is easier and simpler. They've gone

beyond the question of compromise or insistence. They don't need the government's permission to do what they do, and this makes their lives easier and their consciences more at peace. But there will never be many such people. The majority will always be swaying between various degrees of compromise.

SH: I agree with you. It's up to each person, each nameless person, to do whatever he or she can to gradually expand the space for everyone.

HP: Here's another example. In 1989 the Hungarian government officially announced the rehabilitation of the 1957 uprising, but many Hungarians knew this had happened years ago. The newspapers and magazines didn't report anything about it until 1989, but the people themselves spread the truth across their dining tables. In the case of China, we can see that at first the government deprived the Chinese people of news and facts and kept people ignorant on many important issues, but after a time, the people themselves no longer wanted to find out the truth. This can be seen in many Chinese scholars overseas. They have access to all kinds of information and read whatever they want, but they prefer to remain in ignorance. They close their eyes to the truth about China because they knew this knowledge would make them uncomfortable.

SH: Actually, no matter how hard they try, they can't maintain complete control. This is why we have the opportunity to make a difference. The choice exists to reject the ideological rationales offered by those in power as a justification for maintaining their power, to say "no" to the human suffering and sacrifices demanded.

HP: That's right. When they said they don't know, they already know. They say they don't know because they dare not face the truth. It's like a child that's afraid to look at a dead body. They want to avoid the truth, because they know once they look at it, their consciences will no longer be at peace. That's why we will always need people who bravely speak up and others who bravely listen. Dr. Jiang is a great model. His story tells us that it's not that easy for the government to always be in control.

SH: The fact is, no matter how hard the government tries, it can never maintain complete control. That's why we have the opportunity to make a difference.

HP: It often seems that dissidents are lonely voices in the wilderness. But as Vaclav Havel observed, they are still useful. When the time is ripe, one ordinary person can disarm a whole division, and one last blow can make the dictatorship crumble. I've said before that when a dictatorship is in power, people can't imagine how it could ever collapse. But once the dictatorship has collapsed, people wonder how it ever lasted so long.

The dictatorship in communist countries is really as flimsy as a spider web. Everybody knows this, yet no one dares to poke a finger through it. But the day will arrive when everyone says "no" at the same time, and everyone will find out that they all are thinking the same way.

Translated by Wang Ai and Stacy Mosher

1. The term generally refers to the group of young filmmakers who graduated from the Beijing Film Institute in 1982. It includes Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuanghuang, Zhang Junzhao and Wu Ziniu.
2. The other is Chen Kaige, director of *Yellow Earth* (1984) and *The Big Parade* (1985), both films shot by Zhang Yimou, and an allegory celebrating the transcendental power of art, *Life on a String* (1992).
3. Beginning with *Red Sorghum* (1988), which won the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival, Zhang Yimou's subsequent films all received international artistic recognition. *Ju Dou* (1990) won the Luis Bunnuel Award at Cannes and the Golden Hugo Award for Best Film at Chicago, and was the first Chinese film nominated for an Oscar (for Best foreign Film). *Raise High the Red Lantern* (1991) received five prizes at the Venice Film Festival, including the Silver Lion Award. Zhang's work has been nominated three times for an Academy Award (*Ju Dou*, 1989; *Raise the Red Lantern*, 1991; *Hero*, 2002).
4. For example, Zhang Yimou served as one of the judges for the 1993 prestigious Berlin Film Festival and he is the subject of the first foreign documentary on a Chinese filmmaker (made by BBC). He was elected one of the vice presidents for the newly formed mainland filmmakers association. Xinhua Overseas News Service, January 17, 1993.