

Sketching A Dazzling Sun: A Film Review of *Maples* 勾勒耀眼的太阳：《枫》(1980)之评论

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“Are they heroes?”

“No!”

“Are they martyrs?”

“No!”

“Who are they?”

“They are history...a lesson of the history!”

Shortly after the end of Cultural Revolution in 1976, Deng Xiaoping launched the ‘clearing chaos and returning to normal’ (*boluan fanzheng* 拨乱反正) programme, which intended to rectify the social damage caused by waves of cultural and political rampages during the Mao era. Gradually rehabilitating millions of victims of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and Cultural Revolution, *boluan fanzheng* served as a crucial transition programme that established Deng’s leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the first step of opening China and economic reform. Corresponding to this rectification was a short period of creative freedom at the turn of the 1980s, when Chinese cultural industries had enjoyed a relative openness to political criticism, mainly towards the trauma and chaos brought by the Cultural Revolution. It was within this context that Chinese cinema produced a number of films that revisited the nation’s immediate past, such as *The Thrill of Life* (生活的颤音, dir. Teng Wenji 滕文骥 and Wu Tianming 吴天明, 1979), *Troubled Laughter* (苦恼人的笑, dir. Yang Yanjin 杨延晋 and Deng Yiming 邓逸民, 1979), *Evening Rain* (巴山夜雨, dir. Wu Yonggang 吴永刚 and Wu Yigong 吴贻弓, 1980), *A Hand Cuffed Passenger* (戴手铐的旅客, dir. Yu Yang 于洋, 1980), *Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (天云山传奇, dir. Xie Jin 谢晋, 1980), *Portrait of a Fanatic* (太阳和人/苦恋, dir. Peng Ning 彭宁, 1980), *Xu Mao and His Daughters* (许茂和他的女儿们, dir. Wang Yan 王炎, 1981), *On Narrow Street* (小街, dir. Yang Yanjin 杨延晋, 1981), and *Forget Me Not* (勿忘我, dir. Yu Yanfu 于彦夫, 1982). Collectively labelled as scar films (*shanghen dianying* 伤痕电影) and in some cases reflective films (*fansi dianying* 反思电影), these titles often tell a story of an individual’s personal endurance and sufferance as a political victim of the Anti-Rightist Campaign or Cultural Revolution.

Whereas the majority of these films focused on intellectuals, artists, and veteran cadres who were wronged and persecuted during the Mao era, Emei Film Studio’s *Maples* (枫, dir. Zhang Yi 张一, 1980) stands out as a rare case that directly portrays the violent conflicts between different factions of Red Guards and their associated supporters. The film’s protagonists are two young Red Guards, Lu Danfeng (Xu Feng 徐枫) and Li Honggang (Wang Erli 王尔利), who are in their late teens. Shortly after they finished their high school education, Lu and Li joined two opposing factions and became political rivals, despite that they are deeply in love with each other. Both believing they have followed the right track to fulfil the mission of Cultural Revolution and seeing their faction the true upholder of Mao’s revolutionary doctrine, Lu and Li fight against each other to seize power and refuse to surrender to the other side. The factional conflicts eventually escalate to a series of bloody warfare, which leads to Lu and Li’s tragic deaths.



A large portrait of Chairman Mao is hung at the centre stage at a *pidou* (denounce) assembly, screenshot from *The Maples*

Maples was an adaptation from a short story of same title written by Zheng Yi (郑一) who joined the Red Guards and created the story based on his own observation of factional conflicts during the early years of the Cultural Revolution (Zheng 2016). What made this film different from many other scar films is that it goes beyond the depiction of personal suffering or praising its protagonist's unreserved devotion to their motherland – China, the Communist Party, and

Mao's leadership – regardless of the hardship and persecution they had been through before and during the Cultural Revolution. Neither does it create a specific antagonist character to impersonate the 'evil' who takes advantage of China's political havoc. Frequently mentioned as pure, innocent, and beautiful youngsters, both Lu and Li are portrayed as human beings who are still caring for others rather than being demonised as credulous fanatics who crave for bloodshed violence. Whereas the depiction of intellectuals' suffering is kept to a minimum, the film's portrayal of violence concentrates on the conflict between the fractions of the Red Guards who fight for their beliefs.

Reflective Films and Censorship

The two terms scar films and reflective films are often used interchangeably for their shared narrative interests of a character's political trauma and emotional memory of the suffering. Yet, while scar films invoke the pattern of 'speaking-bitterness' (*suku* 诉苦) (Berry 1995, p.90), reflective films go further to probe the political root of such personal suffering during the Mao era. Unlike many scar films that have been celebrated as classic dramas in mainstream cinema in the 1980s, reflective films were more likely to be banned from public release because the officially sanctioned censorship has inclined to regard these films' inquiry one step too far. As such, reflective films were often criticised for undermining the CCP's claim of its achievement and contribution to the development of China's socialist society (see Zhang 2016, p.366; Chronical of Chinese Film Editorial Board 2006, p.585).

Maples has been widely believed to be a 'banned' film for telling a story that was and still is sensitive in Chinese cinema and mass media at large. Given the film touches upon a topic that the government is still reluctant to mention and does not want the general public to remember, it is understandable why the film has been rumoured as a 'banned' film. However, the fact is that the film was not banned at all when it was released in 1980. Although *Maples*' release initially encountered conservative criticism from the Sichuan provincial censorship committee, it was eventually submitted to the central censorship committee for further reviewing. After the film went through more than sixty pre-release

screenings to selected audiences in Beijing, a report of viewers' responses was collected and submitted to the Ministry of Culture. After that, the film was reviewed directly by then Vice Cultural Minister Situ Huimin (司徒慧敏) and Director of Film Administration Chen Bo (陈播), both of whom notably were persecuted during the previous decade of the Cultural Revolution. The film received positive comments and passed the central censorship for public distribution in September 1980 (Zhang 2016, p.366; Chronical of Chinese Film Editorial Board 2006, p.585). This thus raised a question why *Maples* is rumoured or perceived to be a 'banned' film afterwards?

Although *Maples*, as many other scar and reflective films produced at the turn of the 1980s, suggests that Lin Biao and Gang of Four were responsible for the disastrous violence between the fractions, the film also makes frequent references to Mao's leadership and his role in Cultural Revolution. From the dialogue (such as 'Chairman Mao's route', 'Chairman Mao's era', 'follow Chairman Mao', and 'remember Chairman Mao's favour') to the newsreel footage of the massive reception that Mao gave to Red Guards at Tiananmen Square, from the image of Mao's portrait hung over Tiananmen gate tower to the props of Little Red Book that contains quotations from Mao's speech, all of those references directed audiences' attention to the CCP's promotion of blind worship towards Mao as a God-like idol during the Cultural Revolution and its impact on the whole generation of youngsters. While the film does not have a conventional 'bad' guy who could be blamed for bringing the protagonists' sufferance, or who plays a surrogate role to cover up institutional fault of the political system, *Maples'* direct references to propaganda slogans, newsreel footage, and protagonists' frantic craze of Mao's revolutionary doctrine boldly probes the root behind the tragedy caused by the bloodshed among factions. Implying Mao's role in the Cultural Revolution, the film goes beyond the *suku* narrative of scar films.

However, what would have happened to the film's release status if it had been produced or submitted to the censors a few years (or even a few months) later? Although we probably would not be able to tell exactly what would have happened to this film, we can speculate about the outcome if we take a look at some other reflective films that also went beyond the narrative of sufferance endurance and raised questions about the systematic damage and crackdown on different voices of the Cultural Revolution. For instance, Changchun Film Studio produced *Portrait of a Fanatic* (太阳和人/苦恋, dir. Peng Ning 彭宁, 1980) in the same year as *Maples*. Despite *Portrait of a Fanatic's* script initially having passed Cultural Ministry's review and obtained production permission in June, the film encountered much criticism from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC) when it was submitted for censorship review in November 1980 and was requested to undergo further revisions in February 1981. Eventually the film received Party-endorsed public criticism in a number of mainstream newspapers for over a year and was officially banned from the public release for the reason that it stepped over the red line, implying Mao's responsibility rather than blaming the Gang of Four for the Cultural Revolution.¹ In a sense, *Portrait of a Fanatic's* narrative was deemed by the censors, including Deng Xiaoping, as out of line with the official account as later summarised and included in the CCP's *Decision on Several Historical Issues of the Party Since the Founding of People's Republic of China* (关于建国以来党的若干历史问题的决议) announced in 1981. This decision highlighted the Party's decision to continuously promote Maoism, insisting on Mao's contribution, prohibiting public challenge to the CCP's one-party leadership, and attributing the disastrous outcome of Cultural Revolution to Lin Biao and the Gang of Four.² *Portrait of a Fanatic's* fate not only illustrates that China's film censorship decisions often go beyond the Film Bureau or even the Cultural Ministry's administration, but also reveals the hierarchical relationship between the state's governing bodies when they come to deal with issues such as shaping political ideologies through controlling public access to certain film content. Based on

this observation, it is probably not entirely unreasonable to infer that films like *Maples* were very unlikely to receive a green light if they had been reviewed after the announcement of the *Decision*.

Moreover, it is important to note that a number of the 1990s' productions that touched upon Anti-Rightist Campaign and Cultural Revolution, such as Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮's *The Blue Kite* (蓝风筝, 1993) and Zhang Yimou 张艺谋's *To Live* (活着, 1994) are also banned from public release, even though both films only use these political movements as the background to ordinary people's experience. Instead of questioning the cause of such political chaos that leads to individual's tragic stories, both films only present the phenomenon and effect of various mass political movements. Unlike the two 90s' films that were co-produced between a Hong Kong film studio and a mainland state-owned studio, *Maples* and other 80s' production were entirely produced by a state-owned studio. Such a shift to some degree not only confirms that censorship has been gradually tightened up since 1981 but also reveals that the film projects that touch upon those sensitive topics have been gradually pushed out of the state production system as a way of shaping the official account of history.

***Zaichang* and Witnessing Historical Space**

The studio-produced *Maples* is particularly worth our attention for its *zaichang* (在场 on the spot, on site, in presence) narration, as it not only provides an alternative voice (or at least supplementary commentary) within the institutional filmmaking system on the forgotten aspects of the Cultural Revolution, but also stands as a witness to Chinese cinema's relationship with political censorship. Indeed, the visual and acoustic aspect of the film is rather poetic. Not only does the cinematography captures the contrast between the natural beauty of the scenery and the ruins left by the factional conflict, but the actors also deliver their lines as if performing a stage recital. The dramatisation of the visual element and performance is accompanied by melancholic music and lyrics that use a metaphor of maple leaves that are blown off and separated from its branches by wind to extract the suggestive questions without explicably mentioning the impact of political violence on an individual's fate and the lovers' separation. Such poetic expression and delivery might appear to be far away from portraying reality. Yet the film's poetic style does not conceal the filmmakers' effort of engaging with social reflection of the history through its content and its arrangement of a third-party's *zaichang* narrative.

Flashback is a popular filmic technique in both scar and reflective films to highlight the notion of memory. In *Maples*, a supporting character Wang (Tu Zhongru 涂中如) – a fine art teacher – carries such a role as a narrator of the past. The film starts with him taking his daughter when they visit the Red Guards' cemetery at a tomb-sweeping festival after a decade of Lu and Li's death, and finishes with the dialogues quoted at the beginning of this review. Thus, the main story is presented to audiences as if it is told by Wang to his daughter. As an artist, Wang was a politically marginalised figure during the Cultural Revolution. Carrying the memory of the past, Wang serves the role as a sympathetic observer of the entire event. Unlike many scar films' protagonists who recall their own past bitterness, Wang, as a wanderer or bystanders (*xiaoyao pai* 逍遥派), does not directly participate in the factional conflicts even though he lives through the heyday of frequent brutal fighting. As the film briefly mentions, while Wang could no longer teach during the Cultural Revolution, he continued to practice his craft of *xiesheng* (写生 sketch). Literally meaning 'writing life', *xiesheng* is probably more accurately understood as an art practice of painting on real subject and scenes.

Instead of creating a painting from imagination, *xiesheng* requires the artists to observe the scene closely and recreate an image of what they see with their own eyes. In this regard, Wang's artist identity and his *xiesheng* exercise serves as an agency of *zaichang* narrative that underpins the live evidence to document reality. Inviting audiences to reflect on the truth and real reasons that turned the two naïve and idealistic young people into deadly enemies, the



Xiesheng and *zaichang*, screenshot from *The Maples*

plot of Wang's memory and his *xiesheng* exercise to some extent brings the film's fictional story closer to a historical record of the Red Guards' experiences that might be barred from, or at least discouraged from, public contemplation in real life.

The film's emphasis of *zaichang* is also evidenced in its inclusion of newspaper headlines and adoption location filming. Despite being fiction, the film contains shots of real newspaper's front-page articles, revolutionary slogans, and headlines that led to the intellectual persecution during the Cultural Revolution. These shots map out the political context behind the Red Guards' frantic action of defending Mao's revolutionary doctrine. In addition, the main scenes of *Ma-*



Location filming and *zaichang*, screen shot from *The Maples*

ples were shot in Xichang at a college building, of which half was covered with numerous bullet holes and cracks and the other half had already been destroyed as a result of real-life factional conflicts (Li 2016, p.106). Taking the risk of filming at such dangerous building that was at the verge of collapse, the filmmakers used the location filming to capture the realness of the bloody factional conflict, not necessarily at the time when the real event was taking place, but at the location (i.e. on the spot) where the conflict happened in the real life. In this regard, the film's narrative footage also preserves the visual evidence of the historical relics of the Cultural Revolution that has been quickly marginalised,

refurbished, and even wiped out from the official account of the Cultural Revolution since 1981.

Notes

- 1 In July 1981, Deng openly criticised the *Portrait of a Fanatic*, which was followed by similar criticism from Hu Yaobang and Hu Qiaomu in August. For further detail, see Chronical of Chinese Film Editorial Board (2006, p.585).
- 2 In 1980, Deng Xiaoping was interviewed by Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci. In this interview, Deng openly expressed his view about Mao's reign, policies, and cult status as well as the Cultural Revolution. These views were consistent with the content that was publicised in the *Decisions* in June 1981. For further details, see Deng (1980).

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