

Codename Cougar: Politics or Entertainment?

Abstract This chapter interrogates Zhang Yimou's early, often overlooked, action thriller *Codename Cougar* (1987). It situates a textual analysis of the film within the industrial context of the late 1980s, an era that called for the development of "entertainment films" for Chinese audiences. Zhang and many of his Fifth-Generation peers re-orient their approach from making art to achieving commercial success. This reflects the rising power of the market, as well as the growing influence of imported popular culture. The chapter suggests that Zhang's pioneering though posturing early action film anticipates the director's later turn to the making of martial arts blockbusters.

Keywords Entertainment film · Foreign imports · Action thriller
Masculinity · Cross-Taiwan Strait relation

The camera offers a close-up shot of a footbridge beside the train station, then tilts down to reveal a middle-aged man in ragged clothes hiding in the shadow. He cautiously peers out from the corner. Cut to a big clock face that reads 7:33 am. The camera returns to the man, who now looks more nervous and expectant. A train is roaring past below the bridge.

This scene, producing an atmosphere of mystery and suspense, is not from an espionage film or an action thriller. It is from Zhang Yimou's *Coming Home* (归来), a 2014 artistically viable film (*wenyipian*) that tells the story of family reunion during and in the immediate aftermath of the

Cultural Revolution. The scene shows the film's protagonist escaping from a labour camp in order to have a brief get-together with his wife and daughter. His teenage daughter betrays him by informing a labour camp officer of her father's whereabouts. Zhang uses parallel editing in the subsequent scene to intensify suspense. While the father becomes more anxious, the mother is on a bus heading to the site, unaware that her daughter is cycling behind the vehicle. At the same time, the labour camp officer and his associates are rushing to the train station to capture the escapee. Such a highly dramatic moment is rarely seen in a family drama.

Could Zhang's use of suspense and thriller elements be testing the water for his forthcoming *Great Wall* (长城), a US–China monster thriller starring Matt Damon, who plays the eponymous hero of The Bourne Trilogy? But Zhang's interest in the thriller generic elements did not start with *Coming Home* or *Great Wall*. In 1988, 26 years before *Coming Home* and still early in his career, Zhang directed *Codename Cougar* (also known as *Operation Cougar* or *Puma Operation*; 代号美洲豹). This film is widely seen as an “alternative work” or cul-de-sac in Zhang's oeuvre; it has been overlooked by scholars, reviewers and the director himself. On multiple occasions, Zhang has explained that it was not his plan to make this film, and he agreed to direct it simply to repay a friend's favour (Li 1998: 29; Berry 2005: 125; Zhang 2010: 134).¹

This chapter revisits *Codename Cougar* because there is much to be learned from it—not as a great film to be rediscovered but as evidence of some major changes in the Chinese film industry. In the late 1970s a desire for “entertainment films” (娱乐片) had emerged, and during the 1980s the industry went through a radical shift from being politically centred to becoming commercially centred. This chapter argues that the shift of emphasis for Zhang and many of his Fifth-Generation colleagues from making art to making money reflects two broad changes, the rising power of the market in China and the influence of imported popular culture. We will closely read *Codename Cougar* as a pioneering but only partly successful action film that in many respects foreshadows the director's grandiose turn to martial arts blockbusters around the new millennium. Its most original aspect is its attempt to address two important but controversial political themes—terrorism and the relationship between Taiwan and mainland China—by using an action film as the vehicle.

For many years after 1949, the Chinese film industry had remained under the close control and censorship of the government. Films were

made to promote the standard ideology of the Communist Party and the state. Over those years, all feature films from the 19 state-operated studios were distributed by the China Film Corporation, a monopoly company that decided on the number of copies to be distributed nationally. A film's box-office revenues were shared between this corporation, the provincial distribution companies, the film studio that produced the film and the processing laboratory. On average, the film studio would receive about 15% of a film's overall revenue (Tian 2013: 4).

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, Chinese film, like the society at large, entered a New Era. The emancipation of mind and the open-door economic policy motivated Chinese people from many walks of life to critically re-think established conventions. Within the film industry, there was an increasing belief that film should not function purely as a political tool but should also serve as an entertainment vehicle. As a result, China's cinema screen became more colourful, literally as well as metaphorically. The percentage of films shaped mainly by entertainment elements grew, according to one survey, to 22, 10, 12 and 32% of the annual output between 1977 and 1980 (Zhang and Shi 2007: 291). Those less political and more intimate films, together with the "oldies" produced during the "seventeen-year" period before the Cultural Revolution, were received enthusiastically by local audiences. Cinema attendances rose from 13.2 billion in 1976 to 29.3 billion in 1979 (Zhang and Shi 2007: 293).

Entertainment films became even more conspicuous by the mid-to-late 1980s, replacing propaganda and art films to become the dominant form. In a 1986 round-table dialogue on entertainment films organized by the editorial office of *Contemporary Cinema*, a bi-monthly film journal based in Beijing, Chen Xihe noted that "in 1985, more entertainment films were produced than in the entire decade of the New Era—more, in fact, than since the founding of the [People's] Republic" (quoted in Semsel et al. 1993: 86). The surge reached its apogee in 1988, when over 60% of the annual output consisted of entertainment films. A generic breakdown shows that, out of the year's total of 152 films (including children's and opera movies), 28 were detective films, 24 costume drama/martial arts and 16 youth films. Film-making on earlier mainstream subjects lost momentum. The number of films on industry, agriculture, or revolutionary or military history dropped to 2, 12 and 8 titles respectively. Even these more conventional films incorporated some elements of entertainment, as indicated by their film titles. For example, the 12 rural films included *A Wild Mountain Inn* (孤岭野店, dir. Xiang Ling),

A Woman from the Desert (被吞噬的女子, dir. Fan Mingren) and *Ghost Fairy Valley* (鬼仙沟, dir. Xiao Guiyun); and the genre of revolutionary history included *Joyous Heroes* (欢乐英雄) and *Between Life and Death* (阴阳界), both of which were directed by the Fifth-Generation director Wu Ziniu (China Film Yearbook 1989: 202–211).

From the start this entertainment wave was accompanied by criticism and disapproval. When *Mysterious Buddha* (神秘的大佛, dir. Zhang Huaxun 1980), the first martial arts/action movie made in mainland China since 1949, was given a trial screening to film scholars and reviewers, it was condemned as having a “vulgar” taste, a “bizarre” story and a “fabricated” plot. The controversy over entertainment films became nation-wide. The editorial office of *Contemporary Cinema* invited scholars, critics, directors, screenwriters and administrators to address the topic, and the first three issues of the journal in 1987 contained energetic debate under the heading “Dialogues: Entertainment Films”. Many issues were discussed, from stylistic features to aesthetic functions, from entertainment “hooks” to generic codes. This debate also provided a chance for film industry practitioners to pour out their grievances. Zhang Huanxun complained that, after making *Mysterious Buddha*, he had been criticized for going after box-office profits, for presenting graphic horror on screen and for catering to the vulgar and unhealthy taste of the audience (*Contemporary Cinema* 1987: 22). Such censure was widespread. Zhang Junzhao was the director of *One and Eight* (一个和八个, 1983), a war film that, together with Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (黄土地, 1984), launched China New Wave cinema in the early 1980s; but in 1986 after he completed a costume martial arts drama, *The Lonely Murderer* (孤独的谋杀者), his art was said to have “degenerated”. When Tian Zhuangzhuang, another key Fifth-Generation director, who became internationally known for experimental films like *On the Hunting Ground* (猎场扎撒, 1984) and *Horse Thief* (盗马贼, 1986), made the more commercial feature *Rock Kids* (摇滚青年, 1988), critics described him as “disoriented”; and Teng Wenji, who built his reputation with art-house movies like *Awakening* (苏醒, 1980) and *At the Beach* (海滩, 1984) was accused of “shallowness” because he made the popular 1985 film *Hurricane Operation* (飓风行动).

In December 1988, the editorial office of *Contemporary Cinema* held a symposium on entertainment films “to further clarify their functions and social effects, and elucidate the positive and negative role of the craze for [such] entertainments in constructing the overall culture”

(Zhang 1989: 4). At this event, Chen Haosu, the editor-in-chief of the journal, who was also Vice-Minister of the Broadcasting, Film and Television Ministry in charge of the film business, delivered the opening speech:

Our lives have been deprived of entertainment. This is not a sign of a civilized society. The advancement of society and civilization requires entertainment. In the past, entertainment took a low status in people's lives because of economic deficiency and political turmoil. Now is the time to change this. A film can educate people and make them concerned [about society]. But this should not be the sole responsibility of film art. A monotonous over-emphasis on propaganda or art may lead us to underestimate entertainment and entertainment films. (quoted in Zhang 1989: 4)

Chen's speech struck the film industry like a lightning bolt, giving encouragement to people like Zhang Huaxun and engendering further debates among critics and reviewers. Film journals presented arguments pro and con. Scholars in favour of Chen's stance sought to expand and theorize his ideas. In "A response to the issue of the contemporary entertainment film" (1989), Shao Mujun called for a better understanding of audiences and a broader definition of entertainment. The article examined a number of key issues, including genre conventions and the negotiations between audiences, studios and the market (13–14). Jia Leilei discussed entertainment films as melodramas that aimed to maximize their commercial value by taking hold of the imagination of viewers and providing them with fantasy, escapism and pleasure (1989: 23). Jia listed five rules for making entertainment films: (1) The heroic protagonists should win the audience's identification and should not be ridiculed; (2) Characters should represent a polarization between good and evil; (3) The narrative should have a clear cause-and-effect logic; (4) Conflicts should be resolved through external factors; and (5) Technically their style should be conventional (28–31). To Li Yiming (1993a), the shift to producing entertainment films was nothing but "an inevitable outcome of cultural transformation and [the] market economy". Drawing on political, psychological, cultural and industrial perspectives, Li's lengthy article offered charts and tables to analyse the popularity of films (Li 1993b: 52–55). His essay concluded by pointing out that Chinese cinema was still no match for Hollywood, in terms of concepts, production, technology and the star system. He saw

a compromise, or temporary solution, in the creation of entertainment films with Chinese characteristics (61), although he did not specify what those characteristics were.

There were critics who did not agree with Chen Haosu's view. Mei Duo, a former editor-in-chief of the popular film magazine *Popular Cinema* and the influential compendium journal *Wenhui Monthly*, believed that the minister was unrealistic in trying to win young people back to the cinemas through entertainment films. This was because going all the way to meet the demands of the audience would only lead to further compromising the artistic and ideological quality of films (Shi 1988: 6). Rui Rui (1989) related the entertainment surge to the rise of "hooligan culture" (*liumang wenhua* 流氓文化) since both were anti-elite, anti-intellectual and anti-aesthetic. His article rejected entertainment films as disposable, immoral commodities, "superficially expressed and recklessly narrated" (5).

Alongside commodification and marketization, another factor that played a pivotal role in changing the look and function of Chinese films in the 1980s was the popularity of imported products, including films and television programmes. After 1949, Chinese society had been governed by a policy of relative isolation but this was abandoned with the arrival of the economic reforms. As Chinese society began to open up, overseas ideas and products began pouring in. Among those that arrived first were popular music and television drama series. In 1980 the telecast of two American television dramas scored a record high in audience ratings. The first was *Man from Atlantis* (1977–1978), a 13-episode science-fiction television series directed by Lee H. Katzin. With the screening of the show on China Central Television (CCTV) in May, its protagonist Mark Harris took hold of the imagination of Chinese viewers with his extraordinary abilities, superhuman strength and unusual sunglasses. It became a fashion for Chinese youth to wear sunglasses in the street, and such glasses were given the Chinese name *maikejing*, meaning 'Mark's glasses'. In October of the same year, CCTV began to broadcast *Garrison's Guerrillas*, a 26-episode ABC television series (1967–1968), which also garnered a cult following across the country, and motivated local television artists to produce China's first television drama series, the 9-episode *Eighteen Years in the Enemy's Camp* (敌营十八年, 1981).

The impact of imported products quickly expanded, including films, publications, music and costumes. Paul Clark notes that the majority of books sold in the 700 bookstores in Beijing in late 1988 "were

reportedly translations from Japanese, English and other foreign languages” (2012: 83). Throughout the decade, foreign films were dubbed into Chinese and introduced to Chinese audiences. Some of the most influential included: *Corazón salvaje* (*Wild at Heart*; dir. Tito Davison, 1968) and *Yesenia* (dir. Alfredo Crevenna, 1971) from Mexico; *Awara* (dir. Nasir Hussain, 1971) from India; *Notre-Dame de Paris* (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*; dir. Jean Delannoy, 1956), *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* (*The Combat of Monte Cristo*; dir. Claude Autant-Lara, 1961) and *Zorro* (dir. Duccio Tessari, 1975) from Italy and France; *Jane Eyre* (dir. Robert Stevenson, 1943) and *Tess* (dir. Roman Polansky, 1979) from Britain, and *Sandakan No. 8* (Ken Kumai, 1974), *Manhunt* (Junya Satō, 1976) and *Proof of the Man* (Seiichi Morimura, 1977) from Japan.

Over this period, it was not uncommon to see a Chinese entertainment film which borrowed stylistic and narrative effects from foreign melodramas, detective or suspense thrillers. Woman director Liu Guoquan’s *Desperate Songstress* (疯狂歌女, 1988), starring a popular female singer, was virtually a Chinese version of the Japanese *Proof of the Man*. As early as 1980, Guo Baochang, later known for directing and producing television melodramas, made *Mist over Fairy Peak* (神女峰的迷雾), which was one of the first post-1949 mainland Chinese films that featured an anti-hero as the central character. The movie portrayed a mother who attempted to cover up the death of her juvenile delinquent son in order to save her face as a high-profile official. Its melodramatic twists were also clearly inspired by *Proof of the Man*.

The nationwide release of a Hollywood low-budget film with a break-dancing theme caused a sensation in early 1988. When *Breakin’* (also known as *Breakdance: The Movie*, dir. Joel Silberg, 1984) first appeared on China’s big screens, it immediately took hold of the hearts of Chinese youth. Sixth-Generation director Jia Zhangke recalled that he had watched this Hollywood product “ten, twenty times, and learned all the [break-dance] moves from that movie” (Berry 2005: 195). That film, plus music albums by Michael Jackson (whose “Thriller” was introduced to his Chinese fans soon after its release in 1983), successfully created a rock ‘n’ roll dance craze, both on and off the screen (Clark 2012: 106). A quick glimpse at late 1980s entertainment films would show that many of them weaved into the narrative at least one dance scene. The dance hall was usually dimly lit by a coloured, mirror-covered ball rotating at the centre of the ceiling, under which young men and women were

performing breakdances (*piliwu* 霹雳舞), robotic (moonwalking) dances (*taikongwu* 太空舞) or flexi-dances (*rouzimu* 柔姿舞).

An examination of Zhang Yimou's *Codename Cougar* should be placed in this general context, since he was by no means alone in departing from an experimental art-house style which had brought him an international reputation. Besides Zhang Junzhao and Tian Zhuangzhuang mentioned earlier, other Fifth-Generation film-makers also plunged into this commercial "river without buoys".² In the same year as *Codename Cougar*, Huang Jianxin (*The Black Cannon Incident* 黑炮事件, 1985; *Dislocation* 错位, 1986) made *Samsara* (轮回); Hu Mei (*Army Nurse* 女儿楼, 1984) directed *A Gunman without Guns* (无枪枪手); Zhou Xiaowen (*In Their Prime* 他们正年轻, 1986) completed *The Price of Frenzy* (also known as *Obsession* 疯狂的代价); Wu Ziniu (*Secret Decree* 喋血黑谷, 1984; *Dove Tree* 鸽子树, 1985) completed *Joyous Heroes* and *Between Life and Death*. This collective rush to join the market reveals the power and speed of the commercial wave.

The thriller (惊险样式影片) was a particularly popular genre. According to a survey conducted across the country during the period March–July 1984, 60% of Chinese audiences in the 18–30 age group had a penchant for thrillers (Wu 1985: 22). As film studios relied increasingly on this genre, it attracted the attention of academia. The editorial office of *Film Art* and *Popular Film* held symposiums on thriller films in 1985 and 1988 respectively. Journal articles were published to defend thriller films (Yan 1985; Chang 1985, Situ 1985), to explore them (Xiao 1985; Meng 1985; Yu 1985), to rethink them (Cao 1988) and to analyse them (Zhang 1989). This genre in Chinese cinema was seen to encompass a number of subgenres, including anti-spy (反特片), underground conflict (地下斗争片), military espionage (军事惊险片), and detective stories (侦探片, or 推理片) (Meng 1988: 49). The common generic subject matter included pre-1949 underground conflicts and the post-1949 suppression of spies, bandits and other criminals (Cao 1988: 35). The subgenre of the detective thriller became especially prolific, with predictable ingredients in terms of plot (investigating crime, murder or the theft of state secrets), characters (police officer or criminal/spy) and themes (the victory of good over evil).

Codename Cougar is an action-thriller, though it has some distinctive features. Its story takes place within 24 h on 3 September (presumably in 1988, the year of its production). A small group of terrorists hijacks a private jet, with a Taiwanese political and

business leader on board, en route from Taipei to Seoul. The terrorists, belonging to the “Asia Black Special Operation Group” based in Taiwan, demand the release of Liu Tingjun, their group leader, from a Taiwanese prison. They want the plane to fly to Manila but they damage the cockpit controls during the hijacking, and the plane is forced to execute a crash landing in so-called “Zone 4” of mainland China. The response from Beijing is rapid, with the dispatch of a counter-terrorist unit to the site, led by Liang Zhuang. Meanwhile, a secret communication channel is established between Beijing and Taipei. The two sides of the Taiwan Strait, after 40 years of non-communication, agree to cooperate on this humanitarian and counter-terrorist mission. A special armed force from Taiwan, headed by Huang Jingru, arrives at “Zone 4” in a civilian “Cougar” helicopter as the “Cougar Operation”. The joint forces make multiple attempts to outwit the terrorists but all their schemes are thwarted. In retaliation, the terrorists begin to kill hostages. Eventually, the Taiwan administration agrees to release Liu Tingjun to the hijackers. Upon Liu’s arrival, the terrorists head with their hostages to a helicopter prepared for them to leave. Snipers open fire and swiftly wipe out the terrorists. Liu Tingjun kills the mainland’s Liang Zhuang before he is himself shot dead by Taiwan’s Huang Jingru. The film concludes with Huang and others leaving “Zone 4” in helicopters, lit by the first rays of dawn.

In world cinema since the 1960s, as Boggs and Pollard note: “[t]errorism has become a vital source of narratives, fantasies, and myths that contribute so much to highly entertaining cinema, with its international intrigue, exotic settings, graphic violence, and the putative conflict between good and evil” (2006: 335). Terrorism has, however, rarely been seen in Chinese films. Presumably for reasons of political correctness, the industry’s engagement with this “vital source” has been almost non-existent. *Codename Cougar* is pioneering in that respect, though the film failed to achieve either commercial or critical success. Interest in the film both from academia and from the general public was as scarce as the treatment of the theme itself in Chinese cinema. Major film journals like *Film Art* and *Contemporary Cinema* carried no reviews of the film. Only *Movie Review*, a tabloid film journal run by a media corporation in remote Guizhou province, published three short half-page comments (i.e. Wang 1989; Qiu 1989; Tian 1989).³ A search for *Codename Cougar* in Google or Baidu in English or Chinese produces surprisingly limited results.

Codename Cougar was Zhang's second film as director. His directorial debut *Red Sorghum* had won the Golden Bear Award at the 38th Berlin International Film Festival in 1988. One difference between the two films was the choice of period. Like most other entertainment films of the late 1980s, *Codename Cougar* takes place in the present. But Zhang's film does not exploit the usual ingredients of contemporary entertainment films such as bars, nightclubs, dance halls, beaches, bikinis or love affairs. The film's main setting, "Zone 4", is an area physically open but psychologically confined. The world beyond the "zone" serves only as a foil, represented through snapshot images.

Before *Codename Cougar*, Zhang was said to have achieved a series of "miracles" as cinematographer, actor and director (Wang 1998), but in filmic terms *Codename Cougar* was viewed as a disappointment. For example, Zhang Huijun, a former classmate and a fellow Fifth-Generation filmmaker, saw a number of flaws in the film's narrative and characterization (2010: 135). What had Zhang Yimou tried to achieve? In an interview in 1992, he offered this rationale for the film:

I was thinking about the lack of communication between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait for 40 years. If an unexpected event occurred that required cross-Strait communications and interactions, what would be the response from each side? ... But in reality, as I realized later, we cannot deal with the subject this way. It would become a political film. Making a political film in China is a difficult task and is subject to censorship from many departments...The existing film...is more commercialized. But it is not that commercial; so it is neither one thing nor another. (quoted in Chen 1995: 71)

The director's words offer useful background. From the very beginning, this was not going to be an experimental project in the tradition of New Wave cinema but a more commercial product that addressed contemporary issues. A distinctive aspect of the 1980s was a more relaxed relationship between Taiwan and mainland China. An atmosphere of militant and political hostility had hung over the Taiwan Strait since the Civil War between the Nationalists and the Communists ended in 1949. From the perspective of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Taiwan was a province occupied by the Nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), yet to be "liberated". All cross-Strait communications were prohibited for a period of more than three decades. But Zhang's father and two uncles

were graduates of the Nationalist Huangpu Military Academy, and all had served in the Nationalist army before 1949. His elder uncle went to Taiwan in 1948 and could not return to the Mainland until 1987. The family's reunion after 40 years' separation deeply impressed the director (Fang 2012: 135; Zhou 2015: 126). The uncle's return to his mainland relatives was made possible by some major political changes.

Soon after Chinese society opened its doors to the outside world in 1978, the CCP shifted its policies toward Taiwan from "liberation by force" to "reunification through peaceful means". This was first signalled in January 1979 when "An Open Letter to Taiwan Compatriots" was issued in the name of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. The letter "dropped the term 'liberation'. It appealed to the national sentiment of the people of Taiwan, expressed two hopes on the Taiwan issue, and suggested talks between the two sides to end the status of hostility" (Bo 2002: 5). To further elaborate the CCP's new policy toward Taiwan, Ye Jianying (叶剑英), the Chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, expressed nine principles concerning "the return of Taiwan to the motherland for the realization of peaceful reunification" in September 1981. Later known as "Ye's Nine Principles", they included a call for negotiations between the CCP and the KMT on an equal basis, and the establishment of "three links"—a direct air and shipping service, mail, and trade links. Ye's points were "the first systematic exposition of the CCP's new policies toward Taiwan" (Bo 2002: 7), later summed up by Deng Xiaoping (邓小平 in January 1982) as the policy of "one country, two systems". Although the initial response from Taiwan to the CCP's call for peaceful negotiations and building up of cross-strait links was a policy of "three noes"—no contact, no negotiation, and no compromise—Taipei did gradually relax its attitude towards mainland China. In January 1984, Taiwan residents were allowed to contact mainland Chinese for international cultural and artistic conferences and other events; and in July 1985 the restrictions on indirect trade between Taiwan and mainland China were removed. Two years later, in July 1987, the state of martial law—which had been active since 1949—was lifted. In November of the same year, Taiwan residents, with the exception of state functionaries and military personnel on active service, were allowed to visit family members and relatives on the mainland (Bo 2002: 13).⁴

In the words of a Chinese saying, "the duck knows first when the river water becomes warm in spring". As ice and snow were melting on

the political and military levels, artists from the two sides of the Strait were among the first citizens to interact with each other. In 1984, the Hong Kong Art Centre had two programmes of films from Taiwan and mainland China which were screened together. This was the first time films of the two territories were combined (Liang 1998: 333).⁵ In 1986, a large-scale symposium on the three New Wave cinemas emerging in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China was held in Taiwan to discuss the parallels and differences between them (Lin 1986).

People in Taiwan had come to know Zhang Yimou primarily through his reputation as a film artist.⁶

The relaxation of political tensions, the interactions between the film industries, the director's personal connections with Taiwan and the artist's sensibility to the market all made Zhang Yimou confident that *Codename Cougar* would be "an interesting and acceptable" project. In the commercial wave pouring through the Chinese film industry at that time, his film stood alone in not dealing with "pillows" (explicit sex-related scenes) or "fists" (martial arts), but instead tackled the themes of counter-terrorism and national reunification, which held profound implications. There was originality in the director's combination of narrative, thematic and stylistic elements. It was not until ten years later that South Korean filmmakers took a similar approach to explore the theme of their own national reunification in the highly influential action films *Shiri* (dir. Kang Je-gyu, 1999) and *Joint Security Area* (dir. Park Chan-wook, 2000).

The cross-Strait relationship had great potential to attract Chinese audiences, but it was still a sensitive and challenging subject for the cinema screen in the late 1980s. Zhang approached the subject cautiously. His film acknowledged the complexity of the issue through the words of the Taiwan business tycoon. At one point, when the terrorists become impatient with the delay in getting responses from the Taiwan authorities and threaten to kill hostages, the business leader delivers them a lesson: "The Communists and Nationalists have had no direct contact for so many years. How can the Communists inform Taipei of this? Even when they manage to do so, why should Taipei believe them? Even when Taipei believes them, the cooperation between the two sides will be conditional. All this takes time." In other respects, however, the film had little to say about the long-term separation. The only cross-Strait differences likely to be noticed by mainland viewers were the connotations of

the names of the two Army officers in command: Huang Jingru (黄敬儒) from Taiwan and Liang Zhuang (梁壮) from mainland China, meaning respectively “admiring Confucianism” and “majestic/strong”.

Instead, the film concentrates on the idea that “Taiwan is part of China”. Unfortunately it does not bring much subtlety to this theme. The motif is expressed through the ties of kinship (such as the Taiwan officer’s Beijing forebears) and by a symbolic use of cigarettes. After the deputy head of the mainland counter-terrorism army unit is killed while injecting gas into the cabin, his Taiwanese counterpart takes out a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of the dead man’s green uniform and later passes them on to his soldiers with the words: “These are good cigarettes from Yunnan. Those of you from Yunnan may have one.” Multiple hands are raised: “I’m from Yunnan!” “I’m also from Yunnan. I want one!” “I also want one!” In Chinese films and television dramas, cigarettes are frequently used to express homesickness. The nationalistic theme is also emphasised at the end of the film in the words of an upbeat theme song: “We say good-bye in the morning; our faces show suffering from yesterday.... [But] we wave our hands, we forget the suffering from yesterday.” This positive message is sung as the military helicopters take off at dawn and fly across the rising sun.

Codename Cougar is a generic hybrid, making visual and verbal references to documentary, political film and action thriller. The film strives for a documentary sense of immediacy with quasi-vérité techniques such as voice-over-narration and the use of still photographs. The images of high-ranking politicians and military officers at meetings are reminiscent of the conclave of generals at the beginning of Costa-Gavras’ *Z* (1970), a classic political thriller. As these still images change, attention is drawn, to borrow Derry’s description of the similar sequence in *Z*, to “their age, their ugly skin tones, their wrinkles, their moles”, their moustaches, and their baldness (1988: 115). Is Zhang similarly portraying the authority figures in a less than positive way? It is tempting to think so, but it is by no means certain since he was constrained by censorship, and the nature of this project obviously required him to tread carefully.

The entertainment offered by *Codename Cougar* comes largely from the action scenes. The film has augmented its visual effects by taking advantage of “what were then new techniques for staging gunfights, explosions, and blood bursts” (Chi 2007: 67). These “new techniques”

are most apparent in the scene where the plane is hijacked. Accompanied by the narrator's account of the context, a montage sequence chronicles the action with elliptical editing, de-centred framing, unusual angles and handheld camerawork. All those elements seem to foreshadow the suspense sequence 26 years later in Zhang's *Coming Home*.

Codename Cougar exploits other elements in seeking to increase its commercial interest. Robert Chi has argued in a discussion of the representation of Taiwan in mainland Chinese cinema that the film reflects Zhang's ambition to seek a global audience, since the film's plotline was situated "within a broad international context" (Chi 2007: 67), with scenes set in South Korea, the United States, Japan and Hong Kong, as well as Taiwan and mainland China. The filmmaker has also used soundtrack and casting to boost the film's appeal. The composer who scored *Codename Cougar* was 26-year-old Guo Feng. Guo had entered the awareness of Chinese music listeners in 1986 when his song "Fill the World with Love" (让世界充满爱) was performed by a hundred popular musicians at a televised concert to mark the International Year of Peace. The performance was a phenomenal success and gave the song a similar status to Michael Jackson's *We Are the World* or Taiwan rock godfather Luo Dayou's *A Better Tomorrow*.⁷ Fourth-Generation directors Teng Wenji and Weng Luming had then used the name of Guo's song as the title of a detective thriller they made in 1987. Guo became one of the country's most sought-after musicians. He scored at least two other films by Fifth-Generation directors at the time he was working for Zhang—Hu Mei's *A Gunman without Guns* (1988) and Zhou Xiaowen's *The Last Frenzy* (最后的疯狂, 1987).

One of the much talked-about aspects of Zhou's *The Last Frenzy* is the "hard body" masculinity of the male leading hero, played by actor Liu Xiaoning. Zhou's film, a somewhat Chinese blend of *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) and *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), has been seen as a significant breakthrough in the Chinese thriller genre (Meng 1988). The same actor, Liu Xiaoning, also appears in *Codename Cougar* as central protagonist (playing the role of Liang Zhuang). Through this figure, the film highlights Chinese indigenous machismo, and women play a much smaller part than in other films by Zhang. The film does include Gong Li, star of *Red Sorghum*, as a nurse who inadvertently helps the terrorists, but this is a minor role. The choice of Liu does match the casting of Jiang Wen as the bandit hero in *Red Sorghum*, Zhang's 1987 directorial debut; yet there is normally a complexity to Zhang's

treatment of machismo, as Wang noted when he described *Red Sorghum* as “a cinematic milestone that proposes a powerful Chinese version of masculinity as a means of cultural critique” (Wang 1991: 87).

At this time, the concept of masculinity had just become a topic of interest in Chinese popular and academic discussion. As a counter-response to the “tall, big and perfect” (高大全) figures representing the Maoist revolutionary ethos, Chinese films in the late 1970s had resumed the tradition of “ideal masculinity in pre-modern China”, such as the image of “the fragile scholar” (Song 2004) which portrayed men as bookish and pedantic (*shudaizi* 书呆子), or handsome but weak (*naiyou xiaosheng* 奶油小生). Chinese audiences were exposed to more physical versions of masculinity in imported films, such as *First Blood* (dir. Ted Kotcheff, 1982) and *Man Hunt* (aka *Kimi yo Funne no Kawa o Watare/When You Cross a River of Rage*; dir. Jun’ya Satô, 1976). The former was publicly released in China in 1986 and the film’s star, Sylvester Stallone, instantly became a household name. The latter was a Japanese commercial suspense thriller dubbed into Chinese and released into the local market in 1979, which played a particularly important role in stimulating a new Chinese interest in “masculinity”. The film features Japanese legendary actor Ken Takakura as the central protagonist Morioka, a Tokyo police prosecutor. At the start of the film, Morioka has been framed for rape and robbery, and he has to run for his life and attempt to clear his name. The masculine image of Ken Takakura in the film, a quiet man in a trench coat with collar up, fighting a one-man battle against both the police and the villains, had an enormous and lasting impact in reshaping the image of masculinity in Chinese popular culture (Pang 2012: 153).⁸ Following Takakura’s performance, Chinese screens were filled with male figures of a cold and gloomy appearance who believed in action more than words. Both Jiang Wen (star of *Red Sorghum*) and Liu Xiaoning were actors of this type.

In the same year that Zhang made *Codename Cougar*, on the other side of the Pacific Ocean John McTiernan directed *Die Hard* for Twentieth Century Fox. McTiernan’s film stars Bruce Willis as John McClane, a New York cop who comes to Los Angeles to visit his estranged wife and two daughters at Christmas time. When he is in the wife’s office building, he comes across a group of foreign terrorists who take her hostage along with other employees. McClane has to fight singlehandedly with the terrorists in order to save the hostages. The production of *Die Hard* came at a time when American society was just

emerging from the shadow of what Robert Bly called the “fall of masculinity” in the suburban post-war decades (Bly 1990).⁹ The film was a huge success, inspiring a number of spinoffs, hard-boiled action films such as *Under Siege* (dir. Andrew Davis, 1992), *Speed* (dir. Jan de Bont, 1994), *The Rock* (Michael Bay, 1996) and *Air Force One* (Wolfgang Peterson, 1997) (Dodds 2008: 242).

On a surface level, *Codename Cougar* and *Die Hard* share similarities of theme (counter-terrorism), spatial location (in an “enclosed” Zone 4 and the Nakatomi Plaza Building respectively), time scale (happening within 24 h), and characterization (emphasizing male characters and largely ignoring female ones). The chief terrorists in both films are neurotic but intelligent, well-educated and ruthless. Hans Gruber in *Die Hard* does not hesitate to show off his education (with wide reading habits and knowledge of international terrorist politics) and his tasteful lifestyle (such as a handmade, bespoke suit from London). Zheng Xianping in *Codename Cougar* is a Princeton graduate and a PhD in Biology from Taipei University and likes to listen to “a bit of music” when under pressure.

But *Codename Cougar* and *Die Hard* also display some conspicuous differences in the way their stories are developed. China’s greatest twentieth-century writer Lu Xun wrote in a poem over 80 years ago (1931) that “A man without emotion is not necessarily a true hero; those with a tender love for children can also be true men.” The message of Lu Xun’s poem, that the essence of a “true man” was not undermined by his association with domesticity, became surprisingly relevant to the male protagonists of Hollywood action films from the 1980s onwards. This coincided with a period of social change in the United States when feminists criticized male dominance and women were encouraged to be ambitious about careers. Hollywood came to see that films with more detailed relationships between male and female characters could be more effective in maintaining the involvement of both male and female viewers. As Susan Jeffords argues, in such films, “fathering became the vehicle for portraying masculine emotions, ethics, and commitments”, and for presenting “masculine characterizations” by blending “spectacular achievement” with “domestic triumph” (1994: 166). Mark Gallagher also points out that contemporary action film often revolves around a combination of action and domesticity, increasingly constructing “stories around threats to domesticity, marriage and the nuclear family. By presenting spectacular violence as the solution to domestic and familial

conflicts, the genre displays the ideological contradictions between idealized masculinity and familial responsibility under contemporary capitalism.” (2006: 45)

Die Hard combines a macho action narrative with a domestic situation. The film commences with John McClane in a family crisis. His wife has pursued a business career in the transnational Nakatomi trading company, and he blames her for having destroyed their marriage and alienated him from his daughters by serving the company rather than the family. After the terrorists take over the company’s building, his wife is taken hostage by the terrorists. McClane has to confront tensions from two worlds—the collective, public world and the private, personal world. In contrast, “familial conflicts” or “familial responsibility” are hardly addressed in *Codename Cougar*. Such elements were not required in Chinese films at the time probably because gender politics were not so much in the news. The only vague implication of a domestic background is when Liang Zhuang tells his Taiwan counterpart Huang Jingru that he will get married after the mission is completed. Throughout the film, man’s feelings and emotions remain focused on the collective conflict.

“Masculinity” in action films is “idealized” because it is represented as “spectacle” (Neale 1993), “performance” and “multiple masquerade” (Holmlund 1993), displaying the central male protagonist’s physicality and spiritual perseverance. In Richard Sparks’ words, the “qualities and virtues of masculinity” are defined by the celebration of the leading man’s “suffering and striving” (1996: 348). Although *Die Hard* also contains the obligatory relationship story, its commercial success, as Maurice Yacowar sees it, is still “primarily due to its breakneck action” (1989: 2). Yvonne Tasker thinks that “there’s not an inch of flab in its construction or a loose end in sight: a genuinely muscular movie” (1993: 61). The film was made in the tradition of classic Hollywood narrative cinema by showing how the central male protagonist overcomes difficulties and hardships in accomplishing his goals. For John McTiernan, what matters is the effective presentation of “spectacle”, ranging from events beyond the realm of everyday routines to technical effects that generate strong emotions such as excitement, shock, wonder and exhilaration (Purse 2011: 28). McClane saves Holly and they end up together, but the film’s huge box-office success worldwide is clearly derived from the extraordinary qualities of the action hero. In order to present masculinity in excess, the camera often focuses on his semi-naked body covered in blood and sweat.

If *Die Hard* is escapist and utopian, *Codename Cougar* is realistic and understated. *Codename Cougar* has Liang Zhuang and Huang Jingru as dual heroes dressed in army uniforms and Western-style suits respectively (to show their different backgrounds). The generic qualities of *Codename Cougar* as a hybrid of political film and action thriller offer great potential for conflicts that test masculine prowess to the limit. Those conflicts might have come not only from the battle with the terrorists but also from political frustration and hierarchical bureaucracy, from anti-establishment sentiment, and from cross-Strait differences as a result of the four decades of separation. Nevertheless, as Zhang implied in the interview quoted earlier, the film's political context had to be stripped down to a minimum because censorship ruled out the possibility of incorporating political criticism or questioning of bureaucracy. Chinese culture has traditionally endorsed collectivism more than individualism and films tend to portray central characters, both male and female, who are public heroes rather than anti-establishment loners. In ideological terms, the primary aim of *Codename Cougar* is to express the idea of "Taiwan as part of China", so it is natural that it should emphasize cooperation between the two territories rather than bureaucratic obstacles.

The political constraints meant that the generic requirements of *Codename Cougar* as an action film—such as “a propensity for spectacular physical action, a narrative structure involving fights, chases and explosions, and in addition to the deployment of state-of-the-art special effects, an emphasis in performance on athletic feats and stunts” (Neale 2000: 52)—could only be generated from the strategic and physical conflict with the terrorists. Zhang does not, however, develop such a conflict as tightly or vigorously as the best examples of the genre succeed in doing. *Codename Cougar* relies more on dialogue than action as each side (terrorism and counter-terrorism) attempts to outwit the other. To heighten the narrative, the terrorists frequently get the better of their opponents, but most of the time, the characters are waiting rather than initiating action. Some 14 min of screen time lapse between arrivals of the two central heroes at the siege, and there is little action in the interim. Liang Zhuang repeatedly explains why it is taking so long to get a response from the Taiwan administration. And this is not the only time he is forced to wait. After his deputy is killed, Liang is twice framed in a medium shot, sitting with rifle in hand and looking irritated. He never has a chance to use the gun and his most heroic endeavour is

volunteering to be a hostage. Even in this role, he is only able to perform a few angry stares, and his eventual death in attempting to save the Taiwanese nurse (played by Gong Li) under machine-gun fire is neither meaningful nor professional.¹⁰

The hijacking scene that commences the narrative forms the film's most spectacular moment. In contrast, the crash-landing of the plane at a deserted airport is not very gripping or chaotic. When Liang and the chief terrorist fail to negotiate an agreement, in the first instance the latter threatens to blow up the plane, but Liang simply offers the disdainful response: "Don't you forget that the plane is not ours." Throughout the film, violent action is limited and does not involve face-to-face confrontations, even in the final, climatic shoot-out. There are also narrative disappointments at the end of the film. After Liu Tingjun, the released head of the terrorist group, is strategically escorted to the site as bait, the terrorists take the hostages out of the cabin and cautiously move towards the helicopter prepared for them. Once their feet are on the ground, they are targeted by snipers crouching in the grass. A series of point-of-view close-up shots suggests that the snipers are having problems in securing their targets. Then the camera turns to Taiwan's Huang Jingru, who calls into headphones: "Attention, everyone! Listen to my order! ... Fire!" On his order, soldiers and snipers keep up a steady volley; all the terrorists are killed and all of the hostages are miraculously saved. In an interview conducted in 1993, Zhang was asked: "What do you think is the most important problem with Chinese film today?" He replied: "They are so fake (*xujia*), they are overdramatic, and the actors do not act like they are people living life but like they are playing out a story. The acting is forced and staged." (Gateward 2001: 45) Yet Zhang's attempt at an action film suffers from the same problems. When the hijacked plane is forced to land in "Zone 4", the location looks artificial—the plane stands in the middle of an area of grass-land surrounded by trees. There is no sign of fire or damage caused by the crash landing. The interior of the plane looks spotless, with the chief terrorist shown sitting in a swivel arm-chair in front of a table listening to music to alleviate the pressure he feels.

If "spectacle" is the "soul" of the action genre, and the key to achieving "spectacle" is (as Gallagher said) a "display" of how "the ideological contradictions between idealized masculinity and familial responsibility" are resolved through violence, then *Codename Cougar* lacks some key ingredients. There is no "familial responsibility" to add an extra

dimension; the “masculinity” is not “idealized”; and the violence is hardly “spectacular”. The film succeeds neither as action nor as drama, which is perhaps what the director means when he admits that it is “neither one thing nor another”. Yet those who regard the machismo of Hollywood heroes as excessive may see Zhang’s comparatively understated approach in a more positive light. His casting of Liu, a star highly popular for his male charisma, shows that Zhang was certainly interested in the rethinking of masculinity that was currently happening in the culture; but the fact that *Codename Cougar* falls short of the hard-boiled intensity provided by Hollywood action films shows that Zhang was not altogether ready to embrace the macho ideal. His interest in questioning traditional conceptions of gender would continue in his next films, *Judou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, involving a shift of focus to women characters.

Overall, *Codename Cougar* was an interesting and in some respects original attempt to adapt the genre of action film to the political situation of “Taiwan as part of China”. It also gave Zhang the experience of working within a more commercial environment. Discussing Zhang’s motivation in making the film, Chen Mo speculates that “The film provides the director a good chance to move from the margins to the centre, from history to the present, from a utopian portrayal of human spiritual mentality to realistic reflection of the politics of national reunification” (1995: 70). Had the film achieved these goals, the director’s creative career might have developed along a different route. But the constraints of censorship and the limitations in film-making experience, particularly in mastering a popular genre, produced a film that fell between two stools, being neither commercially nor critically successful. Nevertheless, Zhang learned some lessons from it, and *Codename Cougar* serves to illustrate the major shifts of interest that were occurring at this time in Chinese cinema.

NOTES

1. As Zhang Yimou’s confidence grew with success stories like *Judou*, *Raise the Red Lantern* and *To Live*, he became critical of excuses of this kind. In an interview in 1999, Zhang emphasized the importance of making use of current opportunities and the possibility of making a commercial film that had some unique features. He said: “in the history of [world] cinema, a director was sometimes forced to make a film purely for the

market or completely for the sake of a friend; but he made it meaningful” (Guo 1999: 10).

2. *River without Buoys* (*Meiyou hangbiao de heliu*, 没有航标的河流, 1983) is a film made by Wu Tianming, a leading Chinese Fourth-Generation director and a mentor of the Fifth-Generation directors. Wu’s 1983 film provides a criticism of the CCP for launching the Cultural Revolution, implying that Chinese people at the time lived an aimless life, like rafting down a river without buoys.
3. The Shanghai-based *Film Story Monthly* introduced *Codename Cougar* with a brief synopsis and six stills of the film (no. 3, 1989).
4. As a response to the shift of the government official policy, Chinese cinema began to represent Taiwan more favourably in such films as *Romance on Lushan Mountain* (庐山恋, dir. Huang Zumu, 1980), *Xi’an Incident* (西安事变, dir. Cheng Yin, 1981), *My Memories of Old Beijing* (城南旧事, dir. Wu Yigong, 1982), and *The Combat at Tai’erzhuang Village* (血战台儿庄, dir. Yang Guangyuan and Zhai Junjie, 1986).
5. This includes the selection and exhibition of some mainland Chinese and Taiwanese films together in international film festivals, such as Berlin, Venice, Nantes and London.
6. By the time Zhang worked on *Codename Cougar*, he had drawn the attention of some Taiwan film critics and industry practitioners by his work as cinematographer (*Yellow Earth*), as actor (*Old Well*, dir. Wu Tianming, 1986), and as director (*Red Sorghum*) (Chiao 1998: 36–38).
7. Another Chinese-language song that achieved mythical popularity during that period was *Heirs of the Dragon* (龙的传人), written and composed by Taiwan-based Hou Dejiang (Hau Dak-gin) in 1978. Hou performed the song at the 1985 China Central Television New Year Gala; and the song has since permeated countless Chinese households.
8. In 1986, the male Shanghai-based playwright Sha Yexin published *Looking for a Real Man* (寻找男子汉), a drama revolving around a woman protagonist’s disappointment and frustration in her quest to find a “real” man to be her future husband (Sha 1986). The performance of Sha’s play generated a nationwide “looking-for-real-men” phenomenon in Chinese society.
9. *Die Hard* also expresses concerns about Japanese economic superiority. In the 1980s the Japanese economy was booming, and the presence of Japanese companies in the USA generated concern: “Americans increasingly saw Japan as international rival” (Neuman 2001: 337). Japanese economic power is symbolized in the film by the Nakatomi Plaza Building where the film’s action scenes take place. And the President of the Nakatomi Trading, Joseph Takagi, is portrayed as a second-generation Japanese migrant who speaks impeccable English but still maintains a distinctive Japanese outlook.

10. From a certain political point of view—the need for a united front—Liang Zhuang's death, like that of his deputy in the earlier scene, can perhaps be read as mainland China's good-will willingness to sacrifice for Taiwan.

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Globalization and Contemporary Chinese Cinema

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