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**Mainstream Film Production in a Country on the Cusp of Change:
An Army Officer's View of Three Chinese Films of the Early 1980s Produced
by the August First Film Studio**

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Abstract

*In June 1984, the journal *Dianying pingjie* (Film Criticism) published a short article titled "An Open letter to the August First Film Studio", written by an army officer called Xu Gewei, in which he described *The Colourful Night*, *The Last Military Salute* and *Star of the Battleground*, three of the studio's recent productions, as mediocre, inept and crudely made. This paper will look at the three films in the context of the early 1980s, a period in the history of filmmaking in Communist China, which, in spite of being critical for the subsequent development of the Chinese film industry, still receives comparatively little attention. The paper will show how, although the films rely for the most part on out-moded techniques and narrative forms, there are moments that display an interest in new film techniques and reveal an understanding of the evolving world of China in the early 1980s.*

Keywords: *August First Film Studio, post-Mao cinema, mainstream filmmaking, film language, Four Modernisations, zoom.*

In June 1984, the journal *Dianying pingjie* 电影评介 (*Film Criticism*) published a short article titled "An Open Letter to the August First Film Studio", written by an army officer called Xu Gewei. Xu singled out three of the studio's recent productions for criticism, describing them as mediocre, inept and crudely made, particularly in comparison with the films being made at the time by other less hide-bound studios. He went on to implore the studio to stop producing work of inferior quality and instead make films that people would want to see. The three films were *The Colourful Night* (*Caise de ye* 彩色的夜; Zhang Yongshou, 1982), *The Last Military Salute* (*Zuihou yige junli* 最后一个军礼; Ren Pengyuan,

1982) and *Star of the Battleground* (*Zhandi zhixing* 战地之星; Wei Long, 1983). Xu Gewei's article adds to the debate about raising the quality of Chinese filmmaking that attracted the attention of critics and academics in the late 1970s and early 1980s, his words acting as a *cri-de-coeur* for someone to address what he, and others, saw as the inadequacies of the studio's output (Xu, 1984). While the works of the Fourth and, especially, the Fifth Generation filmmakers have received considerable critical attention, the mainstream productions that constituted the greatest part of the output of the Chinese film industry in the early 1980s have been largely ignored. Through an examination of Xu's letter and other contemporary material this article will address this gap, providing a deeper understanding of this crucial period in the development of Chinese film, at a time of great change across many areas of Chinese society.

The three films typify a kind of mainstream production that was the norm for China's film studios in the early 1980s. Nevertheless, close examination reveals that, while some of Xu's critical comments are justified, there are signs that the directors were starting to implement some of the more challenging filmmaking methods that had been appearing in certain Chinese films since the end of the 1970s. At the same time, as this paper will show, the films do not exist in a vacuum but reflect the political and social changes that were affecting China during the early years of the reform era. After a discussion of critical writing on the period, there will follow a brief history of the August First Film studio, prior to a more detailed consideration of filmmaking in the post-Mao period, and analysis of the three films listed by Xu Gewei. The analysis will be further supported by consideration of a range of articles published in what was a burgeoning field of film-related journals. Analysis of the content and cinematic style of the three films, all of which are available not just online but as DVDs, will reveal their continuing relevance in China, a country where the production line of patriotic war films, manifesting the very same patriotic values, never dries up and where many of the best-known films of the Maoist era have been recycled in the form of lengthy TV series.

Apart from a range of material about the three films taken from contemporary sources, I will draw on discussion of the film production of the early post-Mao period, when adaptations of works of *Scar Literature* explicitly addressed the traumas of the recent past, with blame generally directed firmly

towards the Gang of Four. The political dangers of going beyond the limits of what constituted acceptable criticism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) can be seen with the banning of Peng Ning's 1981 film *Unrequited Love* (*Kulian* 苦恋) which was criticised for expressing hostility towards Communism, thus exceeding the limits of the short-lived period of cultural liberalisation. The ensuing campaign against the film, discussed below, serves as a powerful indication of the continuing importance of film to the state.¹ It was around the same time that a wide-ranging debate was taking place on how to improve Chinese film: key texts from the debate written by figures such as Zhang Nuanxin, Li Tuo and Bai Jingcheng, also discussed below, revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the existing model of filmmaking.² Zhang Nuanxin, who began her own filmmaking career with *The Drive to Win* (*Sha'ou* 沙鸥; 1981), went on to make the critically acclaimed *Sacrificed Youth* (*Qingchunji* 青春祭; 1985): her work would later be classified along with other contemporaries such as Xie Fei and Wu Tianming as part of the Fourth Generation group of filmmakers.

The production of the three films listed by Xu Gewei occurred in the aftermath of the campaign against *Unrequited Love* at a time when film was very much at the heart of state cultural production and, with ownership of private television sets still uncommon, when it could still command huge audiences. Statistics cited by Zhang Yingjin show that audience figures around the end of the 1970s and early 1980s were at a record high: annual cinema attendance in 1984 was 25 billion, or around 70 million per day and production was increasing; 144 new feature films were released in 1984, more than double the figure of 67 in 1979. Zhang goes on to note other developments which reflected the rebirth of film in the post-Mao period, not just the opening of new studios and new cinemas, but the resumption of the Hundred Flowers Awards in 1980 and the appearance of new journals such as *Dangdai dianying* 当代电影 (*Modern Film*), first published in 1984 (Zhang, 2004: 227-228). These figures show one aspect of the changing film scene of the early 1980s: the films of the Fourth Generation

¹ Discussion of the post-Mao period in general, and scar films in particular, can be found in Clark (1987) and Zhang (2004).

² The translated texts can be found in Semsel et al. (1990).

directors, initially, and the Fifth Generation, subsequently, constitute a response to the perceived failings of the existing model of filmmaking.

The August First Film Studio

A brief summary of the development of the August First Film Studio up to the early 1980s will reveal its singular nature.³ Established on August 1, 1952, shortly after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and around the time when the film industry was being nationalised, the studio was part of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). After concentrating on educational and documentary films in its early years, the studio moved into the production of feature films with *Breaking through the Darkness before Dawn* (*Chongpo limingqian de heian* 冲破黎明前的黑暗; Liu Peiran, Wang Ping and Ding Li, 1956), before going on to make some of the most renowned films from the first seventeen years of Communist rule, including *The Five Heroes of Mt Langya* (*Langyashan wuzhuangshi* 狼牙山五壮士; Shi Wenchi, 1958), *Land Mine Warfare* (*Dileizhan* 地雷战; Wu Jianhai, Tang Yingqi, Xu Da, 1962), and *Tunnel Warfare* (*Didaozhan* 地道战; Ren Xudong, 1965).⁴ Foregrounding heroic Chinese workers, peasants and soldiers overcoming the dastardly deeds of a variety not just of Japanese or foreign imperial troops but also of Nationalist traitors, Chinese war films were at the core of cinematic production in the early years of the PRC and, by the mid 1960s, the August First Film Studio was a key player.

Although it did not entirely escape the enforced hiatus of the Cultural Revolution, August First was one of the first studios to restart the making of features, with the celebrated children's film *Sparkling Red Star* (*Shanshan de hongxing* 闪闪的红星; Li Jun and Li Ang, 1974). Production levels rose subsequently; a short article published in the journal *Film Art* (*Dianying yishu* 电影艺术) in 1982, recording an event held to mark the thirtieth anniversary of

³ August First was the date of the Nanchang Uprising of 1927, marking the founding of the People's Liberation Army, the military wing of the CCP.

⁴ For the early history of the August First Film Studio, see Huangfu (2005: 131-132) and Ding (1982).

the founding of the Studio, noted that it had produced a grand total of 1275 films since the 1950s. Among the names of those recorded as attending the event are not just major figures from the art world such as the renowned film critic Chen Huangmei, but also leading members of the political and military establishment, including Yang Shangkun, who was then Secretary General of the Military Commission, and Wei Guoqing, Director of the General Political Department. In a nation where ideologically reliable filmmaking was central to cultural production, the August First Film Studio was one of the leading studios (Anon, 1982).

Ding Jiao's celebratory piece marking the same anniversary emphasised the need to follow current policies such as the Four Modernisations and Deng Xiaoping's Four Cardinal Principles and made much play of the Studio's close connections with the PLA (Ding, 1982). The usefulness of these connections is evident in *The Colourful Night*, *The Last Military Salute* and *Star of the Battleground*, each of which engaged PLA units as extras, their names prominently listed in the opening or closing credits.⁵ A further indication of the central role of August First productions in Chinese filmmaking in the early 1980s can be seen in a list of recently released films published in *Film Criticism* in 1983, in which *The Last Military Salute* is the first name (Anon, 1983).

Filmmaking in Post-Mao China

By the early 1980s the August First Studio, like the rest of the film world, was adjusting to the realities of post-Mao China. Chris Berry has painstakingly chronicled the gradual shifts in the subject matter of films made from the late 1970s on, as, tentatively at first and then more boldly, the many problems of life in the PRC were addressed. Initially confined to the latter stages of the Cultural Revolution, the period represented in the films gradually shifted back in time, so that by 1980 Xie Jin's melodrama *The Legend of Tianyun Mountain* (*Tianyunshan chuanqi* 天云山传奇) traced the problems encountered by intellectuals and others as far as the Anti-Rightist campaign of the late 1950s

⁵ The credits for the films list the Chengdu troop for *The Colourful Night*, Units 81076 and 51118 for *Star of the Battleground* and Units 81131 and 57601 for *The Last Military Salute*.

(Berry, 2004).

The controversy that erupted over *Unrequited Love* (1980, aka *The Sun and the Man*), made by the Changchun studio, showed the continuing influence of conservative elements within the CCP when it came to the matter of the representation of recent Chinese history. Directed by Peng Ning from a script by Bai Hua, *Unrequited Love* was the story of a patriot who returned to China after 1949, only to be persecuted subsequently for his associations with western capitalist countries. A spate of articles which appeared over the course of 1981 in journals such as *Liberation Army Daily* and *Literary Gazette* criticised the filmmakers for straying too far from the accepted parameters of apportioning blame for the impact of the Cultural Revolution on the shoulders of the Gang of Four towards a more general suggestion that the CCP itself might be at fault. The film was never released. The line in the Literary and Art Workers Pact that emerged from a 1982 meeting of the Federation of Literary and Art Circles which read "Oppose Ultraindividualism, Liberalism, Factionalism and Sectarian Bias", spelled out all too clearly the limits of artistic freedom.⁶

While the subject matter may have been slowly evolving, stylistically progress had, on the whole, been even slower, with frustration at the style of so many films of the time provoking a series of articles from the end of the 1970s. Bai Jingcheng's "Throwing away the walking stick of drama", for example, published in *Film Art Reference* (*Dianying yishu cankao ziliao* 电影艺术参考资料) in 1979, looked at what he saw as the film world's attachment to theatrical modes of storytelling, suggesting that most Chinese films were too wordy and tied to a set of highly conventional dramatic, or perhaps more accurately, melodramatic formulae.⁷

In "The Modernisation of Film Language", also published in 1979, Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo cited *Early Spring in February* (*Zaochun eryue* 早春二月; Xie

⁶ For discussion of *Unrequited Love*, see Clark (1987: 167-172). Chris Berry (2004) translates the film's title as *Bitter Love*.

⁷ A translation of Bai Jingcheng's article can be found in Semsel (2004: 10-20). (Bai's given name is listed in Semsel as Jingsheng). See also Zhang (2004: 231, 235). For further coverage of the debate see Pickowicz (1989: 37-56), Li (2002) and Semsel et al. (1990).

Tieli, 1963) and *Stage Sisters* (*Wutai jiemei* 舞台姐妹; Xie Jin, 1964) as examples of filmmaking from a period when Chinese directors had attained a lofty level that reflected a national style. However, following the onset of the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent interference of Jiang Qing and others, Zhang and Li asserted that filmmaking had atrophied and the many innovations engulfing western filmmaking had passed China by. Instead of Bazinian long takes, Chinese film language remained stuck in the clichés of Socialist Realism, notably an over-reliance on the use of montage (Zhang and Li, 1990: 10-20). As recent scholarship has noted, politics also played a part in the deliberations of Zhang and Li, who saw the reform of filmmaking as part of the much larger project of the transformation of the superstructure of Chinese culture and society (Tweedie, 2013: 230). In addition, Jason McGrath has pointed out that Zhang and Li were also criticising the over-reliance on the part of filmmakers during both the Cultural Revolution and post Cultural Revolution periods, on the notion of revolutionary class struggle (McGrath, 2016: 226).

The two articles by Bai Jingcheng, and Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo, appeared in specialist film journals: He Kongzhou and Peng Ning's "What's Wrong with the Movies", in contrast, was published in the *People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日报) in January 1979. For He and Peng, too many of the films coming out of China were insipid. "Art must serve politics, but the ways in which art can serve politics are many.... If no one wants to watch them, how can we still talk of art serving politics?" He and Peng called for greater artistic freedom, insisting in particular on the necessity for the director, rather than the hierarchy of the film studio, to be placed at the centre of film production.⁸ It is worth noting that other film critics adopted a more cautionary tone. Writing in the CCP journal *Hongqi* 红旗 (*Red Flag*) in 1981, for example, Chen Bo noted: "The blind and indiscriminate copying of foreign artistic techniques is not only harmful to the future creativity of a national film art but is also detrimental to a genuine assimilation of useful artistic experience" (Chen, 1981: 29).

The articles from the late 1970s and early 1980s set off impassioned

⁸ He and Peng's article was subsequently reprinted in *Dianying yishu* under the title "Wenyi minzhu yu dianying yishu" (Artistic democracy and film art) (He & Peng, 1979: 28-33). For further discussion of this debate, see Clark (1984: 177-196).

discussion in Chinese film circles about the many inadequacies of the films made not just during the Maoist era but also in its aftermath. While undoubtedly related to the specific conditions of the era, this debate also highlighted long running issues about the relative merits of national, that is Chinese, artistic forms, and imported, Western, forms of cultural creativity. Above all, there were calls for a move away from simple reliance on plot and the adoption instead of some of the more cinematic aspects of filmmaking.⁹ While the works of the Fifth Generation directors were still some way off, students and teachers at the reopened Beijing Film Academy were watching the works of western auteurs from the 1950s onwards as well as previously banned Chinese films from the 1930s and pre-Cultural Revolution period.

In fact, the style of filmmaking was slowly starting to change from around the end of the 1970s. Among the most interesting of the films to emerge at this time were *Troubled Laughter* (*Kunaoren de xiao* 苦恼人的笑; Yang Yanjin, 1979), a satire about the travails of a Shanghai journalist in the last days of the Cultural Revolution, and *Xiao hua* 小花 (Little Flowers; Zhang Zheng, 1980), a melodrama which alternated between the present day and the Civil War of the 1940s. Yomi Braester has noted how Yang Yanjin used dreams, remembrances and fantasy to represent an individual's state of mind, while other contemporary filmmakers experimented with novel camera angles, hallucinations, and jittery editing (Braester, 2003: 136). *Xiao hua* had a huge impact on Chinese filmmakers, with Huang Jianxin, who went on to direct *Black Cannon Incident* (*Heipao shijian* 黑炮事件; 1985) and other works, writing admiringly of what he described as the film's rebellious qualities in terms of both content and style, adding that it was neither a straightforward educational film nor a documentary style record of a glorious military campaign (Huang, 1980: 15-20). Xie Fei, the noted Fourth Generation director, recorded his shock at seeing the film's juxtapositions of time and space, as well as the use of fast motion, flashbacks and still frames (Xie, 1984: 76-84). A more recent study also stressed the film's significance, noting the use of a non-linear plot as well as the innovatory editing, cutting across time and space, and sequences that alternated between colour and black and white (Gu, 2004: 9).

⁹ As mentioned above, translations relating to this debate are contained in Semsel et al. (1990). A selection of the original articles can be found in the second volume of Luo (2003).

Post-Mao Filmmaking August First-Style

Prior to discussion of their form and content, brief plot summaries of the three films discussed by Xu Gewei will be given.

The Last Military Salute, which lasts a compact 72 minutes, tells the story of Geng Zhi, a middle-aged man adjusting to the prospect of entering civilian life after being told that he is to be discharged from the army where he had been serving as a political instructor for the last thirteen years.¹⁰ For the first half hour of the film we see Geng's home life in the army base as he awaits his farewell journey, with a group of other demobilised soldiers, to a nearby town. The remainder of the film shows the physical journey away from the military base towards civilian life, a journey that is punctuated by a series of incidents, including having to deal with obstreperous colleagues and a bus carrying a group of schoolchildren that has broken down in the middle of an icy river: together, these tests of his resolve come to represent a metaphysical journey. By the end of the film he has accepted that he is no longer a soldier but firmly in the ranks of the ordinary people.

Set in the present day, *The Colourful Night* starts with a convoy of lorries about to set off from Chengdu on the hazardous journey to Tibet; Li Tao, one of the drivers, is told off for turning up late after spending time with his girlfriend, Li Li, the daughter of the convoy's deputy director. The next day, following an accident which results in the road being blocked, Li Tao is severely criticised by Li Li's father, his words upsetting the other drivers who feel he was too strict. In order to resolve the dispute, Captain Liu, one of the older members of the convoy, talks about his experiences during the Korean War, his selfless actions during this period of active service for the state in a time of national crisis showing the younger members of the group how individual needs should always come second to one's duty to the nation.

Star of the Battleground is set during the Korean War in 1952, at a time when peace negotiations are underway. Having been sent to the frontline because of

¹⁰ *The Colourful Night* is 78 minutes long, while *Star of the Battleground* is the longest of the three films at 90 minutes.

her ability to speak English, Bai Lu, a recent university graduate from Shanghai, broadcasts music and propaganda in Chinese and English to both Chinese and American soldiers. The film charts the conversion of the male commander of the unit to which she is assigned from out and out hostility to the very presence of a female soldier to gradual acceptance. At the same time, Bai Lu learns valuable life lessons about the need to obey rules and how to be part of a team. Of the three films discussed by Xu Gewei, *Star of the Battleground* is the only one set in wartime, rather than relying on flashbacks to present the scenes of fighting that would be expected of an August First film.

The Criticism of Xu Gewei and Others

Xu Gewei stressed that it was precisely because he was in the army that he was so keen for the August First Film Studio to produce good films, “Since the smashing of the Gang of Four and especially since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP in 1978 the Chinese film industry has been flourishing, producing a succession of outstanding movies. As a soldier myself, how I wish the August First Film Studio would make even better films; unfortunately, compared with the national film industry, the situation in the August First Film Studio today is disappointing” (Xu, 1984). He suggested the following reasons for the poor quality of the studio’s output. Firstly, the leaders of the studio were working in isolation, resulting in stale films. Secondly, the ideology of the creative personnel was not up to the mark, and they did not adopt a rigorous attitude. Thirdly, the studio’s leadership was weak, with individuals concerned only with avoiding political problems, rather than attempting to raise artistic standards. He pointed out the reforms taking place elsewhere in Chinese society, and wondered why the August First Film Studio remained indifferent to change. The only August First director to be praised for his work over the previous few years was Li Jun, director of *Anxious to Return* (*Guixin sijian* 归心似箭), a melodrama set in 1939 during the War of Resistance. Anyone watching a film like *The Colourful Night*, Xu commented, would consider it a waste of two hours (Xu, 1984).

In a different article, also from 1984, Bian Guoli was if anything even more scathing about *Star of the Battleground*. After acknowledging the fact that the

film should be praised for presenting the first cinematic depiction of a female participant on the frontline in the Korean War, Bian went on to state that the film suffered from two major imperfections: namely that it was untruthful and old-fashioned. Bian noted that Bai Lu's face remained clean and pure throughout the film and that she was able to carry on broadcasting even after the broadcasting station was hit by enemy fire. In addition, the depiction of the overall state of the war was unclear and there was no clear sign of the importance of the particular location to which Bai Lu is sent. Bian was particularly exercised by the hackneyed characters, all of whom he felt could be found in many other war films: the conservative, fiery commandant; the straightforward, happy political instructor; the revered head cook; the smart, courageous reporter. Bian wondered how audiences could become involved, given the actors' identikit expressions (Bian, 1984).

The New and the Old

Narrative is one obvious area of weakness in the three films. The plot of *The Colourful Night*, for example, relies extensively on the use of coincidence. Thus, Wang Jing, the journalist who has been sent to report on the convoy's trip to Tibet, turns out to have been a close friend of Li Li's mother during the Korean War, when they were both members of a performing troupe: this allows Wang to participate in the telling of the moral tale which offsets the film's central narrative. Narrative implausibility is also a striking feature of each film. Thus, in *Star of the Battleground*, for example, as Bai Lu heads for the frontline at the start of the film, she takes off her army cap, shakes out her hair and announces in English to her escort, "How gorgeous to see the battlefield!" She then picks a bunch of flowers that somehow survives the arduous journey to the army station, along with all the long-playing records that she is carrying with her. The foregrounding of an attractive young female actor here is a sign of the increasing glamorisation of film stars. Overall, although two Chinese soldiers do die in the course of the fighting, the film offers a remarkably anodyne vision of war, perhaps the most bizarre aspect being the complete lack of a single Korean soldier or civilian throughout: one could be forgiven for thinking that the war was simply Chinese against Americans. Stereotypes also persist. The peace-loving Chinese soldiers relax by learning English, while the American soldiers are

shown playing cards and drinking alcohol when they are off duty. There is even an unsubtle allusion to the racism found in American society when one of them is addressed by a fellow soldier as “Black Devil” (*hei gui* 黑鬼).



Figure 1. “How gorgeous to see the battlefield!” (*Star of the Battleground*).

A similarly unlikely picture is presented in *The Colourful Night*, notably in one surreal scene in which Korean natives are seen casually strolling round in national costume in the middle of an air-raid. Such implausibility attracted the attention of contemporary critics: Halalei describes a scene from *The Last Military Salute* in which a demobilised medical officer takes his doctor’s bag home, commenting “This would be like a typist taking a typewriter home or a soldier taking a gun home” (Halalei, 1984).



Figure 2. Korean civilians walking past PLA soldiers in *The Colourful Night*.

Where *Star of the Battleground* does cover new ground is in the depiction of gender and class. The newness of Bai Lu's position is indicated early in the film when, during her journey to the frontline, she and her male companion Niu Qiang encounter a group of soldiers passing the time by singing songs as they rest on a hillside. After expressing their surprise at seeing a female soldier, one of them says that fighting is like going on stage, before asking where Bai and Niu are going: she replies that they are heading for the big stage. The message is clear. While the male soldiers are idling, far away from the frontline, she is committed to serving the state wherever necessary. Similarly, one of the older Chinese officers, company commander Yang Fusheng, is at first opposed to the presence of a woman so close to the battlefield, a woman moreover who is a student and, thus, in his eyes, an intellectual.

Eventually, Bai Lu earns her spurs when the American officers, having been ordered to prevent her from broadcasting, attack the army post: she protects the record player by covering it with her body and hits an American soldier over the head with the handle of a gun. Company commander Yang is won over by her practical approach and accepts that while she may be an intellectual, she is certainly not aloof from the masses. The American soldiers also fall for Bai Lu's charms: seduced by the mellifluous tone of her homilies about the joys of family life, one of them says, "To be frank, I like the sound of her voice." Not only do her actions convince sceptical males that women can make a valuable contribution to the war effort, they also convert Yang Fusheng to the need to avoid rushing to judge individuals on the basis of their class background. At the time of the film's release, new generations of students were graduating from the universities that had reopened in the late 1970s: the example of what a female graduate from a middle-class background could offer serves to show how the representation of class struggle, once at the heart of Chinese cinema, was no longer mandatory.

Each of the three films examines the question of the relationship between an individual soldier's humanity and the responsibility of that soldier towards the state. The two films set in peace-time, *The Last Military Salute* and *The Colourful Night*, explicitly address the question of the application of military knowledge to problems found in civilian life. Soldiers are shown as being able to draw on their experiences of fighting real wars to find their own place in China and

inspire those living in a more peaceful age. *The Colourful Night* looks at the misunderstandings that arise between generations, and the need for everyone to work together, ending with brief homilies from Li Tao, the impetuous young man who has now learned his lesson and is prepared to accept the wisdom of the older generation acquired through experience on the frontline, and Wang Jing, who simply says that life is wonderful.

In *The Last Military Salute*, Geng Zhi must learn that he still has a role to perform, and that he should put the interests of the state above his personal wishes. Thus, prior to his departure from the military camp he overhears his superior discussing his own return to civilian life and a demobilised cook who has no desire to go to university and is happily preparing for his future as a pig farmer, each one willing to accept the need to play a part, however small, in the future development of the country. The incident involving the broken down bus is the acid test for the former soldiers as they head towards their new civilian lives. Initially, some of the men do not wish to help to push the bus because they are technically no longer in the army, but, after encouragement from Geng Zhi, they waded through the icy river to help. The film ends with Geng proudly giving his final salute. While he remains disappointed to be discharged, he has accepted the decision of the army to let him go. The smaller picture is Geng's future away from the army; the bigger picture is the importance to the Party and the nation of every individual participating in the successful modernisation of Chinese society.



Figure 3. Demobilised soldiers freeing the bus from the icy river in *The Last Military Salute*.

The Changing World of the Early 1980s

Particular aspects of life in China in the early 1980s feature prominently in the three films listed by Xu Gewei. In *The Last Military Salute*, for example, immediately after Geng Zhi's commanding officer stresses the need to implement the Four Modernisations, the lorry transporting him and the other soldiers away from the camp passes a group of huge chimneys belching out smoke. Far from representing a warning of the dangers of pollution, the chimneys symbolise the bright industrialised future that awaits the men. While there is no direct reference in the narrative of *The Colourful Night* to the Four Modernisations, the closing shot of a vast landscape filled with scores of lorries criss-crossing ziz-zag roads as they transport goods to Tibet is a striking image of the growing economic power of the nation.¹¹



Figure 4. Geng Zhi's view from the army lorry of the industrialisation of China in *The Last Military Salute*.

¹¹ Images of the Four Modernisations can be seen in other contemporary films, including Xie Jin's *The Herdsman* (*Mumaren* 牧马人; 1982), which contains many shots of the changing landscape of Beijing, and Wu Tianming's *Life* (*Rensheng* 人生; 1984), when a succession of factories, skyscrapers, motorways and aeroplanes flashes before the eyes of the protagonist Gao Jialin as he leafs through a propaganda magazine.

The importance for an individual's future of joining the CCP had been an issue for a long time, regularly featuring in films of the Maoist era. In *The Five Heroes of Mount Langya*, for example, the protagonists are seen discussing their applications for Party membership in the midst of fighting the Japanese soldiers. Party membership was not simply a great accolade but a public acknowledgement of an individual having the correct attributes to contribute to the well-being of the nation. In the course of the lengthy flashback section of *The Colourful Night* that takes place during the Korean War, after the deputy company commander accepts that he has made an error, the officer who arrested him asks whether he is a Party member: his response to the affirmative answer is to say, "Then you know that any time you fall down, you just have to get back up again." In the early 1980s, the desirability of becoming a member of the Party was still strong: as we shall see, the start of the Reform Era had brought an added twist.

Thus, in *The Last Military Salute*, several of the demobilised soldiers are keen to join the Party and there is much discussion of how best to go about this. In a flashback sequence, Wei Cheng, one of the younger soldiers, approaches Geng Zhi asking for support for his application: in return, Wei suggests, Geng's prospects for advancement in his new civilian life would be bolstered by the backing of Wei's mother, who has strong local connections. Known as the back-door method, the seeking of support for personal advancement was much debated during the early stages of economic reform in China. The upright and honest Geng Zhi is unwilling to take up the offer, and to underline the significance of his actions an additional counterpoint is served up through a short scene showing the unfussy, efficient actions of Xiao Ling, a young nurse who is also applying to join the Party, her impeccable behaviour providing a stark contrast with Wei Cheng's self-serving attitude. His impetuosity leads him to storming off from the rest of the group, thus causing a delay that forces them to camp out overnight: he eventually realises the selfishness of his actions when he hears Geng Zhi announcing his decision to join the local commune. An

analogous issue is raised in *The Colourful Night* where Li Li's father goes out of his way not to give preferential treatment to his daughter.¹²

Star of the Battleground alludes to other contemporaneous concerns. When Bai Lu plays western classical music to rouse the troops, Yang Fusheng complains that her choice of music has no "Chinese flavour" (*Zhongguo wei'er*) and when she sings "The Beautiful Meteor" he mutters to himself about the relevance of stars to life at the frontline, complaining that the song is just for intellectuals, and certainly isn't right for the army. He would prefer her to sing the PLA marching song "Xiangqian, xiangqian" (Advance! Advance!). She also plays an English language popular song, Bing Crosby's "I Can't Begin to Tell You", in an attempt to engender homesickness among the American troops. We hear early on that her parents were English teachers and she herself learned English at university, a sign not merely that education was no longer a dirty word, but also that the acquisition of foreign languages was once again considered to be a noble pursuit. This suggests a recognition of a growing interest in, and tolerance of, other cultures, particularly on the part of young people.¹³ A further indication of the evolving world of Chinese filmmaking is evident in scenes in *The Colourful Night* in which two of the truck drivers speak in Sichuan dialect. In a similar vein, Paul Clark noted the use of Shanghai dialect by minor characters in the 1983 film *Under the Bridge* (*Daqiao xiamian* 大桥下面). This reflected a change from the early years of the PRC, when Chinese film had served as a powerful medium for language standardisation, the ubiquity of Putonghua pushing regional or class accents to one side (Clark, 1987: 58, 178-179).

In her English-language broadcasts directed at the American troops, Bai Lu stresses the pointlessness of the war that they are fighting. This is picked up in a scene of an American soldier writing a letter home in which he repeats the

¹² Contemporary references to the back-door method can also be seen in two films from 1984, Xie Jin's *Garlands at the foot of the Mountain* (*Gaoshanxia de huahuan* 高山下的花环), in which the mother of a political instructor tries to pull strings to enable him to be withdrawn from the frontline, and Wu Tianming's (1984) *Life*.

¹³ Learning English features equally prominently in *Romance on Mount Lu* (*Lushanlian* 庐山恋; Huang Zumo, 1980), in which the protagonists repeatedly declaim the phrase "I love the morning of my motherland."

exact phrase that she used in her broadcast. The film concludes with yet one more iteration of the phrase, as well as the famous words of General Omar Bradley about the Korean War being the “wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy.”¹⁴ The bellicosity of the Cultural Revolution was in the past, the image that the PLA wished to present in the early 1980s was more peaceful.

Cinematic Style

Above all, though, it is the style of the films that indicates their provenance in the early 1980s, during the early stages of the reform of Chinese filmmaking. Familiar techniques include the use of voiceover, used to provide easily digestible chunks of exposition, often to the accompaniment of a montage sequence. At the start of *The Last Military Salute*, for example, Geng Zhi’s voice introduces his character and presents the film’s core dilemma, while in *Star of the Battleground*, we listen to Bai Lu reading out a letter that she is writing to her father in which she talks of her life at the battlefield, to a montage of brave soldiers. Montage also features in *The Last Military Salute*, when images of soldiers earnestly engaged in a variety of activities—from crossing a swollen river and sewing to reading reports—provide substance for Geng Zhi’s reflections on his military career.

In terms of cinematography, it is perhaps the overuse of the zoom that most clearly marks the films out as belonging to the early 1980s. Already familiar to audiences from the films of the last few years of the Cultural Revolution, the zoom was employed to foreground the resolve of the central hero or indicate serious consideration of a weighty matter. At worst, as in the case of Shui Hua’s ponderous adaptation of Lu Xun’s story “Regret for the Past” (*Shangshi* 伤逝; 1981), repeated use of this technique renders the film unwatchable.¹⁵ Thus, in

¹⁴ Bradley’s words are cited in Burton (1999: 13).

¹⁵ For more on the use of the zoom in Chinese films of the early to mid 1970s see Clark (2008: 139-140). This did not escape the attention of contemporary film commentators: see, for example, Shao Mujun’s article “Summary of Casual Thinking on Film Aesthetics Part IV”, originally published in *Film Art* in 1984, and translated in Semsel et al. (1990: 109-112).

The Last Military Salute, the camera moves slowly in on Geng Zhi's face whenever he is about to head off into a reverie about the past, and a zoom towards Bai Lu's face in *Star of the Battleground* indicates her determination to be a match for any male soldier. While the zoom is on the whole employed to signpost meaningful emotional moments by highlighting an individual's expression, there is an instance in *Star of the Battleground* when it is used slightly differently in order to emphasise the importance of the propaganda that is broadcast to the American soldiers. Alarmed by the impact of Bai Lu's messages on his homesick soldiers, the American commander orders the destruction of a loudspeaker located on a ridge above their base. The response from the Chinese side is for one of their soldiers to crawl across the battlefield with a replacement speaker, which he successfully installs, only to be struck down by an enemy bullet. Although he dies from his injuries, there is a victory for the bigger cause, as we see when the camera moves in on the speaker at the moment when Bai Lu's broadcast starts up once more.



Figure 5. Replacement of the damaged loudspeaker in *Star of the Battleground*.

A further common feature of the three films is the regular use of flashback, an indication of the widespread move away from the straightforward linear plots which had dominated the early years of PRC filmmaking. In *The Last Military Salute*, for example, Geng Zhi regularly muses on important moments from his many years in the army as part of the process of his readjustment to

civilian life, while almost the entire second half of *The Colourful Night* involves the two main protagonists, Captain Liu and the reporter Wang Jing, taking turns to present their memories of events from thirty years ago, the action shifting regularly from past to present and back again. At one point towards the end of the lengthy tale, there are even flashbacks within flashbacks, as short montage sequences show two of the leading protagonists in turn going over the most significant of the events we have just witnessed. This is similar to *Xiao Hua*, whose leading protagonists repeatedly look into the past after their memories have been stirred by a present-day encounter. The inner monologue is also employed: in the concluding scene of *The Colourful Night*, for example, as the convoy sets off again on its journey to Tibet, all the conflicts now resolved, we hear the inner thoughts of Wang Jing and Li Tao, their words guaranteeing that the message of mutual respect between older and younger generations is not forgotten. Thus, while the more innovative techniques and developments of narrative structure, called for by Zhang Nuanxin and others, and, by the early 1980s appearing in such works as *Troubled Laughter* and *Xiao hua*, are nowhere to be seen, the three filmmakers do display some evidence of adapting to the changing world.

Conclusion

By the early 1980s, the August First Film Studio had been at the forefront of the production of war-related films for almost thirty years and still relied to a large extent on the template, discussed above, that was established in pre-Cultural Revolution films such as *The Five Heroes of Mt Langya*, *Land Mine Warfare* and *Tunnel Warfare*. Because of the straitjacket that had been imposed on the film world from the early years of Communist rule, and to an even greater extent during the Cultural Revolution, the evolutionary development of film that had taken place in other countries had not taken place in the PRC. From the late 1970s, Bai Jingcheng and others had spelled out how the old-style film industry needed to adapt to what was fast becoming a very different world, sparking a debate that was already underway well before the films listed by Xu Gewei were released. Indeed, several years had already passed since the publication of Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo's seminal discussion of film language. Filmmakers now faced many challenges, in terms of handling not just the fallout from the

chaotic political and social aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, but also the very new social conditions engendered by the early stages of the era of economic reform.

However, while Zhang Nuanxin and the directors of films such as *Troubled Laughter* and *Xiao hua* were introducing new cinematic styles, many Chinese film directors of the early 1980s, as this paper has shown, were still hanging on to old ideas. This may be explained partly by a lack of interest on the part of the filmmakers in making films in a more up-to-date style, but it is worth noting that the furore over *Unrequited Love* would have served as a very strong reminder of the ongoing lack of artistic freedom. Nevertheless, the publication in *Dianying pingjie*, and other journals, of strongly worded criticism of August First productions reveals the depth of frustration many felt at the poor quality of films produced by such a prominent studio. As already noted, Xu Gewei stresses his own military credentials. The by-line for the article by Halalei, moreover, points out that the author is attached to an unnamed unit based in a military district in Gansu province. The message is clear: if even patriotic military professionals are dissatisfied with the output of the PLA's own film production unit, then the need for change was undeniable. In this regard, the three films cited by Xu Gewei, and referred to by others, stand as manifestations of the conservatism of those who were slow to adapt to the new world of China in the early 1980s.

In spite of this, as has been shown in this article, there are signs of the August First filmmakers moving away from the old ways of making films, and, instead, starting to embrace change. When discussing the content of the films, we have seen the acceptance of intellectuals, the presentation of regional accents, the prominence given to young female actors, as well as the move away from the portrayal of class struggle, and the allusions to prevailing feelings of dissatisfaction with the nascent corruption as manifested in the back-door method. When looking at cinematic techniques, while the zoom remains over-used, there are signs of progress in the use of non-linear narratives and interior monologues. The disapproval expressed by Xu Gewei and Bian Guoli relates above all to the clichéd plots and stereotypical characterisation, while the filmmakers' tentative steps towards modernisation are not recognised.

More recently, in a development almost certainly not envisaged by Xu Gewei, the three films he discussed belong to the category of Red Classics, models of revolutionary culture from earlier generations that are still widely marketed. At the same time, the films can be seen as precursors for the Main Melody films, described by Yu Hongmei as “uplifting films with didactic and pedagogical functions” that would soon come to form a central part of state-funded filmmaking in China.¹⁶ The production values may have been upgraded, and a new cohort of skilled filmmakers trained at the Beijing Film Academy and other institutions brought in to add artistic quality to the films, but the straightforward extolling of the virtues of the Communist state has remained constant. Indeed, although the August First Film Studio closed on February 1 2018, when, as part of a national restructuring of cultural production, it became a department of the new PLA Culture and Arts Centre, the production of war films continues to this day (Yu, 2018: 52).



Figure 6. The cover of the DVD version of *Star of the Battleground* categorises the film as an “Everlasting Classic Chinese War Film.”

¹⁶ The term “Main Melody” (*zhuxuanlü* 主旋律) was first used in 1987. See Yu (2013: 167).

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