

### ENCIRCLING THE CITY: PEASANT MIGRATION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE MEDIA

Rural China serves as a barometer of Chinese political and historical weather. The notion of rural China is rooted in the Chinese mentality and has navigated and shaped national policy making and individual's words and actions over China's long history. Chinese rural cinema occupied a dominant position in the screenscape of Mainland China since the People's Republic of China (PRC), or *New China*, was established in 1949. However, the rural theme no longer enjoyed its prominence in Chinese cinema in the last three decades of the 20th century. Since 1978, China has rapidly and vigorously shifted from a planned economy to a market economy. The economic revolution has brought about unprecedented changes. One of the changes is that market forces fractured the system that kept farmers pinned to their land for four decades. In the economic reform era, Chinese farmers became one of the vital forces in the construction of these changes with a scenario that veered towards a near total reconfiguration and reconstruction of a long history of pro-village ideology, and postulated a new pattern of the rural-urban dynamic in present day China. Enjoying this rare opportunity, farmers first expanded and relocated roadside or small-scale businesses to the city, and then continued to fill various gaps in the city job market as cinematically represented in the films discussed in this article. The migration of about 200 million farmers to the city is one of the most striking social phenomena today.<sup>1</sup> Forceful modernizations and irresistible globalization have blurred the line between the country and the city and renewed Chinese urban vitality and visibility. The extended urbanization of the rural area, on the one hand, brings about many positive changes in the country, but on the other hand, poses a new challenge to farmers—uprooting them from their farmland. *San nong wenti* (the issue of farmers, countryside, and agriculture), a rhetoric and expression concerning Chinese farmers, frequently becomes the headline of various news media in China. The dislocation of farmers and the rupture of their tradition have appeared as urgent

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<sup>1</sup> See *Zhongguo nongmin gong diaoyan baogao* (A research report on Chinese farmer migrant workers), compiled by The State Council Research Group. (Beijing: Zhongguo yanshi chubanshe, 2006), 2.

issues in the Chinese government's agenda and have also caught the full attention of scholars and experts in the field. For the first time since 1949, the Chinese government considered that finding solutions to the issues/problems of Chinese migrant farm workers was an urgent need for the realization of the concept of scientific development,<sup>2</sup> a necessary demand for constituting a socialist harmonious society, and a strategic mission in constructing a unique Chinese socialism.<sup>3</sup>

This article aims to conduct a survey of Chinese rural cinema under the theme of the uprooting of the peasantry. Briefly tracing the evolution of Chinese farmers' social and political status and the trajectory of their cinematic portrayals from the birth of New China till the present, the article outlines farmers' positions within the Chinese social and political diagrams and examines how the agenda of Chinese farmers is closely associated with the state's policy making. Along this line, the article examines the cinematic and media representations of the rural-urban embattlements and dialectics through a selection of acclaimed Chinese films and other media work regarding farmers in the period from the 1950s to the present. This study also tries to define the vagrant and vigilant positions of Chinese farmers in both urban and cinematic spaces of contemporary China and to respond to the following three questions: How did the political and historical dimensions circumscribe the cinematic configuration of both urban and rural spaces in the films in the period from 1950s to today? How has the act of farmers' encircling of the city enriched and enlarged the film genres of both Chinese urban cinema and rural cinema in terms of cinematic aesthetics and meaning production? How did Chinese filmmakers understand and present changing operations and ideologies on the rural-urban paradox and the local-global paradigm depicted in the studied visual materials?

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<sup>2</sup> "The concept of scientific development" is a new political term. It refers to the current official guiding socioeconomic ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) incorporating sustainable development, social welfare, a person-centered society, increased democracy, and ultimately, the creation of a harmonious society.

<sup>3</sup> The Chinese government issued a number of policies regarding Chinese migrant farm workers in the city in the first decade of the 21st century. Following these policies, a series of books and articles were published either by noted scholars or by government-based writing groups. Among these publications, *A research report on Chinese farmer migrant workers*, published in 2006, stood out and stunned the reading public in China. The three principles mentioned in my article are my generalization of the points in the book. For more details, see Wei Liqun, "Zhengque renshi he gaodu zhongshi jie jue nongmin gong wenti" (Correct recognition and high consideration of solving the problems of farmer labors). In *Zhongguo nongmin gong diaoyan baogao* (*A research report on Chinese farmer migrant workers*), compiled by The State Council Research Group. (Beijing: Zhongguo yanshi chubanshe, 2006), 1-11.

## FARMER MOBILITY CAUGHT IN-BETWEEN

The rural-urban dichotomy has a long history in China. As some Chinese historians pointed out, the narrative of a peasant-based Chinese revolution has dominated the history of modern China. The idea of a pro-village revolution throughout most of the 20th century has tended to relegate urban history to a subordinate role in the grand narrative of modern China.<sup>4</sup> However, farmers, who had been one of the core forces and resources of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the revolutionary era before the establishment of the people's Republic of China, and one of the major groups that helped to construct New China, had not been able to find their own positions in the urban space until the 21st century.

In the later 1940s and early 1950s, farmers were given land in recognition of their support for the CCP. But they never received titles and, by 1958, all their productive property and all their land had been collectivized without any compensation. From the 1950s to the early 1970s, the government's rural-urban policies and regulations banned farmers from entering the city. The largely glorified heroism that had been ascribed to Chinese farmers in the by-gone revolutionary age gradually faded out in the late 1950s, and their roles had been much more limited, functioning solely within the territory of the countryside, although farmers had been politically elevated as so-called educators to the sent-down youth during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. One of the primary reasons for these phenomena is that the Chinese state leaders shifted their attention from the country to the city after 1949, prioritizing the need for building the state economy.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in the late 1950s, the first generation of Chinese leaders imposed a *people's commune* system (*renmin gongshe*)<sup>6</sup> on agriculture and farmers to expand food production at a rate greater than population growth. The celebration of the people's commune had been extended to the urban space and formed a symbolic act of farmers' encir-

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<sup>4</sup> The detailed reference can be found in *Remaking the Chinese City: Modernity and National Identity, 1900-1950*. Edited by Joseph W. Esherick (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Mao Zedong, the first leader of the Chinese Communist Party, issued his directive for shifting the Party's focus from the rural to the city at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in March 5, 1949. Mao stated that the CCP focused on the rural during the period from 1927 to 1949, and gathered the CCP's power in the rural, encircling the city with the rural, and finally occupying the city. Mao announced that this phase was over and the new phase should let the city lead the rural. See Mao Zedong, "A Report at the Second Plenary Session of the Seventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in March 5, 1949." In *Selected Works of Mao Zedong Vol. 4*. (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1966), 1365.

cling the city since 1958. Following the establishments of the rural people's commune, the *urban people's communes* (*chengshi renmin gongshe*) emerged in the late 1950s. By July 1960, there were 1,064 urban people's communes established in 190 big cities in the PRC. The CCP believed that the urban people's commune had three advantages. First, it was the fundamental form and organization of socialism and the best way to advance China from a socialist society to a communist one. Second, it reflected the characteristic of the Chinese revolutions and developments, which were moving from the rural to the urban. Third, it had shown many advantages for building up a socialist China.<sup>7</sup> The urban people's communes were under the leadership of the CCP-centered *neighborhood committee* (*Juwei*) in the city, which was normally composed of retired senior people including government officials, workers, housewives, and migrant farmers.

A group of films produced in the period from 1949 to 1966 exhibited farmers' roles and their anticipated influences in New China. For instance, *Five Golden Flowers* (*Wuduo jinhua*, dir. Wang Jiayi, 1959) presents a romantic comedy of one Chinese ethnic young man's encountering of five Chinese ethnic girls who have the common name of Jinhua (golden flower) and their enthusiastic engagements in the People's commune, *Li Shuangshuang* (Li Shuangshuang, dir. Lu Ren, 1962)<sup>8</sup> displays a farmer couple's tears and laughter while participating in collective farming in the People's commune, and *The Young People of Our Village I & II* (*Women cunli de nianqingren*, dir. Su Li, 1959 & 1963)<sup>9</sup> showcases a group of young villagers who try to solve the irrigation problem for their commune. One of the representative films of the rural genre of the

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<sup>6</sup> The term the *people's commune* was coined by Chen Boda, one of the Chinese state leaders of New China, and appeared in his article "Completely new society, completely new people" (*Quanxin de shehui, quanxin de ren*) published in the top official magazine, *Red Flag* (*Hongqi*). no. 3 (1958). In his article, Chen Boda stated that the people's commune was an organization, which perfectly combined agricultural and industrial cooperations. This system lasted for about 26 years, from 1958 to 1984. The first *people's commune* was established in July 1st, 1958 in Henan Province in the PRC. The people's commune system transformed a private and individual-based agricultural ownership into a cooperative-based agricultural ownership. The people's commune was a multipurpose organization for the direction of local government and the management of all economic and social activity. Each commune was organized into progressively larger units: production teams, production brigades, and the commune itself. As a basic unit of China's socialist system, the commune reflected the often-abrupt changes in political and economic policy after 1949.

<sup>7</sup> For more information, see Li Duanxiang, "Lun Chengshi renmin gongshehua yundong de lishi biranxing" (On the historical inevitability of the urban people's commune movement). In *Dangdai shijie yu shehui zhuyi* (*Contemporary world and socialism*). no. 2 (2007): 131-134.

<sup>8</sup> See Tang Xiaobing, "Rural Women and Social Change in New China Cinema: From *Li Shuangshuang* to *Ermo*." In *Position: East Asia Cultural Critique*. 14, no. 3 (Winter, 2003): 647-674, and Chris Berry, "Sexual Difference and the Viewing Subject in *Li Shuangshuang* and *The In-Laws*. In *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, edited by Chris Berry. (London: BFI Publishing, 1991), 30-39.

<sup>9</sup> For more information of Chinese cinema 1949-1978, see Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics since 1949*. (New York & Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.)

period is *The Spring Is Always Colorful* (Wanziqianhong zongshi chun). Helmed by noted film director Shen Fu and produced by well-known Shanghai Film Studio in 1959, *The Spring Is Always Colorful* portrays a group of ordinary housewives who have newly migrated to the city from the countryside to accompany their husbands who became employees of urban factories. Unwilling to be jobless housewives in the city, they enthusiastically gather themselves and provide sewing, daycare, and other daily routine services to the local community in their rural manner. The film illustrates well the model and real practice of the urban people's commune under the watch of the neighborhood committee. Although *The Spring Is Always Colorful* is generally categorized as a city film showcasing Chinese women's participation in the early stage of socialist construction and the temporal structure of the film indicates a political reaction to the doctrine of "encircling the city," the formal representation of the rural elements in the film, including the rural women and their beloved *commune*, a special metaphor of Chinese rural life, through choices of cinematography, a bright color palette, montage, and close shots of the rosy faces of the rural women characters, all seem to exhibit and encourage a nostalgic response to the pro-village ideology. The disjuncture between the pictorial aesthetics and thematic narrative of the rural in the city bespeaks both the social and cinematic factors that farmers' mobility and its corresponding representations are caught between. Such *caught-in-between* illustration problematizes the viewer's experience of "encircling the city." The filmic depiction of these rural housewives did not mean to showcase their dislocations from the rural spaces and their frustrations arising from the urban challenge they encountered. Rather, the film represented them as a much needed labor force that effectively fulfilled the call of the CCP to shift from the country to the city and participate in the socialist construction. Instead, what *The Spring Is Always Colorful* praised and confirmed was not about farmers' migrations in particular but farmers' participation in building up a New China in general, just as they were metaphorically glorified as colorful flowers blooming in the Spring of New China. In the end of the film, a rapid forward zoom on a well-framed photo of all the principal women characters smiling like blooming flowers jump cuts to a signature scenery of metropolitan Shanghai with two gothic and byzantine architectural structures in the center of the screen. The two Western structures signify the past colonial history of Shanghai. They are the tokens of *bourgeois elements* (*zichan jieji yinsu*). Before the establishment of New China, to be more precise, the urban people's commune, the city had been long criticized and repressed for its bourgeois features and decadences. The juxtaposition of the rural female images and the two colonial signifiers symbolically declares that the country is encircling the city, but who or what was in charge or praised for this encirclement remains unclear in the film. The reasons for such an ambiguous cinematic

representation of farmer migration were multiple. First, openly praising labor mobility in the film would conflict with the government's restriction on floating populations. Under the planned economic system, people could not move from place to place as they wished. On the contrary, "forced migration or population floating happened sometimes due to particular political purposes."<sup>10</sup> Second, an obvious confirmation of farmers' active and leading roles in the urban settings would de-construct the new principle of letting the city lead the rural which Mao Zedong set for New China. Third, there were no clear criteria from the government for filmmakers, writers, and any cultural workers on how to configure new types of farmers' images, how to evaluate their values in a new social environment, and how to enliven their by-gone heroism in the urban-based social space, through cinema, literary, and artistic representations in general under the newly issued and enforced pro-city policy and an as yet to-be-formed urban ideology.

## RUNAWAY FARMERS AND THE ECONOMIC REFORM

The second generation of Chinese leadership, signified by Deng Xiaoping, an eight-time cover figure on *Time* magazine,<sup>11</sup> initiated China's astonishing economic reform in 1978 and steered China away from its Leninist and Maoist organizational straitjacket into a wider world of technological growth and international trade. He introduced a new economic dynamism with his striking phrase that it did not matter whether a cat was black or white, as long as it could catch mice, it is a good cat. Deng also identified other areas including the education and military systems where changes had to be made for China to become a world power. The economic revolution changed the planned economy to a market economy and loosened rural and urban ties. Thus Chinese farmers started crossing the boundary between the city and the country with relative freedom, becoming the primary force behind the enormous success of the reforms in the early years. Chinese filmmakers and writers immediately revealed their corresponding reactions to farmer migrations and labor mobility in this economic transformation in their films and literary works. However, while treating farmers' migration or "runaway" (*chuzou*)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cai Fang, Du Yang and Wang Meiyuan, "Migration and labor mobility in China." *Human development research paper 2009/09*. (United Nations Development Program, April 2009), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Deng Xiaoping had appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine for eight times during the years of 1976-1997. See *Time*, January 19, 1976; December 25, 1978; January 1st, 1979; February 5, 1979; September 26, 1983; September 23, 1985; January 6 1986; and March 3, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> See Jia, Leilei, "Zhongguo nongcun dianying zhong 'chuzou zhuti' de shanbian" (The changing themes of 'runaway' in Chinese rural cinema). *Dangdai dianying*, 149, no. 8 (2008): 13-17.

from their homeland, many filmmakers neither posted their criticisms nor extended their praise to the migration movement of Chinese farm workers in the early stage of the reform era. Many filmmakers were uncertain in light of this unprecedented economic reform as to how to politically define farmers' runaway from their homeland and the agricultural geography on screen. The following films, to a certain extent, reveal ambiguous attitudes toward Chinese farmer migration: Wang Xinyu's 1982 *Chen Huansheng Entering the City* (Chen Huansheng shangcheng); Hu Bingliu's 1983 *Country Couple* (Xiang yin); Wu Tianming's 1987 *Old Well* (Laojing); and Zhou Xiaowen's 1994 *Ermo* (Ermo), to name just a few.<sup>13</sup> All these films illustrate farmers' encounters with the city and their anxieties and yearning for the city, and share a common theme that the city is no longer a taboo. The utopia of urban abundance and modernization become a persistent feature in the early cinema of the reform era.

One of the early films reflecting the runaway theme, *Life* (Rensheng), directed by Wu Tianming and made in Xi'an Film Studio in 1984, exemplifies such uncertainty and contradiction. Adapted from the novel of the same title by Mao Dun Literature Award-winning author Lu Yao,<sup>14</sup> *Life* is a heart-tugging love story and a tale of a young village man's ups and downs associated with his city dream. A young rural schoolteacher, Gao Jialin, has lost his teaching position to another young man whose father has political clout. The defeat forces him to resume his role as a farmer and assist his elderly father with farm work. His misfortune though finds the sympathy and heart of a beautiful and caring village girl. Gao Jialin is moved by her pure love and dates the girl while he continues to maneuver to run away to the city for better living and social conditions and where he can pursue his dream of becoming a writer. No sooner has he landed a job in the city, then he abandons the village girl for a city woman. In the end, Gao Jialin breaks up with the city girlfriend when he is forced to withdraw from his city job due to political reasons, and the village girl has married another farmer upon Gao's second return to the rural home.

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<sup>13</sup> For more information about these films, see Shell Kraicer, "Rediscovering the Fourth Generation." *Cinema Scope*, no. 33 (Winter, 2008): 29-32; Ma Ning, "Signs of Angst and Hope: History and Melodrama in Chinese Fifth-generation Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 44, no. 2 (Summer, 2003): 183-199; Ma Ning, "New Chinese Cinema: A Critical Account of the Fifth Generation." *Cineaste*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (1990): 32; Jerome Silbergeld, *China Into Film*. London: Reaktion Books, 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Sponsored by the Chinese Writers' Association, the Mao Dun Literature Award is the most prestigious literature prize for writers in China. The award was created by the will of Mao Dun, who was a prominent Chinese writer of the 20th century, with his donation of 250,000RMB (about \$42,000) to encourage Chinese novel writing.

*Life*, screened nationwide, had a high profile after its release in 1984, including winning the Best Film and Best Actress awards at the People's Hundred Flowers Awards of 1985. Its cinematic aesthetics, including a saturated rural mise-en-scene and fascinating long takes and long shots over the northwestern geography, plus the actress' vivid and passionate performance of the village girl convincingly wakened a pro-village ideology and launched heated debates among critics and common viewers on the topics of morality, traditional value, man's responsibility in relationships, the position of love, and the rural-urban dichotomy. The male protagonist Gao Jialin became the core target of all sorts of criticism mainly for his moral misconduct in abandoning the village girl. Interestingly, among all the viewers' responses, almost no single voice defended or justified his city pursuit and his desire for more education, knowledge, and opportunities for uplifting himself. The pro-village ideology was embedded in the extolling of traditional values and virtues that the village girl represented; endurance, kindness, tenderness, thoughtfulness, unselfishness, and all the other humanistic qualities. That the film offered its audience a viewing pleasure of the rural space enhanced and enriched the praise of the rural. Under this awakened pro-village mentality, the city was completely repressed, as was the image of the rural young man who longed for the city. The pro-village rhetoric was also acute in my conversation with the film director Wu Tianming as shown in the following.<sup>15</sup>

Fu: "How do you define *Life* in terms of film genre?"

Wu: "It is a rural film."

Fu: "What about the image of the city and other urban elements that significantly sustain or constitute the story of Gao Jialin?"

Wu: "They only play a supporting role in my film."

Fu: "In what way?"

Wu: "The city functions as a contrast to the countryside. With this contrast, we are able to see the beauty of the countryside and the acclaimed humanism and morality appearing in the rural people. I always love the countryside."

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<sup>15</sup> I interviewed Wu Tianming at the conference of "Chinese Cinema in the U.S. since 1979" at University of South Carolina, October 8-10, 2010. The interview was conducted in Chinese. The English translation of the quoted conversation in this article is mine.

Fu: "To follow your view, can we call *Life* a melodrama of morality? Many viewers' responses to *Life* centered on the issue of morality as represented in the film. Could you reflect on this?"

Wu: "You (the audience) may think the film a melodrama of morality. To me, it is a film of the rural-city dichotomy and interaction in the reform era."

Fu: "It seems to me that the city itself and every element and every figure related to the city or within the urban setting appear to be very negative and thus repressed in the film. For instance, Gao Jialin's city girlfriend, the city officials, even the cinematography shows limited or fewer aesthetic merits of the city in comparison with the rural counterpart."

Wu: "You made your points. I do regret that I did not add a little more weight on the image of the city. If I redo the film, I will also decrease moral judgments imposed upon the character Gao Jialin, and justify his desire for education and knowledge."

The conversation reveals the uncertainty about the rapid social changes that many filmmakers had during the early stage of the reform era, and also in part offers a rationale for the cinematic ambiguity reflecting the relation between the rural and the urban, including, as well, the runaway farmers.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a striking number of films about rural migration, and the plight of female rural migrants in particular, appeared on the screen, counter-intuitively focused more on the economic reform than gender issues per se. Peng Xiaolian's 1987 *Women's Story* (Nuren de gushi), one of the earliest films about rural women seeking business opportunities in the city, attracted the attention of international film critics for its portrayal of women's changing role in the labour force. And Zhang Liang's 1990 film, *Working Girls from the Special Economic Zone* (Tequ dagongmei), told the story of a group of rural women becoming employees of a joint-venture electronic factory in Shenzhen, the Special Economic Zone near Hong Kong.

The award-winning film *Ermo* (Ermo, dir. Zhou Xiaowen, 1994)<sup>16</sup> offers a paradoxical example of runaway farmers' mobility from the rural. The film show-

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<sup>16</sup> For more film critiques of this film, see Ping Fu, "Ermo: (Tele)Visualizing Urban/Rural Transformation." In *Chinese Films in Focus II*, edited by Chris Berry. (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 2008), 98-105; and Tang Xiaobing, "Rural Women and Social Change in New China Cinema: From *Li Shuangshuang* to *Ermo*." In *Position: East Asia Cultural Critique*. 14, no. 3 (Winter, 2003): 647-674.

cases a female farmer named Ermo's desperate pursuit of the largest television set displayed in a city department store. She makes frequent trips to the city setting up a roadside business to sell her homemade noodles, working in a city restaurant, and even selling her blood in exchange for a television. In the film director's words, the film is about "a peasant's pursuit of a new lifestyle and her wish for upward mobility" and a "search for modern civilization."<sup>17</sup> However, the efforts and hardships that Ermo encountered and endured in order to possess a giant-sized television, a symbolic signifier of "the global village"<sup>18</sup> and a typical example of "commodity-on-display,"<sup>19</sup> showed her pathetic craze for and blindness in catching up with the commercial trend and thus dehumanized her entire "search for modern civilization."

Similarly themed films produced in the reform era delineate how new urban culture, enlivened by the state's open-door policy, usher in a new urban space that has been socially (re)configured in relation to transnational capital and globalised cultural practices. The corresponding city-country dichotomy reflects new political assertions, ideological underpinnings, historical conditions, social transformations, and cultural practices and negotiations. The farmer's urban experience portrayed in *Ermo* illustrates ambiguous and sometimes contradictory mentalities or attitudes toward the ceaseless emergence and progression of modernization and modernity. The cinematic representation of an underlying country-to-city (im)migration craze shows the transformation of the city itself. As shown in the film, the city has been the major node of the state's and each individual's interactions with other societies and cultures around the globe. Structures of local identity, social class, institutions of social integration, and practices of consumption have all been

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<sup>17</sup> Chai Xiaofeng, *Zhou Xiaowen ye fengkuang (Zhou Xiaowen is Also Crazy)*, (Changsha: Hunan Wenyi Chubanshe, 1996), 313. For more detailed discussions, see Dai Jinhua, "Ermo Xiandai Yuyan Kongjian" (*Ermo: Modern Allegorical Space*); Wang Dehou, "Ermo: Zhuozhuang yu Mangmu de Jiejing" (*Ermo: a Crystallization of Sturdiness and Blindness*); and Wang Yichuan, "Rushi Biaoyan Quanli Jiaohuan yu Chongfu" (A Realistic Representation of Power Exchange and Repetition), in *Film Art (Dianying Yishu)* no.5 (1994): 39-43, 36-38, and 44-47.

<sup>18</sup> In Marshall McLuhan & Bruce Power's *The Global Village* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), McLuhan invents this term to refer to globalised telecommunication. According to McLuhan, all Western scientific models of communication are linear, sequential, and logical as a reflection of efficient causality. McLuhan thinks speed-of-light technologies could be used to postulate possible futures (globalization). The "global village" (or "international arena") is controlled by those with the most advanced technology. To a great extent, an advanced telecommunication determines the legitimacy of speech, information flow, and in short, global control in this "global village."

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin points out the nibbling yet inconspicuous function of commodity fetishism in his *Arcades Project*. As Susan Buck-Morss interprets his work, the core of the urban phantasmagoria does not necessarily lie in the commodity-on-display in the market, but in the representational value of the commodity. All desirable things could be transformed into commodities as fetishes-on-display, which could stimulate the viewers' desires for the commodity even when possession is beyond their abilities. See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991.)

shaped by the interplay between local and global trends, developments, and images. In short, the cinematic representations of the runaway farmer in the 1980s shows that farmer migration to the city is no longer an individual effort but the result of massive actions. These later farmers' motivations for running away are oriented more around money than looking for an education opportunity or a better career as shown in *Life*.

## GLOBAL OUTLOOK AND LOCAL LEGITIMACY

The cinematic theme and representation of farmers being uprooted was enlarged and enriched at the turn of the century, as the farmer migration became not an individual act, but a mass movement where it now appears that the collective movement justifies the migration. These films show various rationales for farmers' runaway from the country to the city, with their running away now cast in a global context. For instance, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (Xiao Caifeng, dir. Dai Sijie, 2002), adapted from the best-seller of the same name, shows a village girl tailor's transformation. Two sent-down educated youth teach the girl tailor how to read, write, live, love, and how to make fashionable clothes from the works of Balzac. In the end, the young tailor decides to walk out of the mountainous village to find a new life. When the two young men inquired about what made her leave, the little seamstress responded: "Balzac." That French literature awakens a Chinese rural girl's desire for change as manifested in the film simplistically contextualized and confirmed the global influence on the migration movement and the national progress as well. Up to this point, the subjects of the city and the historical past were the sole external measures of the shift from transparency to opacity and therefore to simultaneity and simulacra, entailing an act of "integrating (China) into the world community" (*Yu shijie jiegui*) and representing a tangible instance of globalization in China, become operational particularly on the screenscape.

Zhang Yimou's most down to earth film *The Story of Qiu Ju* (Qu Ju daguansi, 1992)<sup>20</sup> features a stubborn rural pregnant woman Qiu Ju entering the city and looking for justice for her husband who has had a dispute with the village Chief. On the one hand, a rural woman's quest for legal help in the city, politically legitimated a farmer's entering the city. On the other hand, this cinematic instance decreased if not diminished the image and imagery of

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<sup>20</sup> See Fiona Lorrain, "Qiu Ju Goes to Court: Relating Cinematic Art to Juridical Reality." *Asian Cinema*. Vol. 17, no. 2 (Fall/Winter, 2006): 173-181.

endangered urban space, and transformed the long-time ideologically repressed city into a site of hope and a rosy shelter for farmers. Furthermore, *The Story of Qiu Ju* seems to convey that the reform in theory allows individuals restitution against government abuse, and brings about China's installation of a judicial code. Qiu Ju's "runaway" witnesses the changing operations and ideologies around the rural-urban paradox and the local-global paradigm as well as a developing juridical reality.

As suggested in the film's title, *A Beautiful New World* (*Meili xin shijie*, dir. Shi Runjiu, 1998) displays a rosier picture of a farmer's dream coming true in the city. The film tells a story of a male farmer who wins a luxury apartment in a not-yet-built high-rise building through the lottery. Winning the lottery allows him to become a temporary city dweller and offers him opportunities to find a city fiancée. The final episode in the film presented satirically the farmer's rosy urban dream of becoming a permanent urban citizen and living in a top-level apartment of the apartment building. A low angle shot shows the farmer standing on the construction site and embracing his city sweetheart under the heavy rains while they waved at their to-be-built urban home. The lottery, the to-be-built urban apartment, and the relationship with an urban girl seem to suggest the farmer's legitimacy in his urban dwelling and identity. However the heavy rain expresses a constellation of sensibilities that question the probability and possibility of his ultimate settlement in the city, and thus remind viewers of the growing concern for the dislocation of farmers and the issues and problems associated with the dislocation.

Moving into the new century, the representation of farmers' migration to the city has been inspired and affirmed by a TV commercial "Your heart determines your stage" (*xin you duoda, wutai jiuyou duoda*).<sup>21</sup> This TV commercial was produced and broadcast at the beginning of the 21st century by China Central Television (CCTV), the top Chinese official television network. A high angle birds-eye-view shot of a village scene is followed by a cut to a full view of a village girl in typical rural attire dancing alone in her rural home and continuing to then show a vast platform in front of a high-rise office building. In the blink of an eye, the platform dissolves into a stage where the rural girl is waltzing with an urban white-collar man. A zoom out displays more pairs of dancers joining in the dancing carnival, and the subtitle "Your heart determines your stage" pops onto the screen; the commercial ends with the rural girl standing on the stage, her back to the audience, panning/glancing at the city below

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<sup>21</sup> This is my translation. For more information see: <http://www.cftvc.com/Soft/2007/1002/2550.html>

her. The slogan not only justified the farmers' encircling the city, but also became a motto and a part of a very popular public rhetoric for the youth.

With the increasing flow of peasant workers into Chinese cities, relevant problems turn up as constant obsessions. Recently, the Chinese government offered protection and services to this special group in the work force that has been much in need of enormous and lasting urban construction projects. An example is the creation of a farm workers' chorale at the 2008 Chinese New Year's gala, the most popular show entertaining Chinese audiences on every Chinese New Year's eve. Led by a farmer rising star, Wang Baoqiang, the farmer singers voiced their urban dreams and announced their relocations from farm land to the urban zone, and trumpeted their newly obtained status as urban workers, which seemed to suggest a legitimacy to their being uprooted from the country to the city.

## CONCLUSION

These cinematic and media examples of Chinese farmers and their active adjustments to, and sometimes precarious positioning by, the enormous social changes in contemporary China bespeak changing operations and ideologies in the rural-urban paradox and the local-global paradigm in Chinese political and social contexts. This article shows that the force of globalization and domestic economic demands have changed or moderated the long time prevailing pro-village ideology. However, these changes do not seem to lie in farmers' longing for a realization of their urban dreams, though as shown in the films discussed above, Chinese farmers have taken every initiative to change their lives amid the state policy changes. Rather, all the transformations have heavily been charted by the Chinese government's political and economic decisions and measures, which embody all sorts of new governmental ideologies and assertions to keep up with both local and global changes and meet domestic and world demands. The corresponding productions of film and media have followed this trajectory. In this sense, the representation of Chinese farmers on screen is not a mere product of mass-based cultural production, or an effective act of serving the common people, but a resounding echo of Chinese political and economic transformation under the rubric of searching for and building a modernized and globalized China.

As shown in my study, the cinematic subjects and representations of Chinese farmers and rural migration are extensively linked to many social, political and cultural aspects of Chinese society, which have largely diversified

Chinese rural cinema. This ever-emerging diversity is a warning and a reminder to any cultural worker that hybrid Chinese rural themes and rural cinema highlight the need to adjust our critical focus on Chinese farmers on screen and the Chinese rural cinema genre, including their forms and meanings, and their aesthetics and social connotations, in order to account for the problems and pleasure of our viewing experience. Either a pro-village mentality or a pro-city stand will blur our view of seeing a now hybridized China, and a contemporary hybridized rural China in particular. Chinese farmers, who comprise about 60 percent of China's 1.3 billion population, both on and off screen force us to reflect critically upon notions of human equality, individuality, mobility, locality, urbanization, modernization, and the local and the global in a rich and complex way. They have been the vital force behind China's present economic prosperity and will continue to play the role, but many of them are struggling with their basic survival both in the countryside and the city, fighting for fair wages, health care, children's education, and so forth. To look closely at who they are, what they need, and where they are inside China's sociocultural landscape is not only to plot the trajectory of Chinese rural cinema but also to attempt to describe the momentous changes happening every day in the lives of the world's largest class of a now hybridized rural proletariat—Chinese working class farmers (*nongmin gong*).

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