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Discuss and analyze two or three films of different types that discuss historical events. Compare their presentation with that given in written accounts. Which aspects do the filmmakers emphasize? Do they distort the record of the past to produce a dramatic story or to promote a political point of view? Is this practice inevitable in film, or is it possible to make an “objective” account?

The past two centuries have seen China transform herself from an imperial-ruled feudalistic country to a socialist society with “Chinese characteristics” led by the Communist Party. These changes were not made without Chinese bloodshed, the last of which was the June 4th event in 1989, well-documented by “The Gate of Heavenly Peace”. What holds for the future of China? “China: Beyond the Clouds”, through personal stories in Lijiang, Yunnan, vividly explores the many social conditions and problems China faces in the present and coming years.

China in the 1980s

Democracy, one of the three ‘isms’ advocated by Sun Yat-sen in the beginning of the 20th century, was still the main slogan shouted by student demonstrators at Tiananmen in the weeks leading up to June 4th 1989. What started as a memorial for the ousted liberal General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, HuYaobang, soon culminated in a mass gathering of students at Tiananmen Square in April 1989. Eventually, workers, merchants, and intellectuals all showed support for the students’

demand for modernization and democratic reforms from the government. By early June 4th, after 7 weeks of peaceful protest, the government used armed forces to crush the “Dong Luan” and restored authority and absolute control to the Communist Party. While all those who watched the news will remember the image of a man standing in front of the advancing tanks, “The Gate of Heavenly Peace” digs deeper into this event. From captured footages and interviews with the student leaders, workers, intellectuals, and former party officials, this documentary shows the various social tension and problems that existed in the 1980s under Deng’s reform policies.

Under Deng’s economic reform policies, lives in China in the 1980s had indeed improved since Mao’s death in 1979. China was no longer isolated from the world. Those who were educated, such as university students and intellectuals had constant exposure to the Western world. No longer having to worry about basic needs such as food and clothing, many urban dwellers and intellectuals seek more emotional and intellectual freedom. Lives in the rural area improved as well under Deng. Communes were decentralized and once more, farmers were allowed to plant in their plots of land for profit as long as they satisfied the governmental quota. Under this cloak of economic prosperity however, many undercurrents of discontent, such as those of the state-owned factory workers, poor intellectuals, and the euphoric students were developing in China.

Deng’s policy of “socialism with Chinese characteristic”, in other words capitalism, saw a boom in China’s economic growth. Supply and demand of the freer market made the state-owned enterprise less competitive compared to the privately owned business. Workers from the state-owned factories were laid off during “reprioritization” without any social safety net. Their “iron rice bowls” were no longer

secure. For many of the laid-off workers, their lack of technical skills and lazy habits developed from working in the SOEs made it difficult for them to find well-paid jobs. This proletariat class, the most important class of the revolution, no longer seemed needed or important to society. Many workers felt disillusioned and angry toward the economic reform.

While the intellectuals had long advocated for economic openness and reform, people without Party connections did not benefit much from the actual reform. Those who gained economically were mainly party officials who had extra information and connections that gave them opportunities of which others were unaware. Many deals were made through the “back door.” The intellectual class, many of whom looked down on such behavior, felt helpless as well. A few brave intellectuals such as Wei Jingsheng, who called for the 5th modernization of china--democracy, were prosecuted and put away by the government. Most still had faith in the government and were waiting for reforms to take place slowly.

The most restless class was the young people, and mainly the educated students. Many university students, having excelled in academics, had received only the best treatment from those around them, including their parents, teachers, and peers. They were euphoric and optimistic, having grown up in the years of rapid reform and growth. Like Wuer Kaixi (student) points out in the film, young people wanted Nike shoes, free time to take their girlfriends out, to be respected of their opinions. They were seeking more emotional and mental freedom. The students wrote demands and expected “Dui Hua” with the government, hoping to awaken the people around them and boost reform. This expectation alone demonstrates how optimistic the students were at the time. No

one had expected gunfire from the government. Hou Dejian (pop singer) and Feng Congde (student leader) said during interviews that they were expecting soldiers to use clubs instead of guns to clear the square on the eve of June 4th. It was exactly the opening reform that had induced such optimism within the society and euphoria among the students. Emotional extremists such as Chai Ling took power and led the student demonstrations to a more radical and irrational path.

After the governmental crackdown of the demonstrators, many people fled the city to escape arrests and prosecution. Zhang Hongliang, a worker, hid among the peasants who lived outside of Beijing. The peasants told him that they would protect him from being arrested by the government, just like what they had done 50 years ago when they had hid the Communists from the government. This irony suggests that perhaps the most rational people during that time were the peasants, who had become apathetic towards the government and its ownership.

“The Gate of Heavenly Peace” attempted not to take sides, but to tell the story from different angles and societal classes. It does not blindly support the students’ actions or completely blame the Communist party. By showing the conflicts and confusion among the student body itself such as that between Chai Ling and Wang Dan, and the difference between the hardliners and the liberals within the Communist party such as Zhao Ziyang and Li Peng, this film tries to show the complex issues involved and explain the progression of the events that led up to the bloodshed. It would be more complete if the producers Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton were able to interview the party officials who were in power at that time, but that would have been impossible during its filming. The Tiananmen Papers, by Nathan and Links, shows a glimpse of

Deng's decision-making progress. One could see the differences between Zhao Ziyang and Jiang Zemin in dealing with the student demonstrations, and how Zhao was trying to hold on to his power, which he eventually lost. By showing multiple sides of the story, "The Gate of Heavenly Peace" is a successful documentary because it strives for objectivity. Using recorded footages from Zhou and Mao's funeral, to Deng's visit to the US, and Bob Hope's singing in China, it shows the prevailing moods of China at various times, which books would have harder times in capturing.

China in the 1990s

The Communists government's actions towards the student on June 4th taught all the Chinese a lesson. It was futile for most people to advocate political reform. Instead, people started looking towards "money" and concentrated on gaining material wealth in their everyday lives. There was no morality to live by because people had lost faith in the government and the Communist ideologies, despite their omnipresence in all the towns and cities. "China: Beyond the Clouds" tells personal stories from a town called Lijiang, in Yunnan province, which serves as a microcosm of rural China, and reflects the social problems that face China today.

Several characters' lives are described along the course of a few months. Their lives are all connected somewhat because Lijiang is still relatively small. Their lives are affected to different degrees, by social problems and conditions, such as gangs, drugs, juvenile crimes, China's one-child policy, and its legal and education systems.

Mr. Mu's family can trace its ancestors in Lijiang to the 13th Century. In 1994, Mu owns a stand that sells pork, which is allowed under free enterprise. Unlike most city dwellers, Mu owns a big house with a courtyard and is building extensions for it because

his business is doing well. His daughter goes to elementary school. Mu's friend, Dr. Tang runs a self-owned clinic. People from Lijiang go to Dr. Tang because he is well known in the area for his acupuncture abilities. Teacher Zhou brings her infant to Dr. Tang's clinic in order to cure her daughter's handicap-cerebral palsy. Old ladies of the Naxi ethnic group, who live close to Lijiang, visit Dr. Tang for their arthritis pains. Tang's daughter also runs a self-owned dress shop. Young women who go there are dressed fashionably, and they talk about each other's emotions and what is new in town. Theatres show movies from Hong Kong and Taiwan for entertainment rather than propaganda purposes. Young people, such as Mu's nephew Dragon He, who leads a gang of boys, hang out at their favorite places such as the pool hall, the disco and the karaoke bars. Every morning at 7, the loudspeakers in Lijiang would announce the official Beijing time and start broadcasting central news. Merchants, such as the tofu makers would have been up for hours by then, having prepared for the morning market. Dr. Tang's wife works for the Communist party street committee, which takes care of registration of residents, as well as publicize government policies, like the one-child policy.

The people of Lijiang all had their lives and jobs. They also endlessly interacted with each other through constant visits, either for personal or work-related reasons. One night, Mu's nephew Asan was stabbed to death by a group of 30 boys.

In an effort to reduce juvenile crime, which accounts for 70% of all crimes, the police force of Lijiang decided to use Asan's case as an example. Several boys were arrested and questioned by an inspector without being informed of their or lack of rights. They were denied lawyers or chances to see or talk to their parents. Legal advice is only

given in the end of the investigation process when formal charges are filed. Eventually, after many months of investigation and accusations, 4 received sentences, with the heaviest penalty being three years in prison while the rest went on probation. The government decided that it is best to re-educate juvenile delinquents and would only resort to imprisonment as their last option. While Asan's family is angry and heartbroken, there is nothing much they can do to change the court's decision.

Boys, like Dragon He, talked about ways to make money over drinks and cigarettes. They also tried heroin, which they obtained from dealers who had suppliers from Burma. The old women from Naxi tribe remember the time when their husbands and fathers were addicted or died from opium. Up to 1950s, opium had been the major crop in the Lijiang valley. The Communist party had successfully ended the opium problem back then. Heroin has found its way back into China 40 years later. In an effort to crack down the drug problem, a drug dealer, Hu Weixiong was mass paraded through Lijiang and had his death sentence publicly announced in a gathering in the town theatre. Over 100 drug traffickers were shot in Yunnan that day.

Hu was taken to the bottom of the Jade Dragon Mountain, a day's walk from Lijiang, to be executed. Teacher Lu and his wife and four kids live on top of the mountain. He had paid a heavy fine, more than two years of wage, for having his youngest child, finally a son. Teacher Lu is responsible for all the kids around the Jade Dragon mountain area so that they can go to a middle school in Lijiang. The school building is old and crooked. Many of the children are children of the Yi people, another ethnic group that survives on farming. Education is not encouraged because of their hard

lifestyles. While Teacher Lu was away for four months for teacher training, the children at school lagged behind schedule due to the poor quality of their substitute teacher.

One of his old students visited Lu's family, and told Lu that he will leave his wife and child in order to reunite with his formal girlfriend, Li Li, who was tricked into a marriage in Sichuan. Li Li, a friend of Dr. Tang's daughter, had escaped from her in-laws family after being beaten, and returned to Lijiang after three years. The couple was still in love and did not care about being married.

After months of treatment for her daughter, Little Swallow, teacher Zhou finally decides to have another baby. This is allowed by the one-child policy since her first-born is handicapped.

"China: Beyond the Clouds" depicts these segments of life of the people of Lijiang. Nothing as traumatic as June 4th 1989 happens in the film, and people's lives nevertheless carry on one day at a time, with occasional interruptions. Rather than advocating changes by directly confronting the government like the students in 1989 had, most of the rural people, like those of Lijiang lived with government policies and legal systems even if they disagreed. As long as they had food to eat and money to earn, they were content with their lives. The younger generation seems apathetic and do not have a clear direction in life despite their parents' scolding. This film directed by Philo Agland, shows the beauty of Lijiang and tells people's stories in a natural way. It does emphasize somewhat on the Chinese legal system and suggests how it differs from what Americans would expect. Drugs and juvenile crimes are mentioned to reflect that it is a common problem China is facing. It is difficult to judge whether this film is objective because that might not be its purpose. The film does not claim that Lijiang is a typical town in rural

China, simply *a* small town in China. The stories of the characters do reflect, however, the social problems that we know are prevalent in China today. While a book can only describe the way of life of the Lijiang people, this film *shows* it, and thus achieves a much better effect.

China's future

“China: Beyond the Clouds” ends with the arrival of the spring season. Teacher Lu is teaching his students the importance of knowledge and education. He teaches them that the future rests with them and inspires them to achieve great things when they grow up. Despite the crimes and poverty that exist in rural China, the director expresses his optimism of China's future through Teacher Lu's words.

Ding Zilin, a professor who had lost her high school son on the night of June 3rd, 1989, was left disillusioned by the Chinese government and its propaganda system. Yet she still hopes for the day when her son's ashes will be buried with the rest of the people who died on June 4th. She is still hoping and waiting for the government's reversal of judgment concerning June 4th. It is poignantly clear that no matter how disillusioned people become, they still have hope because of the mere fact that they are alive.

Bibliography

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