



MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Art, Industry, and Propaganda in Mainland Chinese Cinema:
Huang Jianxin's Trajectory from Critical Art Film to Propaganda-
Infused Blockbuster

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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien | Vienna, 2026

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

UA 066 811

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree
programme as it appears on the student
record sheet:

Masterstudium Sinologie

Betreut von | Supervisor:

Univ.-Prof. Dr. Rossella Ferrari

Abstract (English)

This master's thesis analyses the cinematic and social trajectory of Chinese film director Huang Jianxin at the nexus of art, industry, and propaganda. It aims to explain his cinematic shift, his shifting positions and dispositions, and his changing authorship-function in the field, from his postsocialist critical art films of the 1980s to his role in directing propaganda-infused blockbusters such as *The Founding of a Republic* (2009). Although there is extensive research on the works of individual filmmakers within the post-Mao development of mainland Chinese cinema, Huang's work has only been studied selectively. No comprehensive study linking his cinematic and social trajectory has yet been conducted. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and concepts from cultural industry and authorship studies, this thesis reconstructs Huang's trajectory using film analysis, a social network analysis of film crews and production companies, an interpretative systems analysis of Huang's articles and interviews, and case comparisons with Zhang Yimou and Feng Xiaogang. This study finds that Huang's shift from critical art film to propaganda-infused blockbuster was not simply an ideological reversal, but a change in position within a field shaped by the influx of Hollywood and state-led film industry development. His authorship-function evolved from that of an autonomous film director to a director-producer integrating mainland and Hong Kong networks and mobilising state-institutional and ideological resources for commercial filmmaking.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die filmische und soziale Laufbahn des chinesischen Filmregisseurs Huang Jianxin an der Schnittstelle von Kunst, Industrie und Propaganda. Die Arbeit zielt darauf ab, den filmischen Wandel, die sich wandelnden Positionen und Dispositionen sowie die sich wandelnde Autorenfunktion im Feld, von Huangs postsozialistischen kritischen Kunstfilmen der 1980er Jahre bis hin zu seiner Rolle als Regisseur von propagandageprägten Blockbustern wie *The Founding of a Republic* (2009), zu erklären. Trotz der umfangreichen Forschung zu den Werken einzelner Filmemacher*innen im Zuge der postsozialistischen Entwicklung des festlandchinesischen Kinos wurde Huangs Werk bislang nur vereinzelt behandelt. Bisher gibt es noch keine umfassende Studie, die seine filmische und soziale Laufbahn miteinander verknüpft. Diese Arbeit setzt an diesem Punkt an und rekonstruiert Huangs Laufbahn auf der Grundlage von Pierre Bourdieus Feldtheorie und Konzepten der Kulturindustrie- und Autor*innenschaftsforschung. Die Untersuchung stützt sich auf Filmanalysen, eine soziale Netzwerkanalyse von Filmcrews und Produktionsfirmen, eine interpretative Systemanalyse von Huangs Artikeln und Interviews und Fallvergleiche mit Zhang Yimou und Feng Xiaogang. Die Analysen zeigen, dass Huangs Wandel vom kritischen Kunstfilm zum propagandageprägten Blockbuster nicht einfach eine ideologische Wende darstellt. Es ist vielmehr eine Änderung seiner Position innerhalb des Feldes, geprägt durch den Zustrom aus Hollywood und die staatlich geleitete Entwicklung der Filmindustrie. Seine Autorenfunktion entwickelte sich von der eines autonomen Filmregisseurs hin zu der eines Regisseur-Produzenten, der festlandchinesische und Hongkonger Netzwerke miteinander verbindet und staatlich-institutionelle und ideologische Ressourcen für kommerzielles Filmschaffen mobilisiert.

Acknowledgements

I was first introduced to the wonderfully absurd and visually stunning critical comedy *Black Cannon Incident* as part of the screenings, readings and discussions during the seminar “Filming the Nation: China on Screen”. I was surprised to discover that Huang Jianxin was also the director of *The Founding of a Republic*, a film that seems to be at the opposite end of the spectrum, both politically and commercially. This provided a natural starting point to go deeper into the changing relations between individual filmmakers, institutions and the state, the more intricate ideological shades, and importantly, the role that Hollywood played in transforming mainland Chinese cinema. It was only during the analysis, guided by Huang’s work, that I took a closer look at the significant position of Hong Kong cinema and its filmmakers in shaping the development trajectory of mainland cinema. At times, it felt like endless openings onto new relations, new branches in the transnational networks, all changing over time. Nevertheless, I hope I have found a way to draw a coherent thread through the dense thicket of actors, institutions and ideologies that shaped the course of Huang’s trajectory within mainland cinema.

First, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Rossella Ferrari, for providing the impetus for this subject through her guidance during the seminar and well beyond, and for her patience in giving me the time and space to complete this thesis at my own pace.

More broadly, I would like to thank the Sinology department at the University of Vienna for equipping me with the necessary language skills, knowledge and groundwork to learn how to learn. Studying Sinology has instilled in me an ever-growing interest in the contemporary Sinophone world, an interest that has deepened with every course and visit to China.

I would also like to thank my employer for providing a steady income and the flexibility needed to complete my degree, even if it did lead me on a few detours. I would also like to thank Vienna for its rich cinema offerings, including regular screenings of East Asian films.

Finally, the repeated questions and discussions on the topic of my thesis, which have spanned the rather long duration of this project, have, at times, sharpened my arguments, or more often, shaken them. This has forced me to reread and refine my thinking on the sometimes disparate information and arguments. In this regard, I would particularly like to thank my family, my parents and siblings, my friends, my flatmate, and others whom I may have enlisted to support my research by watching some of the films on my filmography.

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1 Introduction

The Chinese film director Huang Jianxin (born June 14, 1954) began his career with films that criticised the fundamentals of the Chinese socialist system (Pickowicz 1994, 81f). However, since the release of *The Founding of a Republic*¹ (*Jianguo daye* 建国大业, 2009), Huang has continuously directed or produced box-office hits that directly propagate the official historical narrative of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (Cai 2019). What is behind this trajectory in his filmmaking?

In 2009, *Founding* broke new ground in the field of propaganda work, or rather “persuasive communication” (Wolte 2017) of the CCP, as indicated by the box-office record of about 430 million yuan (Baidu Baike 2023b). The film marked the beginning of a new phase in Chinese filmmaking, fusing commercial appeal with ideological content. It applied production and marketing techniques borrowed from other Sinophone cinemas outside mainland China and Hollywood to create a political film that recounts the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in line with the CCP’s official narrative. Following the success of *Founding*, Huang directed and produced several historical films depicting party history, up until *1921* (2021), which commemorates the 100-year-anniversary of the CCP. All of these films can be considered to be what Cai Shenshen (2019) terms a *propaganda-infused blockbuster*.

Huang’s 1985 debut film *Black Cannon Incident* (*Heipao shijian* 黑炮事件, 1985) was an innovation of a different kind. It is a critical political comedy with clean, stylish cinematography reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Film scholar Paul G. Pickowicz describes the film as pervaded by the “postsocialist sense of profound disillusionment with the traditional socialist system” (2012, 278). Huang continued with the cinematographically similar *Dislocation* (*Cuowei* 错位, 1986) and concluded his first trilogy with *Samsara* (*Lunhui* 轮回, 1988). These films are coherent sequels in terms of the themes they deal with. I therefore describe the trilogy as a series of *critical art films*. Even after 1989, when the political climate in the PRC had already changed, he continued to make films that ironically criticised the bureaucracy and raised social issues in urban China. While these films cannot be described as *critical art films* in the same way, they are still *critical comedies*.

¹ Hereafter, *Founding*.

With this research, I aim to shed light on filmmaking practices in the field of mainland Chinese cinema², as influenced by the changing socioeconomic and political context of the PRC in the nexus of art, industry, and propaganda. Huang's trajectory from *critical art film* to *propaganda-infused blockbuster* is arguably the most pronounced among the Fifth Generation of filmmakers. This term refers to a group of mainland filmmakers who share similar styles and themes, as well as having received their education at the Beijing Film Academy, from which they all graduated in 1982 (see for example: Cornelius 2002; Ni 2003; Zhu and Robinson 2010). Zhang Yimou, also a Fifth Generation director, shifted to more commercially oriented productions, but his films retained the reception as art films (Zhu and Robinson 2010). The cinematic trajectory of Huang thus represents a significant case and a key to understanding a broader development in mainland cinema. Furthermore, as will be shown in the following section, Huang has received little attention in the study of Chinese cinema and the nexus of art, industry and propaganda. To fill this gap, I focus on the following research question, including two sub-questions:

I. What are Huang Jianxin's changing positions and dispositions in the field of mainland Chinese cinema, underlying his filmmaking trajectory from *critical art film* to *propaganda-infused blockbuster*?

- 1 What are the field-specific developments in mainland Chinese cinema allowing for these changing positions and dispositions?
- 2 How can Huang Jianxin's specific authorship-function in the production of these films be conceptualised?

The concepts of field positions and dispositions stem from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993b). These refer to the positions in the field-specific network and power hierarchy, the position-taking, i.e., the films themselves, and the field-specific dispositions, determined by the socio-biographical background and experience in the field, that guide social practice. This theoretical framework directs the view to the possibility of certain positions and position-takings, as determined by the social context (Bourdieu 1993b, 131–41). In light of the criticism of social determinism in Bourdieu's theories (Van den Berg 1998), the criticism of the inability to transfer some of Bourdieu's concepts to mainland Chinese

² Hereafter, shortened to "mainland cinema".

cultural production, and the absence of a transnational perspective in his theory (Hockx 2002; Larson 1999), I analyse the sociological significance of concrete events and the individual practices of Huang. At the same time, I aim to challenge this sociological view to prompt new theoretical perspectives that incorporate a transnational perspective.

The focus on individual filmmaking practices raises the question of authorship in film. Constructing Huang as an author of “his” films is questionable, considering that film production is a collective process, involving a multiplicity of actors, and is highly dependent on the social context in which it is embedded. Finally, Huang is not a single, consistent auteur but has played different social roles across different films. There are various authorship approaches trying to deal with these and other conceptual problems of authorship in film, which I will discuss in Section 3.1.4 of this thesis.

In a sense, I apply an auteurist lens, examining the film discourse surrounding a single film director. However, I specifically look at commercial processes in film through the lens of what Janet Staiger (2013) describes as a “sociology of production” (Staiger 2013, 42ff) and other critical approaches to authorship. Moreover, this research does not simply adopt an auteurist lens but also contributes to the discourse on authorship by drawing on Bourdieu’s field theory and conceptualising Huang’s changing authorship function.

My understanding of Huang’s earliest trilogy, *Black Cannon Incident*, *Dislocation*, and *Samsara*, as *critical art film* is based on Paul G. Pickowicz’s (1994) and Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar’s (1994) work. Pickowicz argues that these films are all characterised by their ironic depiction of the socialist bureaucracy’s inability to cope with the increasingly liberal capitalist development of society. Meanwhile, Berry and Farquhar demonstrate how *Black Cannon Incident* appropriates symbols and forms of modern art as a *postsocialist* cinematic strategy. I apply Cai Shenshen’s (2019) concept of the *propaganda-infused blockbuster* to emphasise the commercial form of *Founding* while acknowledging the propagandistic narratives and symbols in the film. *The Founding of a Republic* is the first film of the *Founding* trilogy, which also includes *The Founding of a Party* (*Jiandang weiyue* 建党伟业, 2011), and *The Founding of an Army* (*Jianjun daye* 建军大业, 2017). The trilogy depicts the creation of the PRC-state and its symbols, the CCP and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), as prescribed by contemporary party narratives. The focus of this thesis is limited to Huang’s trajectory from *Black Cannon Incident* to *The Founding of a Republic*. As an innovation in “historical film”

(Wolte 2017), *The Founding of a Republic* set the stage for the subsequent *Founding* films, as well as for other films directed and produced by Huang after 2009 that followed similar filmmaking techniques. The analysis and concepts derived from it, therefore, also apply to Huang's subsequent filmmaking. I will describe these concepts in my analysis of Huang's cinematic trajectory.

It is important to note that this thesis applies an interpretative research approach to include a variety of different sources. This requires a variety of methodological steps to incorporate these sources into the reconstruction of the phenomenon under investigation. In this approach, it is not useful to provide concrete hypotheses in advance to test them in the analysis. Instead, preliminary hypotheses are formulated and tested within an argumentative structure that is continually revised with each analytical step.³

In Section 2 I start by positioning my thesis in current research on Huang and the field of mainland cinema surrounding his films and filmmaking. While the socioeconomic and political development of mainland cinema has been a prominent subject of research, I argue that the social trajectories of individual filmmakers within the field have not been widely studied. The cinematic and social trajectory of Huang has not yet been addressed by research. Nevertheless, the existing research provides a starting point for analysing and conceptualising his trajectory.

In Section 3 I describe the analytical framework. This comprises the theoretical lens and the methodology as driven by theoretical considerations and the aim of collecting data for interpretation to adept the theoretical concepts and develop an argumentative structure. I set up the theoretical framework by combining Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production, concepts from cultural industry studies, and selected authorship approaches. Using this theoretical lens, I take an interpretative social research methodology, combining film analysis, social network analysis of the crews, actors, and production companies involved in Huang's directorial works, an interpretative systems analysis of interviews with Huang and articles by him, and case comparisons of Huang's trajectory with those of Zhang Yimou and Feng Xiaogang.

³ Due to limitations in scope and resources for this thesis, I offer only a simplified version of the interpretative research process proposed by Froschauer and Lueger (2009).

In Section 4, I provide a film comparison of *Black Cannon Incident* and *Founding* to conceptualise the endpoints and spectrum of Huang's filmic trajectory. This is followed by an analysis of his work in between these two films, including a brief examination of films co-produced by Huang.

Section 5 analyses the wider social context of the field of mainland cinema and its relations and dependencies with other fields. As part of this analysis, I discuss post-Maoist ideology and cultural policy; the relationship between art and industry in post-Mao China, with a particular focus on cinema; and the evolving forms of state-led filmmaking, from the emergence of main melody to new mainstream film. This is followed in Section 6 by an analysis of Huang's film production networks, which serves as an entry point for mapping the field and his position within it. This study then moves on to Huang's reflections on his role and on his interactions with the field, the film audience, and film discourse. From these reflections, I derive his field-specific dispositions and changing authorship function in the field. Through two case comparisons, with Zhang Yimou and Feng Xiaogang, I test and refine the main preliminary hypotheses and arguments.

In Section 7, I provide a discussion and theoretical synthesis of Huang's changing position, dispositions, and authorship function in the field. To this end, I discuss the results of the analyses in relation to the main concepts of the theoretical framework and the research literature. I also consider the strengths and limitations of the research approach adopted in this thesis. Section 8 concludes with an overview of the thesis and the outlook for further research prompted by these findings.

2 Literature review

In the following, I provide an outline of scholarly research and debates surrounding Huang's film production, including conceptual and contextual debates on mainland Chinese cinema and on Huang's filmmaking directly. On each point, I comment on how the research approach and findings relate to my research aim here.

2.1 Conceptual and contextual debates on mainland Chinese cinema

A first point to consider in research surrounding Huang's filmmaking is the discourse on "Chinese cinema" as a concept. Zhang Yingjin (2004) titles his comprehensive monograph on mainland, Taiwanese and Hong Kong cinema "Chinese National Cinema". While he does engage critically with the concepts of "Chinese cinema" and "national cinematic projects" (Y. Zhang 2004, 1–12), he continues to use these terms, arguing that they allow one to study the different ways in which "the national" has been constructed in film production in and between "all three Chinas" (6f). The term includes the adjective "Chinese", which has been criticised in research for its cultural essentialism, most notably by Allen Chun (1996), as it originates from state efforts to modernise and establish a Chinese nation-state. To counter the idea of a monolithic nation-state approach and reflect on the issue of Hollywood influence on Chinese cinema, Chinese film scholar Shao Peiren coined the term "Huallywood" (Shao 2014), a concept that sparked criticism of latent nationalism and self-orientalisation, but gave rise to a self-reflected new constructive discourse on the issue (Fu et al. 2016). In this research, I apply the concept of "Sinophone cinemas". The term includes the cinemas of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Sinitic-language cinemas outside these regions connected and disconnected throughout history (Yue and Khoo 2012). The concept follows the approach of Sinophone Studies, as proposed by Shih Shu-mei. This approach draws on postcolonial theory to counter the hegemonic and homogenising China-centric discourse of "Chineseness", which is propagated in the PRC and uncritically adopted in Euro-American scholarship (Shih 2011, 2013b). The concept aims to move beyond the cultural essentialism and nationalist-ideological underpinnings inherent in these terms, and attempts to critically examine the link with Hollywood and global film industries by describing the locally determined manifestations and transnational relations of Sinophone cinemas (Tan 2021). Huang's trajectory is a case in point for the problem of delimiting and defining the cinemas he is part of, given his transnational

engagement with East Asian cinemas as well as his experience in Hollywood production.⁴ This transnational perspective is central to the research approach taken here and will be further addressed in the course of the analysis.

Firstly, in terms of contextual elements, Huang's filmmaking is embedded within the cultural policy and political economy of art and culture in the PRC. Richard C. Kraus (2004) characterises the development of cultural policy in the PRC by the retreat of the state, the rise of the market, and also a rise in professionalism in the arts, with all the social issues that come with it, including precarity in cultural work. Shan Shilian (2014) analyses the same developments in a more positive light. Shan sees the rise of the mainland cultural industries as an important driver of economic development, arguing that cultural and technological development go hand in hand (Shan 2014). This non-critical use of the term "cultural industries" is based on the research paradigm of Michael Keane, the leading scholar on the cultural industries in China (e.g. Keane 2016). The research paradigm addresses one of the theoretical aims of this thesis, which is to shed light on the relations between film production in mainland China and other Sinophone cinemas. In one of the contributions in Keane (2016), Chung Peichi and Yi Lianyan (2016) study the structural impact of the Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) on mainland-Hong Kong co-production in film as a case for regional cultural policy. However, the perspective on film as yet another cultural industry lacks a more profound conceptualisation of individual agency, the function of the individual filmmaker within production and consumption networks, and power dynamics embedded in the field.

Elena Meyer-Clement (2016) provides an important angle in this regard. In this comprehensive work, she examines the changing relations between propaganda and industry institutions in the PRC. The study focuses on the role and agency of production companies and individual cultural workers in the film and music industries. However, while *Founding* is discussed, Huang is not mentioned. Only Han Sanping is cited as the director of the film. However, not even Han is described as an "entrepreneur" or "agent of change", as the conceptual underpinning of the research might imply. This can be explained by the fact that the section on "agents of change" focuses on lower-level workers in the cultural bureaucracy as well as functionaries of private companies, who are anonymised in the text (Meyer-Clement 2016, 195–241). The problem with

⁴ As will be shown in this thesis.

this research approach is that concrete works of film cannot be linked to concrete trajectories of filmmakers, which precludes what I aim to do in this research, namely, to relate individual filmmaking to the development of the field.

The rise of China's cultural industries is also examined from a critical political science perspective. Matthew D. Johnson (2012) argues that through the combination of soft power and economic power, the "Chinese state attempts to gain local trust [in foreign countries] through inducements such as education, cultural goods, and infrastructure" (Johnson 2012, 178). This suggests a geopolitical rationale on the part of the Chinese state to expand the film industry. More generally, Johnson (2020) identifies an element of continuity in China's long struggle to defend its socialist system against foreign ideological influences through cultural means, namely the securitisation of media and the strengthening of "centrally guided and infrastructure-focused institutions" (Johnson 2020, 257) in the cultural sphere. According to this argument, under Xi Jinping these preexisting endeavours have only been intensified (Johnson 2020).

Alongside the perspective on the response of the Chinese state, there is also research on how the actors in the field are responding to the pressures of globalization and the influx of foreign film culture. While some members of the field, among them Chinese directors, commercial actors, policy-makers, and critics, see the need to catch up with Hollywood by making their own blockbusters, other actors in the field, like director Jia Zhangke, are more critical of these trends, seeking a reflective and ethically conscious use of the medium and technology of film (Braester 2015). Stanley Rosen (2012) also mentions the ambivalent response of Chinese filmmakers and officials to the influx from Hollywood, but identifies the increasing focus on box office success as the underlying trend. Rather than reversing this process, film officials have reinforced political objectives in the mainland film industry, which amounts to increasing pressure from both sides on individual artistic filmmaking (Rosen 2012). A more comprehensive study of the encounter or confrontation of the mainland film industry with Hollywood is conducted by Wendy Su (2016). Su argues that the Chinese state was struggling to protect the cultural foundations of national identity in its encounter with Hollywood's industrial complex and cultural influx. Furthermore, political actors feared losing control over ideological discourse to Hollywood, while at the same time aiming to modernize the domestic industry. This resulted in the party state allowing in global capital, but retaining control by

channelling capital into productions it deemed coherent with its interests (Su 2016). In this thesis, I will argue that this development was pivotal in shaping Huang's trajectory in the field. The focus of Su (2016) is on the state's involvement in commercial production, rather than the production of films that directly propagate the party's ideological narratives. There is also research that focuses specifically on the latter. Tim Trausch (2019) examines the phenomenon of "main melody" (*zhuxuanlü* 主旋律) films. These appropriate the techniques of commercial film to popularize ideological content (Trausch 2019). With a similar aim, but a different argument, Yu Hongmei (2013) studies the changing form and content of the narration of history in main melody films. The research article cites *Founding* as a case in point for the argument "that the conversion from propaganda to consumerism through the spectacular is one of the most crucial steps toward postsocialist ideological consolidation" (Yu 2013, 186). The concept of "postsocialist ideology" in film, as discussed by Yu, raises the question what subverts and is subverted in the relation between commercialisation and propaganda. This question will also be discussed in this thesis.

Another issue concerning Huang's films is the subject of innovation in ideological communication, or propaganda. Ma Weijun (2014) studies popular main melody TV-series, arguing that these constitute an innovation in the "ideological persuasion" of the PRC. This innovation in main melody film and television, it could be argued, set the stage for *Founding* as a "milestone [that] marks the successful shift from propaganda to persuasive communication" (Wolte 2017, 33). Another ingredient to Huang's trajectory is the role of Hong Kong filmmakers in the production of main melody films in the PRC, specifically in some of Huang's later co-produced films, like *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (*Zhiqu wei hushan* 智取威虎山, 2014), directed by Tsui Hark. Stephen Y. Chu (2022) describes *Founding* as a new model for subsequent main melody films produced with a strong engagement of Hong Kong film directors. Although Huang is mentioned as co-director, Han Sanping is credited as the creator of this new model. The role of Huang in the production is not discussed (Chu 2022).

2.2 Huang's films in scholarly discourse

In research focusing on the so-called "Fifth Generation" of mainland Chinese filmmakers, Huang is only scarcely mentioned. Zhang Yingjin (2012) mentions Huang but does not analyse any of his films specifically. In contrast, Li H.C. (1989) analyses *Black Cannon Incident* on equal footing with *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi* 黄土地, 1984) and *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*

红高粱, 1987), but does not mention Huang's trajectory in the field. Other Fifth Generation filmmakers like Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang and Chen Kaige are studied in research papers or even extensive monographs focusing specifically on these filmmakers (Larson 2017; Lu T. 2001; Lu Y. 2022; Zhang R. 2008; Zhu and Robinson 2010; Giannetta and Van De Weetering 2010; a.o.). Zhu Ying and Bruce Robinson (2010) study the transition of Fifth Generation directors "from art to commerce" (Zhu and Robinson 2010, 145) without mentioning Huang. In fact, Huang is not mentioned a single time in the entire volume, even though the cover image of the book includes the poster of *Founding*. Examining his case may provide the key to getting a better understanding of the transition of the Fifth Generation directors, but even more so of the relation between "Art, Politics, and Commerce in Chinese Cinema"⁵ more generally. It seems that Huang is, to some extent, overlooked by film scholars, which could be explained in part by his being less known outside the PRC or by the less consistent style of his films, making him a less popular subject for an *auteur* study.

In Chinese-language research on the Fifth Generation of filmmakers, on the other hand, Huang is analysed on a more equal footing with other directors of his generation. Yang Yuanying (2000) argues that his filmmaking broke with other members of the Fifth Generation in terms of form and content, moving from a highly formalistic to a simpler documentary approach in technique between the 1980s and 1990s, while maintaining his interest in contemporary social issues from a humorous perspective (Yang 2000, 93). Wang Zhimin (2006) goes so far as to argue that while the more famous Fifth Generation filmmakers, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, evade reality, Huang is the only Fifth Generation director besides Ning Ying who makes realist films. Here, Wang sees Huang more as an exception to the Fifth Generation, who has not enjoyed the same international success as his peers (Wang Z. 2006, 95).

There is a body of research on specific films in both English- and Chinese-language film studies. Among those, an important scholarly debate that underpins my study is whether Huang's 1980s films can be conceptualised as *postsocialist*. The first to interpret *Black Cannon Incident* as postsocialist was Paul G. Pickowicz. He argues that Huang's first trilogy subverts the traditional socialist system by satirising its ideological foundations and humorously portraying the characters' alienation from it (Pickowicz 1994). Chris Berry and Mary Ann Farquhar (1994) analyse *Black Cannon Incident* as an example of *postsocialist film* but use the term to describe

⁵ The title of Zhu and Rosen (2010).

the style and filmic strategies rather than the themes and narratives of the films. In *Black Cannon Incident*, the individual is alienated both from the socialist system and from modernisation. “Western devices” of art are applied to underscore this double alienation and to create an effect of “distanciation” (110), which entails establishing a distance between the characters in the film and in their relationship with the audience, and invoking ambiguous meanings in the cinematography. Comparing the film to *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, 黄土地), the authors generalise postsocialist strategies in film as the opening up of new aesthetic possibilities that break with the orthodoxy of socialist realism (Berry and Farquhar 1994, 100–110). Jason McGrath (2019) provides a slightly different reading of *Black Cannon Incident*. According to his interpretation, Huang subverts the authorities’ Maoist ideological fantasy, according to which the main character Zhao Ziyang’s relationship with a foreign engineer and his awkward behaviour reveal his dissidence and collusion with a foreign spy, by presenting it as the ideologically driven fantasy of paranoid party cadres. It is a fantasy that hinders China’s modernisation, which, according to the film’s narrative, can only be achieved through objective science and openness to the West (McGrath 2019). Nick Kaldis (1999) takes a more abstract approach, analysing *Dislocation* through the lens of “aesthetic cognition”. He argues that the film is not merely postsocialist, it is postmodern in its rejection of both repressive politics and capitalist appropriation, but also provides its own theoretical framework through the medium of film, its own concept of subjectivity that is only possible in this artistic form (Kaldis 1999). Irrespective of the differences in the concepts used for analysis, Huang’s earliest trilogy is considered as critical art, which subverts mainstream ideology.

The later films, up to the *Founding* trilogy, are mostly omitted in English-language research, while Chinese-language research covers most of Huang’s work, mostly emphasising the continuity of his films up to *Gimme Kudos* (*Qiu qiu ni, biao yang wo* 求求你, 表扬我, 2005) (Ding 2002; Huang 2004; Hu S. 2008; Feng 2014; Wen 2008 a.o.). Zhang Yingjin summarises Huang’s films from the 1990s and early 2000s as part of a brief description of “urban cinema” as an example of “postsocialist nostalgia” and the “convergence of critical art and popular entertainment” (Zhang Y. 2004, 288). Yomi Braester (2012) also only briefly mentions Huang in a text on “urban cinema”, a subject that would have allowed giving more scope to Huang’s film productions. There, he quotes Zheng Dongtian, who ascribes a prominent role to Huang’s films in their depiction of modernisation through individualisation in a commercialised society (Zheng 1997, 68). There are also several other Chinese-language studies of Huang’s earlier films, which describe them using different terms associated with urban cinema. One describes

Huang's films as modern fables of the city (Chen M. 1998), another as literary material, a „city novel“ (*Chengshi xiaoshuo* 城市小说, Zhao 1989, 28) in the case of *Samsara*. Another group of scholars emphasises the depiction of urban culture in Huang's films. In particular, they focus on the portrayal of ordinary city dwellers, “the village in the city” (*Dushi li de cunzhuang* 都市里的村庄, Dai 1994, 48), and the customs of ordinary residents in the city (Guo 2005). Another focus is Huang's depiction of urban space that signifies the contradictions inherent in urban dwellers' relationships with traditional culture and modernisation (Li D. 2009). In addition to these readings, there is also a discourse that describes his films as “urban searching for roots” (Kuoshu 2011; Wang X. 2012). However, these are all texts that lack a perspective on specific filmmaking practices and individual trajectories within the field, as embedded in its changing circumstances.

Harry H. Kuoshu (2011) provides a more comprehensive study of Huang's works. He categorises his films into three phases. The first three deal with machines and alienation, while the second deal with communal politics and fragmentation. From these two trilogies, he distinguishes the subsequent films up to *Gimme Kudos*, which still deal with communal politics, but within a more consciously humorous approach, making Huang a humourist in the sense of the Chinese tradition of humorous cultural critique (Kuoshu 2011). In Chinese-language research, Huang's films from the 1990s are examined through the concepts of “new realism” (‘Xin xieshi’ ‘新写实’, Chen Y. 1999; Huang 2004; Wang Z. 2006), which is a reference to European “Neorealism”, the relationship between the intellectuals and urban culture (Bao 2009; Yuan 2016); “absurd consciousness” (Liu 2011); and the “absurdity” inherent China's transforming society, as expressed in Huang's style (Liu 2014). Other analytical lenses include “duality” in film and the ambiguity and inconclusiveness of his filmmaking (Jia 1990). A comprehensive study of Chinese-language film scholarship on Huang's films is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis.

Founding is examined in studies that focus on main melody film (the research mentioned above: Trausch 2019; Yu 2013; Chu 2022), or, more generally, as a new mode of propaganda. Sebastian Veg (2012) studies the “repackaging [of] propaganda as entertainment” (Veg 2012, 41) in the earlier two *Founding* films, from 2009 and 2011, focusing on the new role of Mao in official discourse. Isabel Wolte (2017), on the other hand, analyses *Founding* as an innovation in “persuasive communication” that moves away from traditional forms of propaganda. Cai Shenshen (2019) applies another theoretical lens to study the same film, conceptualising it as a

“propaganda-infused blockbuster” (Cai 2019). Despite similar subjects, none of these three sources, Veg (2012), Wolte (2017), and Cai (2019), mention each other. Part of my analysis will be to combine these perspectives and engage them from a long-term view on Huang’s filmic trajectory. There is a paper examining Huang’s cinematic trajectory, “from pioneering and exploring to expressing the mainstream”, that may resonate with the scope of my research. Feng Ling (2014) provides an explanation for this filmic shift in Huang’s filmmaking, describing the increasing orientation towards commercial “mainstream” (主流) productions in mainland cinema. However, the analysis of the developments underlying Huang’s shift is limited to only two paragraphs (Feng 2014, 104).

There is no biography or monograph yet on Huang and his cinema. However, there is a paper by Chen Mo (2011) with a research objective similar to that of this thesis. The research article analyses Huang’s cinematic development aesthetically, combined with biographical information (Chen 2011). However, Chen (2011) ends the analysis with the early 2000s. Xu (2022) describes Huang’s trajectory more comprehensively up to his “new mainstream” (*xin zhuliu* 新主流) films starting in 2009. Xu places Huang at the centre of this new type of political film, arguing that his career was characterised by different phases of innovation in film, finally culminating in the creation of *Founding*, which integrates political and commercial film into the new mainstream. Xu identifies an “early mainstream film concept” (*‘zaoqi zhuliu dianying siweiguan’* ‘早期主流电影思维观’, Xu 2022, 112) in Huang’s films in the 1990s, in that way explaining his trajectory towards making *Founding* (Xu 2022, 112). Xu provides an insightful argument for Huang’s trajectory, but lacks depth, offering a somewhat ideologically deterministic account of Huang’s filmic development. Xiao Cai (2011) provides biographical notes on Huang, mainly a list of his work. In all these articles, the social context surrounding Huang and his filmmaking is not examined at all.

My research aims to address Huang’s filmic trajectory in relation to its changing social context, the social field of mainland cinema, a focus that has not yet been explored in research. While drawing on some of the above findings, this perspective requires a novel research approach in theory and methodology.

3 Analytical framework

The theory and methodology outlined in this section provide the foundation for reconstructing the phenomenon under study and defining the empirical strategy of the analysis. First, I draw upon Bourdieu's field theory, concepts from cultural industry studies and authorship theory to structure and guide the analytical approach. Second, I provide the concrete methodology and research strategy to arrive at a comprehensive conceptualisation of Huang's social trajectory in the field of mainland cinema.

3.1 Theory

Bourdieu's theory of social fields provides an analytical framework for examining the structure of the field, its agents and its relationship with other fields. To account for the institutional and transnational context in which the field operates, the framework is complemented by concepts from cultural industry studies. Finally, I discuss various approaches to authorship that conceptualise the relationship between field structures and individual authorship.

3.1.1 Social fields

In examining the phenomenon of Huang's trajectory in the field of mainland cinema I follow the sociological research paradigm proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, "to understand both the genesis of social structures [...] and the genesis of the dispositions of the habitus of the agents who are involved in these structures." (Bourdieu 1993b, 162)

The field relations and relations between fields provide the social structure. At first glance, this might resemble structuralist social theory. However, the social structures are here not fixed underlying societal structures regulating social life, but structures reproduced and produced through individual agents who are themselves formed by social structures in their actions. The theory of social fields can insofar be understood as a sociological development of Michel Foucault's poststructuralist discourse theory (Foucault [1969] 2002). According to Foucault's discourse theory the subject enters the discourse through a specific point of enunciation, the specific entry point to discourse, determined by the "enunciative domain [...], an anonymous field whose configurations defines the possible position of speaking subjects. Statements should no longer be situated in relation to a sovereign subjectivity, but recognize in the different forms of the speaking subjectivity effects proper to the enunciative field." (Foucault [1969] 2002, 137). In this statement, Foucault already mentions the concept of a field. Bourdieu diverges

from Foucault's discourse theory insofar as he allows for acting agents. In contrast to Foucauldian discourse, or "enunciative fields", Bourdieu's social fields contain agents as such. In this sense, Bourdieu's field theory gives greater clarity to social action and decision-making as shaped by the field and shaping the field in which the agent is situated (Bourdieu 1993a, 72–74). In this research paradigm, agents and actions can be studied directly, without abstracting them into discursive points and relations. Nevertheless, they have to be analysed in their contextual relations, i.e. the relations within the field and the field's relations with other fields, as they change over time.

A field is a social space, also imprinted on physical space as the carrier of social meaning,⁶ which is defined by a function of field-specific stakes and interests. For a field function, it takes "stakes and people prepared to play the game, endowed with the *habitus* that implies knowledge and recognition of the immanent laws of the field" (Bourdieu 1993a, 72). The concept that theoretically links the structure of the field and the agent navigating through it is the *habitus*, the sum of consciously and subconsciously learned dispositions, acquired both outside and inside the field, that generate strategies of action that pursue the agent's objective interest in the field. The objective interest does not mean a specific subjective goal or profit, but an objectively possible position in the field. The determination of objectively possible positions in the field is governed by the power structures as well as the field-specific struggle, the struggle between the newcomers, who want to get access to the field, and the ruling agents, who struggle to keep their monopoly and eliminate the competition. Furthermore, the objective interests are only partially conscious interests that generate only partially conscious strategies in the field, as the rules of the game underlying these strategies are only partially consciously learned. The history of the functioning of the field is learned through belonging to the field, not through consciously accumulating a stock of knowledge on the field, but through playing the game, in the case of philosophers, "knowing what one needs to know of the history of philosophy in order to be able to behave as a philosopher within a philosophical field" (Bourdieu 1993a, 76). The *habitus* binds the agent to the field. It is the sum of dispositions for specific social practices acquired through practice in the field. Through the *habitus* the agents inherit their own position-specific history of the field. At the same time agents shape the subsequent history of the field in their

⁶ For this reason, Bourdieu also works with cultural spatial maps, for example to show the spatial distribution of theatres on the left and right side of the Seine according to social characteristics, or the distribution of the places of residence of writers according to their position in the Parisian literary field, as can be found in the German collection of the texts by Bourdieu on the economy of symbolic goods (Bourdieu 2014, 113ff, 171f).

engagement with the field-specific competition, that is, playing the game guided by the habitus of playing the game (Bourdieu 1993a, 72–76).

The theory of the habitus and social fields has received criticism, some of which I believe can help identify their potential and limitations. Van den Berg (1998) criticises the theory, claiming that it is a vague restatement of sociological common knowledge, not adding any theoretical value in explaining social mechanisms, only further blurring the line between the individual and the social. In this theoretical vagueness, Bourdieu tends towards social determinism (Van den Berg 1998, 212–20). A first counter to that criticism is that the article by Van den Berg argues from a positivist angle, aiming to generalise social mechanisms at the expense of social context. That, however, does not relieve Bourdieu of the criticism. A quote from Bourdieu's text can provide a further counter to this line of criticism:

The relation that is established between the available positions and the position-takings does not entail a mechanistic determination. All agents, writers, artists or intellectuals construct their own creative project according, first of all, to their perception and appreciation inscribed in their habitus through a certain trajectory and, secondly, to their predisposition to take advantage of or reject those possibilities in accordance with the interests associated with their position in the game. (Bourdieu 1993b, 184)

In this statement, both the criticism of theoretical ambivalence and social determinism could be identified. What the habitus entails in relation to conscious interests is still partly unclear. These concepts need to be filled with concrete empirical content to be of scientific value, firstly in terms of the extent to which individual action is determined by the habitus as opposed to interests, and secondly in terms of the extent to which the field shapes the habitus of agents in the field as opposed to the individual trajectory determined by individual choices shaping the habitus. The methodological design of this research aims to address these issues and open new theoretical avenues into the social relations that underpin individual action in the context of cultural production.

3.1.2 Field of cultural production

The specificity of the literary and artistic field is defined by the fact that the more autonomous it is, i.e. the more completely it fulfils its own logic as a field, the more it tends to suspend or reverse the dominant principle of hierarchization; but also that, whatever its degree of independence, it continues

to be affected by the laws of the field which encompasses it, those of economic and political profit. (Bourdieu 1993b, 38f)

The field of cultural production is characterised by a degree of autonomy from other social fields. However, autonomy does not mean independence. The field is the “site of a double hierarchy: the *heteronomous* principle of hierarchization [...] [and] the *autonomous* principle of hierarchization” (Bourdieu 1993b, 38). The heteronomous principle of hierarchization is the logic of hierarchization in the wider societal context. The field of cultural production is dominated by the field of power, i.e. the political system, as well as the economic field, the economy more generally. Accordingly, the political economy determines the position of the field of cultural production in society, and not the other way around. The internal hierarchization of the field is determined by its autonomous principle of hierarchization. The more autonomous it functions, the less it is governed by political and economic logic. In place of political profit, political power, or economic profit, field-specific symbolic power constitutes the currency of the field. Nonetheless, since the field of cultural production is a dominated field, political and economic power never ceases to affect the field. The increasing autonomy of the field, however, means that the effect of political and economic forces on the field is increasingly mediated through the field-internal logic of hierarchization (Bourdieu 1993b, 37–40).

The hierarchy in the field is a hierarchy of social practices invested with symbolic capital, the value of which is contingent on the field-specific consecration. There are agents and institutions that consecrate the position-takings, i.e., endow specific cultural products with value. These agents and institutions must be consecrated themselves as legitimised consecrators to be in the position to consecrate the work. The agents producing cultural works, as well as those consecrating these works, are engaged in competition for positions in the hierarchy, positions of symbolic power to strengthen or weaken the consecration of works of art in the field (Bourdieu 1993b, 76–80). This competition for positions in the hierarchical system of the field depends on the audience, or the recipients of the cultural goods:

The field of production per se owes its own structure to the opposition between the *field of restricted production* as a system producing cultural goods objectively destined for a public of producers of cultural goods, and the *field of large-scale cultural production*, specifically organized with a view to the production of cultural goods destined for non-producers of cultural goods, ‘the public at large’. (Bourdieu 1993b, 115)

The *field of restricted cultural production* is characterised by a degree of autonomy, whereby cultural production is primarily governed by internal competition for legitimacy and external socioeconomic factors are mediated through this internally competitive hierarchical system. That means the agents in the field produce for other producers of cultural goods in the field. The field still needs external economic capital and political legitimacy to function. Additionally, the agents in the field bring their social backgrounds with them. However, these external factors do not determine the production in the field. It is the functioning of the field which determines how these external factors are utilized in the field. A disinterestedness in economic profit may imply symbolic profit in the field, as the agents and institutions allocating resources tend to allocate according to the symbolic hierarchization of the field as the field becomes more autonomous (Bourdieu 1993b, 39f, 115).

The *field of large-scale cultural production*, on the other hand, is dominated by the broader socioeconomic and political context of the field. It is dominated by political capital and the quest for state resources, but also by economic capital, the accumulation of capital through revenue as well as through obtaining investment capital. Thus, the cultural goods are produced for a broader public audience, a target audience determined by the search for economic profit (Bourdieu 1993b, 125–30).

The relationship between these two fields determines the dispositions and position-takings of the agents according to their position in the field-relation:

This opposition between the two markets, between producers for producers and producers for non-producers, entirely determines the image the writers and artists have of their profession and constitutes the taxonomic principle according to which they classify and hierarchize works (beginning with their own). (Bourdieu 1993b, 130)

A preliminary hypothesis on the social trajectory of Huang can be inferred from this theory. As Huang's position in the field of restricted production of mainland cinema might have been stagnating at some point, he moved to the field of large-scale production - in the case of mainland cinema, *propaganda-infused blockbusters* - seeking a bigger audience with larger gains, as well as the secure investments of politically determined state financing institutions. This trajectory implies a change in habitus and a shift in position-taking. This hypothesis will be examined further in this thesis.

Bourdieu's field theory has also been criticised from the academic perspective of Chinese studies. He developed his theory based on the French literary field, raising the question of whether the model can be meaningfully applied to the Chinese literary field and, by extension, mainland cinema. Hockx (1999) argues that Bourdieu's binary opposition between the autonomous and heteronomous principle does not fully capture the structure of the modern Chinese literary field, which is shaped by a "third principle, partly but not fully heteronomous, which motivates modern Chinese writers to consider, as part of their practice, the well-being of their country and their people" (Hockx 1999a, 12). Bourdieu also theorises concrete mechanisms characterising the social relations of the occupants of different positions in the fields, such as the pursuit of individual distinction, the forming of avant-garde collectives that criticize the literary establishment for succumbing to the profit motive, and the autonomy of the artistic field (Bourdieu 1993b, 68–72), which, while coherent in the French context, do not translate directly to the PRC. As Hockx (2002) argues, the Chinese literary field is characterised more strongly by authors seeking to fit into collective structures than by attempts to cultivate individual difference, thereby challenging the universality of a distinction-based habitus and assigning lower value to individual distinction. Furthermore, literary evaluation in the Chinese literary field operates through the culturally specific notion of "normative form," which links the value of a text more closely to its social context, including the authorial persona. Such dynamics challenge Bourdieu's assumptions about the primacy of the individualised habitus and the autonomy of symbolic production (Hockx 2002).

More fundamentally, Wendy Larson (1999) criticises the lack of applicability of Bourdieu's theory in China, arguing that it does not adequately account for cultural production in the "Third World"⁷, particularly filmmaking. Here, scarcity of economic resources and dependence on international funding collapse the notion of an autonomous field of cultural production. She argues that the work of Fifth Generation directors was aimed at both internal mainland audiences and external international audiences, particularly in Europe and the US. In this context, multiple, often contradictory habitus formations coexist and cannot easily be linked to the internal functioning of the field of mainland Chinese cinema. Consequently, key assumptions of Bourdieu's theory, including the concept of field autonomy, fail to capture the

⁷ Larson (1999) employs the notion of "First-Third World"-relations. While these concepts need to be updated in terms of the Global North–South relationship, I would argue that this binary does not easily apply to China, in particular, considering China's changing position in globalized capitalism since the 2000s (Dirlik 2014).

role of unequal global competition and the transnational conditions that shape mainland filmmaking (Larson 1999).

Despite these critiques, I argue that Bourdieu's general perspective on social fields, such as the degree of field autonomy, internal and external hierarchies, and field-specific dispositions, remains useful as a conceptual framework, provided that these concepts are empirically adapted and revised using complementary theoretical approaches. I agree with Hockx (1999) that the autonomous and heteronomous principles do not adequately capture the field of mainland cinema. It continues to be shaped by collective ideological imprints rather than the pursuit of individual distinction, though not necessarily in the sense of serving the "well-being of the country and the people" (Hockx 1999a, 12). Later in the thesis, I will argue that the concept of *postsocialism*, as introduced by Arif Dirlik (1989), helps to account for the collective dispositions of filmmakers in mainland China, which are imbued with the ideological legacy of the socialist past, the rupture with that past, and the partial adoption of capitalism (Section 7.1.2). This also means that value and legitimacy are attached less to the figure of the autonomous artistic creator guided by a purely field-specific habitus, and more to the authorial persona embedded within collectives, institutions, and ideological discourse. These issues are discussed further in the section on authorship (Section 3.1.4).

A further limitation of Bourdieu's framework is its implicit nation-state centred formulation, which lacks a conceptualisation of transnational relations. Larson (1999) highlights this issue in the case of "Third World film", demonstrating how global economic inequalities and dependence on international funding undermine the assumption of autonomous national fields. I consider this issue more broadly in terms of transnational relations in mainland cinema, particularly with regard to other Sinophone cinemas, as well as the transnational dimensions of Huang's filmmaking trajectory. The following section therefore introduces the concept of cultural industries as part of the analytical framework that can address this gap by capturing the transnational economic and capitalist-ideological relations that shape the field.

3.1.3 Cultural industries

The lens of cultural industries brings an economic development perspective, evoking the image of an industrial complex and the idea of cultural modernisation. For this thesis, it serves as a critical concept that draws attention to the production of ideological-cultural narratives that

form subjects under the PRC-mode of postsocialist industrial capitalism in its transnational relations.

The concept of “cultural industries” is bound in its origins to the industrial complex that is Hollywood. In their most famous work, the “dialectic of enlightenment”, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2022) analyse Hollywood as the most prominent example of the “culture industry” (‘Kulturindustrie’, Horkheimer and Adorno 2022). Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the totality of the culture industry operates through repetition, mirroring the underlying pattern of industrial work, taking from viewers their last thoughts of resistance, and forming the industrial capitalist individual according to the ideological needs of the industrial complex of late capitalism.

Richard Florida (2002) used the term in a more positive light, describing with it the ideal of entrepreneurship and the creative class as the new drivers of the contemporary creative economy. This understanding of the concept, and the subsequent rephrasing of it as a “creative industry”, was heavily criticised for its neoliberal rebranding of capitalist accumulation - that is, for portraying making money as “creative” (Miller 2009). These industries are far from the ideal described by Florida. Precarity is increasingly the defining characteristic of the Hollywood film industry (Curtin and Sanson 2016). In economic terms, this precarity translates to uncertainty in the production process, making planning and control difficult, and output and profitability equally risky (DeVany 2004). This economic uncertainty results in extreme income inequality between professions, but even more so within a single profession, creating both “superstars” and precarious film workers. Recent strikes in Hollywood are signs of the untenable level of inequality in the industry.⁸ Since Hollywood functions as the global cultural centre of gravity and as a widely perceived ideal for cultural development, these insights are highly relevant to the study of film industrialisation and cultural industrialisation more broadly. Both themes figure prominently in mainland Chinese discourse on the development of its own cinema and also shape Huang’s reflections on mainland film. These connections will be discussed further in Sections 5 and 6.

⁸ For example the strike of the Writers Guild of America in 2023: Rottenberg, Josh, and Jessica Gelt. 2023. “‘We’re Fighting for Survival’: Writers on the Picket Line Talk Pay, Family and How the Strike Is Hitting Home’. *Los Angeles Times*. May 14. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2023-05-14/wga-writers-strike-impact>.

Another dimension of the cultural industries is their geography. Production chains of the cultural industries, from content design and creation, material and tool production, reproduction, and mass distribution, to the exhibition and sites of exchange, encompass wide geographic nets, often specialising and thus concentrating certain activities in specific regions. In these regions, cultural industries can induce strong secondary impacts on patterns of economic development, often considered by policymakers, and on cultural life and identity more broadly. More direct are the primary impacts, the way geographic relations and the local are formed by the specific processes of cultural creation (Pratt 2011, 327–34). That is to say, the question of how the changing structures and practices of agents in the field of cultural production shape geographies. Although not explicitly outlined in Andy C. Pratt (2011), these production-focused concepts can be reconnected back to the ideological function of cultural production in a geographical dimension, i.e. the geographical and regional manifestations of ideological production.

Finally, the concept of cultural industries can also be used to decentralise European and Anglo-American theoretical work by broadening the analytical vocabulary used to describe Asian regional cultural production. In the contributions collected in Lorraine Lim and Hye-Kyung Lee's *Handbook of Cultural and Creative Industries in Asia* (2019), the term is employed as an open, descriptive category that captures the interplay between cultural policy, cultural producers and production processes, and the consumption and circulation of cultural goods. It also encompasses the role of cultural industries in activism, independent culture, and subcultures, as well as the negotiations of heritage and tradition at the intersection of politics, economics, and identity. The concept thus enables both a regionally grounded analysis and an understanding of the transnational embeddedness of cultural industries.

In the field of cultural industry studies, discourse on authorship is less prominent. The focus is instead on institutional structures and policy environments. While some approaches integrate identity and agency, authorship itself remains secondary. In contrast, this thesis focuses on the social function of authorship and the agency of individual authors within the field.

3.1.4 Authorship

The discourse on authorship is too extensive in its theoretical genesis to provide a complete description. Given the scope and aims of this research, a few key points from the discourse on authorship in film suffice to explain the approach to authorship adopted in this study.

Edward Buscombe (1981) traces the development of the concept of *auteur cinema* from its romantic origins towards more structuralist conceptualisations. The romantic authorship theories usually postulate a unity between the artist and his art, explaining the art with the personality and inherent skill of the artist, the genius *auteur*. The structuralist authorship concepts seek to explain a film through the underlying structures that produced it, rooted in the *auteur's* unconscious preoccupations. Structural forces produce the codes and meanings in film through the preoccupations of the *auteurs*. He ends the text by putting forward three avenues for expanding the concept of *auteur* from a more sociological perspective, which include the effects of cinema on society, society on cinema, and films on other films. Buscombe rightly brings up these aspects but fails to reference any pre-existing theories on these perspectives.

Catherine Grant (2000) criticises the concept from another angle. According to her analysis the discourse on the “*auteur*” entails a commodification of authorship in the form of „*auteurist consumption*“ (Grant 2000, 106). This process encompasses production, audience interaction, but also film studies itself (Grant 2000). This research employs an *auteurist* lens. The subject is the film discourse and the social field surrounding a single film director. I incorporate Catherine Grant’s critique of *auteurist consumption* insofar as I specifically examine commodification in film, focusing on the role of Huang in the wider net of film production in mainland China by applying a methodology which comes close to what Janet Staiger (2013) describes as a “*sociology of production*” (Staiger 2013, 42ff). This authorship approach aims to describe the social structures, the internal and external relations of the production process, the roles individuals take up within these relations, and the routines they perform as part of those roles.

In addition to the concept of authorship as *sociology of production*, Staiger (2013) describes several different approaches, including authorship as *origin* or *personality* (30-40), which are closer to the romantic authorship approaches described above. Then there are more structural or discourse-oriented approaches, authorship as *signature*, as *reading strategy*, or as *site of discourse*. Authorship as *sociology of production* could be added to this category of authorship approaches, but is based on a more material sociological conception of structure and relation than the discursive approaches (40-49). This approach to authorship provides part of the framework for my analysis. What is missing is the individual disposition and position-taking of the author as an agent. The lack of agency in this theory is also criticised by Staiger (2013, 43). For this reason, Staiger ultimately applies the concept of authorship as *technique of the self*.

Here, the author is an active agent endowed with the necessary power, the “specific authority to make authoring statements” (51), to perform authorship through citation and repetition of statements (49–52).

Finally, I engage with the discourse on authorship through Bourdieu’s field theory. In this theoretical framework, authorship is a social function that is only possible within a specific field, with its own laws of functioning that constitute the social function of authorship, such as the writer in the literary field (Bourdieu 1993b, 162f). From this perspective, this research aims to conceptualise Huang’s changing authorship function in the field, which, in my approach includes Huang’s understanding of the field and the related self-understanding of his role and artistic choices. However, the concept of field-specific habitus formation and dispositions does not clarify the author’s agency, as it is bound to their position within the field and to the field’s functioning. By contrast, the approach of *technique of the self* shifts the focus towards the individual recognising their ability to act and to make authoring statements, as constituted by discursive systems and enabled by their position within social relations (Staiger 2013, 50f). However, this approach does not withstand the critique of overemphasising field autonomy and the autonomous artistic creator discussed above (Section 3.1.2). Following the empirical analysis, I will further explore this theoretical gap.

Figure 1 summarises the approach to authorship adopted in this study. Without reiterating the full theoretical discussion above, the figure illustrates the discrepancy between field-specific habitus and authorship as *technique of the self*. Combining insights from field theory and cultural-industry perspectives, it sets the relative autonomy of the cultural field against the influence of ideology and the regionally shaped geographies of cultural production. These geographies are formed through cultural policy, modes of production, and patterns of circulation and consumption. These structural and commercial forces can both shape and clash with regionally specific subcultures, heritage, and identity. Rather than applying an auteurist lens as a consumerist label or a purely stylistic category, this framework emphasises that authorship is situated between discourse-based subjectivisation and social functions embedded within transnational networks and fields of cultural production.

3.2.1 Film analysis

The first step is to conceptualise Huang's cinematic trajectory, from *Black Cannon Incident* to *Founding*, drawing on research on his films as well as my own film reading. This step consists of two sub-analyses. The first is a film comparison of *Black Cannon Incident* and *Founding*, based on analytical concepts derived from James Monaco (2009). The focus is on the relationship between the two films in terms of their cinematic style, specifically the use of lighting and colour, sound, editing and montage, shot composition, and set design. Although, the main emphasis is on the themes, narrative structure, and character development. The film analysis is complemented by research literature on Huang's films.

The second part describes the cinematic trajectory from *Black Cannon Incident* to *Founding*. That includes the films directed by Huang and those co-produced by him. They are positioned within Huang's cinematic trajectory, identifying turning points and continuities in their cinematic style, the main themes, and the character development. The preceding film comparison between *Black Cannon Incident* and *Founding* provides a comparative framework for analysing the films as points on the cinematic trajectory.

3.2.2 Field analysis

Next in focus is the social trajectory of Huang in the field of mainland cinema, the relations of organisations and actors, the economic structure, and the relations with other Sinophone cinemas, especially Hong Kong cinema, and with Hollywood, in which he is embedded. This approach is driven by Bourdieu's "point of method":

It follows as a point of method that one cannot give a full account of the relationship obtaining at a given moment between the space of positions and the space of dispositions, and, therefore, of the set of *social trajectories* (or constructed biographies), unless one establishes the configuration, at the moment, and at the various critical turning-points in each career, of the space of available possibilities (in particular, the economic and symbolic hierarchy of the genres, schools, styles, manners, subjects, etc.), the social value attached to each of them, and also the meaning and value they received for the different agents or classes of agents in terms of the socially constituted categories of perception and appreciation they applied to them. (Bourdieu 1993b, 65)

It is not possible to give a full account of the relationship between the space of positions and dispositions at any point in time since the totality of things cannot be described fully. The above "point of method" can nonetheless serve as a guide for reconstructing Huang's social trajectory.

I begin by deriving the position of mainland cinema within its wider context from research on the socioeconomic and political developments surrounding it. This is done by collecting and organising the arguments and results of the research, guided by the concepts described above in the theory section. At the same time, the analysis of research literature aims to adapt the concepts and their interrelations. The final aim of this exercise is to get closer to reconstructing the changing “space of available possibilities” (Bourdieu 1993b, 65) Huang is situated in along his trajectory.

The set of dispositions that guide position-taking, i.e. the practices in the field, is embedded in the field structure, the principles that determine the hierarchy, the struggle for resources, and thus the space of available possibilities in the field. The field structure in turn, is dependent on other fields, namely, the political and economic fields. This specific dependence relation is itself dependent on the degree of autonomy of the field of mainland cinema. Therefore, I analyse and derive the position of the field of mainland cinema, focusing on cultural policy, the tension between art and industry in film and ideology-driven filmmaking in post-Mao China. A particular emphasis is given to transnational relations of the field, adapting the field theoretic framework.

3.2.2.1 *Social network analysis*

After a brief summary of Huang’s life trajectory, I examine the field’s internal structure. I restrict the perspective to film production by and around Huang, collecting data on the production companies and film crew members from the films’ closing credits, websites on the films and production companies, and media articles. Besides the list of names of the crew members, I also collect information on the production companies’ headquarters, and information on whether these companies are state-owned, state-administered, or private. Budget and box office data are incomplete and were therefore not included in the analysis. The films examined include all those directed or co-directed by Huang, from his first feature film production, *Black Cannon Incident*, to *Founding*. The data thus compiled are listed in Appendix II. These data are then visualised as two-mode network graphs, primarily using the *igraph* and *ggraph* packages in RStudio, to highlight links among the films in Huang’s trajectory. These links include the crew members, actors and production companies shared between Huang’s films. Each crew member, actor, and production company is represented by a node on the graph, connected to the film nodes by edges. In the crew member network graph, for example, second-degree neighbours are crew members who participate in common film projects or films with

common crew members. To maintain visual clarity in the crew member and actor networks, only nodes with at least two adjacent edges are included, i.e. crew members or actors connected to at least two films. A map of the locations of the production companies participating in Huang's films adds a geographical dimension to the analysis. These network graphs together provide a horizontal perspective on Huang's position in mainland cinema as a film director.

3.2.2.2 *Interpretative systems analysis*

To derive Huang's dispositions in the field, I analyse selected articles by or interviews with Huang. These were selected based on the year of publication and the themes discussed in the text, to include texts of different stages in his trajectory, and two after the release of *Founding*. In total, I analysed three articles by and three interviews with Huang (Appendix III).

For the interpretation of the texts, I used a systems analysis as described by Lueger (2010), to analyse Huang's interaction with the field and the development of the field in which he is situated. This analysis includes a focus on his self-described role, his reflection on the changing field relations, and the meaning of filmmaking for him. The selection of text sequences for interpretation was guided by theoretical considerations. The theoretical framework provided a guide for determining which sequences were relevant to answering the research question and for generating hypotheses, as well as for searching for text sequences that disprove or lead to an adaptation of the hypotheses. Ultimately, the selection aims to achieve theoretical saturation, providing sufficient material to generate and test the theory of the phenomenon in question. The aim is to reconstruct the habitus, the changing dispositions of Huang, determining his authorship-function in the field, based on his reflections on his role as a filmmaker. I follow the paradigm of Sarah Projansky and Kent A. Ono (2013) in this respect:

We argue that the study of cinema profitably includes an understanding of the filmmaker's role as social subject. We also argue, however, that this critical focus makes sense only if it includes an examination of the author-function, or the production of the auteur in various public discourses about a particular filmmaker and her or his film, including discourses produced by the filmmaker herself or himself. (Projansky and Ono 2013, 263f)

A systems analysis, as conceptualised by Lueger (2010), is a qualitative interpretation method that, in terms of level of detail, is situated between fine-grained sequential interpretation methods and content or thematic analysis. It is a less granular variant of interpretative methods that can be used for larger volumes of text and to analyse social processes and dynamics in highly differentiated social fields. Selected thematic text units are analysed extensively to

reconstruct the structuring characteristics of social contexts and the perception of specific social reality. The analysis is organised into three layers and five interpretation steps. First, the analysed thematic unit is paraphrased to describe the manifest content (“Paraphrasierung”). Then the second layer, the context of expression (“Äußerungskontext”), is subdivided into the text frame of the unit (“Textrahmen”) and the lifeworld underlying the expression (“lebensweltlicher Kontext”). In the first sub-step, the specific context of text production is analysed, including the situational intentions during the text production. In the second sub-step, the focus is on the specificity of expression dependent on the lifeworld experience of the text producer, or in other words, the perception of reality and normality as manifested in the specific forms of expression. The third layer of analysis is the hypothetical context of action (“hypothetischer Wirkungskontext”). The first step here is to interpret the interaction effects of the contexts analysed in the preceding steps. The aim of this step is to reconstruct the structuring of the interactions, the hypothetical processes of social actions, in which the text producer is textually situating her- or himself. The final step is to interpret the system effects, the dynamics and evolution of the social system or field, which forms the context of reference in the text and the social context in which the text producer is acting. In this step, the reactions and interactions of other actors towards the actions described by the text producer are interpreted. The hypothetical context reconstructions generated in the course of these steps are then tested by contrasting them with the results of subsequent analyses, which include contrasting thematic units and testing the plausibility and consistency of the theoretical inferences, the concepts and argumentative structure generated (Lueger 2010, 199–206).

Based on the systems analysis of the articles and interviews, I reconstruct Huang’s dispositions as a film director and categorise them according to the main dimensions identified in the analysed texts. Within each dimension, I first present the findings of my analysis of Huang’s 1986 article reflecting on his filmmaking debut, *Black Cannon Incident*, and a 2009 article by Huang and Han Sanping reflecting on *Founding*. I then compare the findings of the analysis of these two texts. From there, I follow up with an analysis of the other interviews and articles, which expand on the comparison and fill in the gaps in Huang’s changing dispositions over the course of his filmmaking trajectory.

I then reconstruct Huang’s trajectory as a film producer. This analysis combines relevant text sequences from the articles and interviews with information from other sources about the films he collaborated on as a producer, along with research literature on their production.

3.2.2.3 *Case comparisons*

In a final sub-step, I bring in a case comparison with Zhang Yimou, a comparatively well-researched film director (Larson 2017; T. Lu 2001; Zhu and Robinson 2010; Giannetta and Van De Weetering 2010). As both Huang and Zhang are Fifth Generation filmmakers whose work has shifted towards more commercial productions, their positions and position-takings are temporally and stylistically related. A more pronounced distinction may be identified in their relation to state actors and institutions in their mode of film production. I provide concrete examples as points of comparison, such as Zhang's involvement in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games, in a similar way to *Founding*, a state-led production. Another case for comparison is Feng Xiaogang, a film director who focuses mainly on comedy and, early on, adapted to commercialisation while instilling his commercial comedies with social critique. In comparisons like these, which Linda Gordon (2013) calls “small comparisons” (Gordon 2013, 321), I seek to expand the view on the “network of [...] relations” (Shih 2013a, 95) in the field, to question the arguments raised in previous analytical steps and to raise new questions, creating new argumentative lines.

3.2.3 **Theoretical synthesis**

In this step, I revise and contextualise Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework on field-specific positions, dispositions and position-takings. I then expand on this framework by reflecting on the role of ideology, as manifested in different forms of postsocialist filmmaking. I consider the institutional and economic configuration of state-led film industry development and transnational filmmaking, as well as the limits of the notion of a national field, invoking the paradigm of Sinophone cinemas. Finally, I conceptualise the changing authorship function of Huang, addressing the dichotomy between authorship as a field-specific function and individual authorial agency. I set out the theoretical framework in dialogue with other concepts and research literature. The product of this theoretical discussion is a revised conceptual framework and the derivation of hypotheses and potential research avenues for further study.

4 The cinematic trajectory of Huang Jianxin

Before deriving explanations of the underlying field structures and individual dispositions that shape Huang's trajectory and the filmic choices made, I reconstruct the filmic trajectory itself, from *critical art films* to *propaganda-infused blockbusters*. I provide an analysis of the films, first comparing the endpoints of his trajectory and second analysing the points in between.

4.1 Comparison of *Black Cannon Incident* and *The Founding of a Republic*

In their main themes and basic plots, *Black Cannon Incident* and *The Founding of a Republic* defy comparison. However, as the analysis proceeds, specific differences and similarities appear that reflect Huang's cinematic trajectory and developments in the field of mainland cinema more generally. In the analysis, I start by describing the main theme and plot, and then move on to the cinematic style, significant themes, and character development. A conceptual discussion will preclude the film comparison.

In *Black Cannon Incident*, a mining company engineer, Zhao Shuxin, who has lost his "Black Cannon" Chinese chess piece, sends a telegram to the hotel where he stayed to retrieve it. The post office clerk becomes suspicious when she reads about the "Black Cannon" and informs Zhao's employers. The mining company that employs him was already suspicious of him because of his personal relationship with a German engineer sent to China to help install the new drilling machinery. Zhao is fluent in German, so he has been translating for the German engineer. Because of the incident with the "Black Cannon" chess piece, Zhao is transferred to another position when Hans Schmidt, the German engineer, comes for a second visit to complete the final installation of the WD machine. A tourist translator, Feng Liangcai, replaces him but does not know how to translate the engineering vocabulary. The manager of the mining company discovers that Zhao's "Black Cannon" is just a missing chess piece. At the management board meeting, he suggests keeping Zhao on as a translator. Still, the plant's old party secretary insists on keeping Zhao away from the German engineer until the "Black Cannon Incident" is resolved.

A translation mistake by Feng results in the burning of all bearings during the test run of the WD, causing significant losses to the company. Eventually, Zhao receives a parcel containing the missing black cannon chess piece after the company managers inspect the parcel. They

reproach Zhao for sending a telegram for a worthless plastic chess piece. Zhao is left aback, surprised and confused.

Founding depicts the historical events, the conflicts and negotiations leading up to the proclamation of the PRC on October 1, 1949, in Beijing. The film primarily focuses on the political manoeuvring and negotiations among various Chinese political figures during the critical period between 1948 and 1949. The narrative delves into the final stages of the Chinese Civil War between the Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang (KMT), and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), featuring historical figures such as Mao Zedong, Chiang Kai-shek, Zhou Enlai, and others as main characters. The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference and political parties other than the CCP and the KMT also play a central role. In short, the film provides a dramatic retelling of this pivotal moment in Chinese history, highlighting the transition from the Chinese civil war to the establishment of the new state under Communist leadership, the founding of the People's Republic of China. The film's final scenes depict the creation of key symbols of the PRC, including the annual military parade, the national anthem, and the national flag.

4.1.1 Cinematic style

In their cinematic style, these two films exhibit marked differences. As described above, *Founding* is a theatrical depiction of the historical events that form the founding myth of the PRC. The main part of the film consists of high-level meetings of numerous politicians and diplomats scheming, negotiating, and reacting emotionally as the dramatic events of this history unfold. Scenes like these dominate both the plot and the character development. They are intercut with short war scenes that give the film a documentary quality. The film is fast-paced throughout, with constant cuts and angle changes. This creates a very dense two-hour vision of the founding myth. Central to this vision are state symbols, which are the sole focus of the film's final 20 minutes. These symbols connect the past with the present, fulfilling the film's role as a celebration of the PRC's 60th anniversary.

The phrases used by the characters in discussing China's symbols construct a connection between the past and present. For example, in the first meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference⁹ (CPPCC), discussing the new national anthem of the PRC, one older

⁹ *Zhongguo renmin zhengzhi xieshang huiyi* 中国人民政治协商会议.

delegate makes the argument for using the original lyrics by Tian Han in Nie Er's "March of the Volunteers", stating, "the lyrics of the song remind us not to forget the past" ('*zhe shou geci tixing women qianwan buyao wangji guoqu*' '这首歌词提醒我们千万不要忘记过去'). The same argument for keeping the wartime lyrics is then restated by the founder of the KMT's revolutionary committee, Li Jishen, a central character in the film, also present at the CPPCC: "We must remember history" ('*yao jizhu lishi*' '要记住历史').

While *Founding* is stylistically centred on constructing a lively historical narrative around state symbols, *Black Cannon Incident* is dominated by codes and symbols of modern art. The rooms are set in modernist interior architecture with minimalist colour-codes, mainly black, white, and red. The set design and camera framing are dominated by symmetrical shapes and long, slow takes, somewhat reminiscent of the pace and style of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. This design clashes with the characters' humanly irrational behaviour. Here, I follow the interpretation of Berry and Farquhar (1994), who argue that the set design combines symbols and forms of modern art to create an atmosphere of distance and alienation against a backdrop of material modernisation.

One example of the clear-cut colour code and symmetrical shapes in the sets of *Black Cannon Incident* is the rock concert scene that Zhao Shuxin visits with his girlfriend. The singer performs in black clothes, contrasted by dancers behind him, wearing short red dresses, both reminiscent of 60s and 70s fashion. He sings a Chinese cover version of the song "1001 Nights (Ali Baba)" by the German band Pappy'ion.¹⁰ The scene is cut short when Zhao and his girlfriend leave the concert after the audience, emboldened by the music, grows increasingly loud and raucous, with one man even being taken away by security guards for his wild outbursts. The scene conveys a sense of distance and disconnection between the contemporary deviant youth and the film audience, identifying with Zhao Shuxin.

¹⁰ Merkel, K.-H. (1979). *Pappy'ion—1001 Nights (Alibaba)* [Vinyl recorded by Pappy'ion]. CBS Inc. <https://www.discogs.com/release/1608968-Pappyion-1001-Nights-Alibaba>. The song was popular in mainland China at the time. It first gained popularity in Hong Kong through George Lam's version, before being adopted in the PRC (Baidu Baike 2023a). This is an exemplary case of the role that Hong Kong played as a transnational hub for cultural imports into the PRC.

4.1.2 Depiction of the youth and the party

The rock concert scene described above can elicit different readings of the image. For European viewers, the image might be confusing in its mixture of modernist abstract shapes and a song featuring the orientalist folklore figure of Ali Baba. Berry and Farquhar (1994) explain this mixture by the manner in which “Western modern art” was introduced to post-Mao China. A comprehensive history of modern art, banned during the Cultural Revolution era, was reintroduced to China within a few years, presenting Chinese artists with a century of modern art in one fell swoop (Berry and Farquhar 1994, 102). The “Ali Baba” song itself plays a specific role in that context. The lyrics say “Ali Baba is a happy guy” (‘*Alibaba shi ge kuaile de qingnian*’ ‘阿里巴巴是个快乐的青年’), in contrast to the original lyrics, which only retell the tale of his hideaway.¹¹ In the film, Ali Baba might symbolise the wild youth, escaping the strict regularity of their working life under bureaucratic party leadership. Children play a similar role, as an early film analysis describes, “these images of children present an ideal picture of simplicity and innocence contrary to the adult world of anxiety and distrust” (Li H.C. 1989, 107). I would argue that the final scene of children playing with bricks and the concert scene of young adults going wild at the concert show two sides of the subversive potential of the Chinese youth at the time, both the chaos and the innocence and playfulness in the absence of bureaucratic control.

In *Black Cannon Incident*, the party functionaries are introduced during formal meetings of the management board, all wearing white clothes at a white table in a room with white walls, a large white clock in the background. The company wants to modernise by introducing new machinery from Germany. However, the party secretary is more preoccupied with her suspicions of a conspiracy between Zhao and the German engineer, since the two speak in German, in which only they can converse, to the exclusion of the ears of the party. Rather than following the objective demands of industrial development and skills, specifically, Zhao’s engineering and translation expertise, the Party prioritises its own abstract ideals, hierarchical order, and paranoia about foreign influx. Especially the old party secretary seems out of place, adhering to ideals and principles of a vanished past. At the same time, Zhao himself acts irrationally. He does not fit into the gigantic industrial complex. The plant is often filmed in long takes, showing the machine-filled landscape of coal and dust in a somewhat

¹¹ For the lyrics, see: NewTigerArt. 2022. ‘Pappy’ion 1001 Nights (Ali Baba) 1979 Lyrics’. Deviant Art. 26 February 2022. <https://www.deviantart.com/newtigerart/journal/Pappy-ion-1001-Nights-Ali-Baba-1979-Lyrics-908185569>.

impressionistic style. These images are visually stunning and, at the same time, create a sense of alienation from symbols of modernisation and capitalist industrialisation.

The CCP party organisation within the mining company is portrayed as unable to cope with the technological, economic, and cultural developments of 1980s China. Its functionaries have lost touch with the youth, who are embracing a divergent, individualist pop culture that absorbs foreign cultural goods from capitalist countries. In a scene discussing the case of Zhao, the party secretary of the plant, Zhou Yuzhen speaks about the disconnect with the youth and the development of society, “Some people call me names behind my back, they call me Serious Zhou, old lady Ma, Secretary Left. [...] It seems that Marxism-Leninism has gone out of fashion” (*‘youren beihou ma wo, jiao wo Zhou renzhen, Ma laotai, zuo shuji. [...] haoxiang malie zhuyi bu shixing le’* ‘有人背后骂我，叫我周认真、马老太、左书记。[...] 好像马列主义不时兴了。’). In the case of Zhao, she concedes that “people must have principles” (*‘ren yao you ge yuanze ma’* ‘人要有个原则嘛。’). At the following management meeting, she says that Zhao must be protected from himself by the Party, personified by her.

Unsurprisingly, this antinomy between youth and party bureaucracy is absent from the *Founding*. The youth do not play an important role here, nor are they assigned any particular symbolic meaning. Rather, it is the CCP that is playing the role of the historic youth, a relatively new political force ahead of its time and leading the struggle in the right direction, in contrast to the KMT, which is fading from power and corrupted by its own functionaries. This is conveyed through the stylistic depiction of the CCP in bright colours and revolutionary guerrilla-style clothing, in contrast to the KMT, which is depicted in sterile dark black clothing in darker, often rainy environments. This association of the KMT with a dark and melancholic atmosphere can be interpreted to highlight their historical fate of losing the mandate to rule China.

4.1.3 Character development

A characteristic feature of *Black Cannon Incident* is the empathetic way the characters are developed. There are no evil characters, only individual humans acting irrationally and in an overly individualistic manner, such as Zhao Shuxin. In the case of party officials, ideology and bureaucratic structures lead them to act as they do. All are depicted as multifaceted human characters. Thus, it is not individual humans who are criticised, but the ideology and party bureaucracy that guide their actions.

Founding also develops multiple characters. Character development is certainly more central than the narrative structure. Here, however, the focus of character construction is different. The focus is on leaders and their followers, that is, the interaction with their followers and the emotions these leaders evoke in other characters on screen and in the minds of the film audience (Wolte 2017). Even Chiang Kai-shek is portrayed as an emotional yet self-destructive human being. However, his party is in decline, resorting to mafia tactics to silence opponents and bringing him down with them.

The different approaches to character development are also evident in the smiles of the main characters. Zhao Shuxin wears a humorous smile as he looks back on his own confused series of events. Mao is also frequently seen smiling light-heartedly at the people around him. However, his smile is less of a silly smile, reflecting ironically on himself, but the smile of a grandfather who listens to his grandchildren explaining to him the world of today, a proud grandfather. Remarkably, Mao is not portrayed as the revolutionary motor driving continued development of the country, but as a figure who has accomplished his task. Even the subsequent films of the *Founding* trilogy and Huang's other political-historical films after 2009 refrain from telling stories of the Mao era, except *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (*Changjin hu* 长津湖, 2021), produced by Huang, portraying a battle during the Korean War, in which Chinese soldiers fight against the US Army in a 300-style battle¹². According to the narrative of *Founding*, Mao is the leading figure who shaped the foundation of the PRC state and its symbols, making himself a symbol of the state in completing the founding process. Nevertheless, Mao is also a human figure who feels and experiences as mortal people do. Mao's smile underscores his human embodiment as a state symbol. This lively and emotional human depiction is a novelty in the film, a quality attributable to Huang's directorial role, as I will argue later in the text.

Besides Mao, numerous other historical figures are described in detail. *Founding* weaves a multitude of stars into the narrative, creating vivid historical characters who sometimes appear and disappear within minutes or even seconds. Of the many characters in *Founding*, it is, however, striking that Mao is less complex than Chiang Kai-shek. Mao is portrayed as a

¹² Referring to the hyperbolic depiction of the hero-figures in battle in Zack Snyder's *300* (Legendary Pictures, 2006).

charismatic figure, always ready for a laugh and pragmatic in his decision-making. But he tends to be too perfect at times, losing his more down-to-earth human appeal. The antagonists are easier to sympathise with. In general, the film masterfully develops the supporting characters, creating hundreds of roles for Chinese film stars in this highly symbolic mode of production, while keeping Mao as more of an ideal type.

The screen is filled with stars, creating a complex net of relations among the characters on screen, the stars, and the film audience. Zeng (2009) describes the film star system in terms of brand power. Stars are brands in themselves and support other brands through their brand power in what is called a “brand extension strategy” (‘*mingxing mingpai yanshen zhanlüe*’ ‘明星名牌延伸战略’, Zeng 2009, 45). *Founding* is the first of Huang’s films to employ this commercial strategy, and it is also the film in which this strategy was used to the greatest extent, compared to Huang’s later *propaganda-infused blockbusters*. Seen in this light, the film is not only celebrating the 60th anniversary of the PRC, but also Chinese cinema itself. Character development serves a different purpose than in his earlier films. It goes beyond the screen into the media reality of Chinese filmmakers and actors.

4.1.4 From *critical art film* to *propaganda-infused blockbuster*

Based on my reading of *Black Cannon Incident* and the film analysis by Paul G. Pickowicz (1994) I conceptualise Huang’s earliest trilogy, *Black Cannon Incident*, *Dislocation*, and *Samsara*, as *critical art films*. Visually, *Black Cannon Incident* is an avant-garde art film. It explores new visual forms and modern architecture, with clear, sterile forms and clear-cut colour codes, often intermixed with documentary sequences that visualise the urban and industrial environment surrounding the film’s main stage. But these films are not only art films, but also critical comedies that depict the failure of the socialist bureaucracy to cope with the liberal-capitalist development of Chinese society (Pickowicz 1994). This is most starkly visible in the depiction of party and state functionaries failing to cope with the new norms and practices of the postsocialist youth. These films are comedic in their absurd and ironic narratives (Feng 2014, 103; Liu 2011), and visually stunning by “invoking Western modern art” (Berry and Farquhar 1994, 110) through the deliberate use of abstract film techniques. These artistic citations, in their formalist style, create a postsocialist aesthetic that is also postmodern, associating ambiguous meanings with the modernisation of Chinese society (Berry and Farquhar 1994; Kaldis 1999).

One aspect I emphasise more in my reading is the mode of character development. Huang's films create multiple, complex characters, portraying even the supposed antagonists as ambivalently human. His changing mode of character development also links these films to his later productions.

I conceptualise *Founding* as a *propaganda-infused blockbuster*. It does not fit the label of evolutionary realism as the films of the cultural revolution were termed, it is not postsocialist in the sense of challenging the socialist heritage, and it is also not simply top-down propaganda, as often portrayed in Anglo-American media (Child 2009; *The Economist* 2022). This framing of the film aligns with what Tang Xiaobing (2014) describes as biased reporting, which categorises Chinese films based on the ideological perspective of liberal democracy. In general, propaganda is never a simple top-down flow of information, a simple manipulation of the population, but a targeted dissemination of ideological narratives, which is always contingent on human reception and interactive response (Denton 2021, 21f). *Founding* is essentially a blockbuster commemorating the 60th anniversary of the PRC's founding. This dual function of the film as both a commercial product and a state commemoration is achieved by applying commercial film techniques to make a film based on contemporary ideological narratives of the party, i.e., propaganda discourse. The plot, the cast, the advertising of the film, filming techniques, etc., are informed by technical-commercial considerations, and infused with ideological meanings in the form of political-historical narratives and symbols (Cai 2019).

Finally, *Founding* represents an innovation in "historical film" (Wolte 2017) or main melody film (Tausch 2019; Yu 2013; Chu 2022), a commercial film in style and production, infused with "official propaganda" (Cai 2019). I use Cai Shenshen's (2019) concept of *propaganda-infused blockbuster* to denote this new model of state-led film production. The two subsequent films of the *Founding* trilogy, *The Founding of a Party* (*Jiandang weiye* 建党伟业, 2011), and *The Founding of an Army* (*Jianjun daye* 建军大业, 2017), a trilogy that narrates the creation of the PRC state and its symbols, the CCP and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), as prescribed by the official party discourse, and other films directed and produced by Huang after 2009, follow this model in terms of filmmaking and narrative techniques (Cai 2019; Chu 2022; Tausch 2019; Veg 2012; Yu 2013).

While *Founding* is not described as postsocialist in the texts mentioned above, it could be argued that the film is postsocialist in its embrace of capitalist production relations. The goal

of propagating official discourse, patriotic socialist narratives and state symbols is pursued through cinematic practices embedded in the state-constituted market economy of the PRC. Commercial film production and the logic of the commercial film market are harnessed to promote ideological narratives. This aspect will be discussed further in Section 7.1.3. To delineate Huang's filmic trajectory, *propaganda-infused blockbuster* is an apt term for the film that marks its endpoint.

4.2 Huang's films in between

Dislocation very much follows the style of *Black Cannon Incident*, with similar cinematography and related themes. As in *Black Cannon Incident*, the cinematography includes starkly contrasting colours and long scenes featuring artwork, architectural landmarks, and symbols, portraying a clean, modernist image of China. The main character is an overworked director general who installs a robotic copy of himself to attend meetings in his place. The film touches on the issue of alienation in the process of capitalist modernisation and in social relations at work. However, it does not directly address party bureaucracy and ideology.

Released just before the 1989 demonstrations and subsequent massacre, *Samsara* follows the lives of children of high-ranking officials who are socially left behind and get sucked into a cycle of alienation and depression. The cinematography is less symbolic and abstract and more realistic, closer to the characters. In this regard, the film is already more similar to his later works. Nevertheless, with *Samsara*, Huang takes social criticism in film to a new level, mirroring the social upheaval at the time. I therefore include the film in what I term Huang's trilogy of *critical art films*.

After a short break from filmmaking, Huang reengaged with "urban cinema" (Zheng 1997; Braester 2012) in 1992, starting with the production of *Stand Up Straight, Don't Bend Over!* (*Zhan zhi luo, bie pa xia* 站直啰，别趴下, 1993). In this absurd comedy, an anxious journalist gets into the midst of a neighbourhood quarrel between a low-life business entrepreneur and an old party official who fails to cope with the rapid transformation of China towards a capitalist market economy. All these characters stumble together through a changing urban society marked by rapid construction, chaotic relationships, and capitalist exploitation, with their wives further complicating the relationships. Even while constrained by traditional gender roles, the film masterfully develops its characters in a very humorous and realistic way. Visually, the film is less formalistic and abstract than his earlier films.

There is a continuity in the themes and narratives of the films up to *Gimme Kudos* (*Qiu qiu ni, biao yang wo* 求求你, 表扬我, 2005), almost all of which depict urban life, social relations in the city, and the complexities of “urban communal politics” (Kuoshu 2011, 55). In all these films, Huang manages to create an array of ambiguous characters, of antiheroes, who find themselves in absurd situations and plots (Kuoshu 2011). Similarly, another scholar identifies a continuity in all of Huang’s films up to *Gimme Kudos* in their focus on the ordinary as the nexus of the story, ordinary city dwellers as the locus of the film (Wen 2008). These films share the broad theme of small-town life in the big city, creating an image of urban culture and the customs of ordinary people in the city (Guo 2005), which Dai (1994) aptly describes as “the village in the city” (‘Dushi li de cunzhuang’ ‘都市里的村庄’, Dai 1994, 48). These films can also be further divided into two periods. *Stand Up Straight, Don’t Bend Over!*, *Back to Back, Face to Face* (*Bei kao bei, lian dui lian* 背靠背, 脸对脸, 1994), *Signal Left, Turn Right* (*Hong deng ting, lu deng xing* 红灯停, 绿灯行, 1996), and *Surveillance* (*Maifu* 埋伏, 1997) are all critical comedies humorously scrutinising the corruption and inefficiency among officials and businesspeople in urban China. Starting with *Xi’an’s Finest* (*Shui bu zhao* 睡不着, 1998), Huang’s films became darker and more dramatic in their portrayal of intimate urban lives and relationships, without the humour of his earlier films. *Xi’an’s Finest* is a police drama that captures the darker facets of urban society. *Something about Secret* (*Shuo chu ni de mimi* 说出你的秘密, 1999) and *The Marriage Certificate* (*Shei shuo wo bu zai hu* 谁说我不在乎, 2000) focus more on individual psychology and family dynamics. The latter also touches on cultural revolution nostalgia and the psychological dimension of China’s post-Mao transformation.

Gimme Kudos is in many ways similar to *Xi’an’s Finest*. It scratches at the respectable facade of objective reporting and police work, which is undermined and overwhelmed by the subjective reality inherent in personal trauma. Interwoven into the story is a washed-up man from a small village who is desperate to earn “kudos” or formal recognition for some deed, as his father was decorated with hundreds of official certificates for his deeds during the Maoist era and cannot respect his son until he, too, receives public praise. While this subplot opens the film as a comedy, it soon takes a darker turn. As more details of the crime are revealed, the trauma of a rape victim and the reporter’s inability to deal with this reality dominate the film. Again, it is the character development, the complexity and depth of the relationships between the characters, and their evolution throughout the film, that stand out. The absurd in a play of ordinary urban characters becomes an increasingly dramatic reality. This can be emphasised as

a constant element in Huang's films. It is perhaps this aspect of his filmmaking, the ability to create complex characters and develop drama through their relationships, that prepared the ground for his role in the production of *Founding*.

All of these films correspond with the concept of urban cinema, as discussed by Braester (2012), setting the scene with cityscapes and specific visions of urban space, but focusing on changing relationships and the contradictions of individual consciousness and identity against the backdrop of urbanisation and commercialisation.¹³ In that view, these also continued the series of postsocialist films but in a simpler visual style, leaving behind the abstract form of the earliest trilogy.

There are outliers in this filmography that I have not discussed yet. In 1993, Huang directed the melodrama *The Wooden Man's Bride* (*Wukui* 五魁, 1993). Similar to *Ju Dou* (菊豆, 1990), directed by Zhang Yimou and Yang Fengliang, the film is set in rural China at the beginning of the twentieth century. The film starts as a historical drama, seemingly depicting the rescue of Wukui, a bride-to-be, but turns into a melodrama criticising harsh customs that bind women to their ancestral household and home, constraining their movement. Wukui is finally liberated from her miserable, tortured life at home by a gang of thieves led by her servant, who has also become her lover. While the film does portray female liberation from brutally conservative norms, it is the man "saving" her, and earlier also, the men negotiating her liberation. Thus, it is still a film very much constrained by its male gaze. Similar to the role of the paranoid party bureaucrat in *Black Cannon Incident*, the old widow is the one constraining the youth, trying to prevent the liberation. Nevertheless, she is portrayed as a human character, rather than as a simple figure of evil. According to the film, the evil lies in the social relations binding the characters, in this case, outdated customs, which individuals follow with good intentions. Visually, it is characterised by stunning desert landscapes and traditional clothing in rural China. These slow-paced scenes share commonalities with *Black Cannon Incident*, but even more so with films of his contemporaries Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, including *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi* 黄土地, 1984). In this sense, the film can be seen as Huang's attempt to enter the earlier genre of the rural root-searching, which brought about the initial success of the Fifth Generation of filmmakers.

¹³ My reading of these films is also informed by Kuoshu (2011), who describes a key aspect of these films as the way in which individual identity is shaped by communal politics (p.55-69).

Ten years later, Huang made *Swordsmen of the Passes-Uncle Donger*¹⁴ (*Guanzhong dao ke zhi Donger* 关中刀客之董二, 2003), a martial arts film set in China's rural West.¹⁵ Dong Erbo, the protagonist of the film, is not a swordsman in the militaristic sense of the word, but rather a sage who educates, instils virtues and good deeds, and uses moral ideals rather than the sword to improve the world around him. The film establishes his moral authority and wisdom through several scenes, including writing an indebtedness note in blood to a highwayman, helping out a young man who accidentally killed a relative, and taking care of the daughter of his father's murderer. The film is not political; it carefully portrays the swordsman as someone who conserves rather than rebels against the social order. This is also evident in Dong Erbo's positive relationship with an imperial bureaucrat. The evil characters are local feudal lords. Unlike in *The Wooden Man's Bride*, local traditions and feudal relations are not portrayed as an evil, oppressive force. Visually, the film is also set against the backdrop of China's barren rural west, with local traditions and customs highlighted, as is characteristic of the "Western Martial Arts" genre. However, it is much faster-paced and less focused on film aesthetics, and as such, more oriented towards a commercial film audience.

In the second half of the 1990s, Huang began working in production roles for Taiwanese and Hong Kong films. In 2001, he worked in similar positions on several films a year, including co-productions with US companies and collaborations with Hong Kong filmmakers, such as *Big Shot's Funeral* (*Da wan* 大碗, 2001), which was headed by a mainland crew. *Big Shot's Funeral* is an interesting point in this trajectory for several reasons. Firstly, it is a comedy by Feng Xiaogang, filmed in the Forbidden City, the central symbol of the PRC's historical heritage and of regime transition and legitimacy. The site is plastered with capitalist symbols, which are the target of the film's satire. Secondly, the film reflects on power relations and hegemony, particularly in Chinese-US co-productions. Finally, this is the first film production on which Huang and Han Sanping have collaborated. Feng Xiaogang then appeared as an actor in two of Huang's films, *The Marriage Certificate* and *Founding* (Figure 4), and as a producer in *Gimme Kudos* and *Swordsmen*, in the latter with Han Sanping, who went on to direct *Founding* with Huang (Figure 3).

¹⁴ Hereafter, *Swordsmen*.

¹⁵ On Baidu Baike, the film is also described as a "Western Martial Arts" film characterised by images of the arid and desolate landscapes of Western China (Baidu Baike 2025).

In 2003, Huang worked on the production of the main melody film *Zhou Enlai in Bandung* (*Zhou Enlai Wanlong zhi xing* 周恩来万隆之行, 2003). He also participated in the international co-productions of *Kill Bill* (2003), *The Kite Runner* (2007), and *The Mummy 3: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (2008), all of which were led by American crews. He mostly worked as a producer on films directed by Hong Kong directors and led by Hong Kong crews and production companies, or on co-productions between Hong Kong and mainland crews and production companies. These include *Reunion* (*Shouzu qing* 手足情, 2002) and *Zhou Yu's Train* (*Zhou yu de huoche* 周渔的火车, 2002), the latter of which was led by a mainland crew, *Love Undercover 2* (*Xin sha shimei 2* 新扎师妹 2, 2003), *2 Young* (2005), *Drink-Drank-Drunk* (2005), *Embrace Your Shadow* (2005), *Battle of Wits* (2006), *The Warlords* (*Tou mingzhuang* 投名状, 2007), *Phoenix* (*Fenghuang* 凤凰, 2007), *All About Women* (*Nüren bu huai* 女人不坏, 2008), *Shinjuku Incident* (*Xinsu shijian* 新宿事件, 2009), *Bodyguards and Assassins* (*Shi yue weicheng* 十月围城, 2009), which were led by Hong Kong crews, some of which included Japanese crew members and companies. *Blood: The Last Vampire* (2009) is a Hong Kong-Japanese-French-US co-production.¹⁶ Most of these were large-scale productions, mainly martial arts fantasy films and comedies, including several international blockbusters such as *The Mummy 3: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*.

Finally, in 2009, Huang returned to directing, together with Han Sanping, for the production of *Founding*, and has since continued to direct and produce mostly political-historical and patriotic action films, following the model of the propaganda-infused blockbuster.¹⁷

¹⁶ Appendix I contains a full list of film productions in which Huang Jianxin participated as a crew member.

¹⁷ All films are listed in Appendix I.

5 Mainland Chinese cinema in its socioeconomic and political context

The preceding section examined Huang's diverse cinematic works as a director, producer and co-producer. It traced the trajectory of his filmmaking from critical art film to propaganda-infused blockbuster, showcasing his position-takings in mainland cinema, but also in the cinemas of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Hollywood. To reconstruct Huang's social trajectory and the social positions and dispositions that underlie his cinematic works, the first step is to situate the field of mainland cinema within its broader socioeconomic and political context.

As a social field, cinema is interwoven with other fields and other layers of social fields in society. The metaphor of the field is somewhat misleading, since all social domains and processes are interlinked and thus cannot be easily enclosed from one another like a field of wheat. Reconstructing the position of a social field necessarily entails a certain reductionist demarcation, drawing boundaries of differentiation that do not exist as clearly in social reality. Yet this analytical abstraction is indispensable to identify the mechanisms that distinguish one field from another, the field-specific social logic that governs it, and the relations between fields that together constitute the social space of cultural production in a comprehensible way.

Despite its reductionist overtones, this framework allows me to map the field of mainland cinema within its socioeconomic and political context as it evolved from *The Black Cannon Incident* to the release of *Founding*. Mapping the field encompasses both a horizontal and a vertical perspective, both from inside and outside of the field, i.e., the internal logic of the field and the field-specific hierarchy, as well as the position of the field in the broader societal hierarchy of fields (Section 3.1). In the analysis, I will start from the broadest perspective, moving closer to the field in the next section, where I will also examine the changing socioeconomic and political relations as manifested in the evolving internal mechanisms of mainland cinema and in Huang's filmmaking.

5.1 Post-Mao ideology and cultural policy

The birth of Chinese cinema in the early twentieth century was largely shaped by the presence of foreign powers and individuals in Shanghai, and the city's integration into the global economy. A multitude of European and US businesspeople resided in Shanghai and provided funding and skills for the establishment of early film production. Film equipment was first imported from the US, and many Chinese filmmakers were trained there. Soon after the

establishment of Chinese cinema in the 1920s, the development of the field was marked by the conflict between commercial interests and the goal of ideological and moral education through film (Zhang Y. 2004, 13–57). These educational goals were strongly influenced by the May Fourth Movement, a political and cultural movement that originated with the Tiananmen student protests of May 4, 1919, advocating for China's modernisation and intellectual emancipation from imperial powers and the constraints of traditional society (Carter 2016, 118–23).

The field of politics began to dominate only with the increasing control of the KMT-state under Chiang Kai-shek, which dominated resource allocation for cinematic production and shaped field-internal norms of production through censorship. Nonetheless, leftist filmmakers in the 1930s and 40s defied both the pure market logic and political censorship, producing films infused with leftist ideology (Zhang Y. 2004, 58–112).

After 1949, some of the same filmmakers continued to make leftist films, but now as part of state-organised productions. The party-state became the driving force behind the development of the film industry. Campaigns were launched at irregular intervals during the Mao era (1949–76) against supposedly deviant cultural practices, at productions that deviated from the ideological narratives propagated during these campaigns. During the Cultural Revolution, this intrusion of the logic of the political field into the field of cultural production reached new heights (Zhang Y. 2004, 189–224). Politics permeated the field-internal hierarchisation to such an extent that the hierarchy between the two fields was inverted. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, the logic of the field of cultural production came to impose itself on the political sphere (Gu 2011, 294f). That changed with Mao's death. A recovery of mainland cinema ensued after the devastating period of the Cultural Revolution. Soon after, with the emerging socioeconomic and political order under the slogan of "Reform and Opening Up" (*Gaige kaifang* 改革开放), led by the market reforms of the Deng era, expansion and an increase in autonomy characterised the further development of the field (Zhang Y. 2004, 222, 226–29).

Meyer-Clement (2016) describes the first phase of cultural policy after the Cultural Revolution as a rehabilitation of previously shunned ideas, norms, and cultural practices. The first phase of the Deng-era cultural policy was to allow the return of cultural products banned during the Cultural Revolution and to grant greater freedom in the arts and artistic expression. At the same time, instead of coercion, the party used softer measures to get artists to follow party ideology.

As early as 1981, however, Deng called for an ideological rectification in the arts, to uphold the “four cardinal principles” of “keeping to the path of socialism; upholding the dictatorship of the proletariat (people's democratic dictatorship); upholding the leadership of the CPC; and upholding Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought” (Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies 2022). With Deng’s speeches providing the legitimisation, campaigns were launched in 1981 and 1987 against “bourgeois liberalisation” (*zichan jieji ziyoushua* 资产阶级自由化), and in 1983 against “spiritual pollution” (*jingshen wuran* 精神污染). Although these campaigns involved direct criticism of artistic works, they only provided loose negative boundaries and no clear prescriptions for cultural production (Meyer-Clement 2016, 58f). As Richard Kraus (2004) argues, early Deng-era cultural reforms and campaigns were not guided by a coherent cultural vision but emerged as an “unintended by-product of other policies designed to secure Deng Xiaoping’s power” (2). This helps explain the incoherence and factionalism characterising cultural policy in the early 1980s.

Despite these campaigns, the 1980s also saw a period of open criticism of the communist cause, marking a retreat of political forces in the arts. In 1988, markets for cultural goods were officially approved, but the disregard for the underlying economics of the cultural field ultimately “resulted in widespread cynicism among artists, producers and consumers” (Meyer-Clement 2016, 61), further eroding party control over the cultural field. There was thus an increase in both the field autonomy and marketisation at the expense of political influence. These developments were accompanied by a strengthening of professionalism among artists, who increasingly pursued aesthetic and professional autonomy as market reforms and the shift of the state from a dictating to a facilitating role eroded the capacity of cultural bureaucracies to exert tight control (Kraus 2004, 163–71). The propaganda system was weakened, but a degree of power was maintained by setting new norms for cultural production and by preserving the party-state's censorship function in that field. By the end of the 1980s, the principles and instruments of Maoist cultural policy were also, in part, slowly being reinstated (Meyer-Clement 2016, 55–62).

This ambiguous development of cultural policy after the Cultural Revolution was paralleled in the political field by the struggle among party factions for control and by the discourse on the further course of market reforms in China. The relative openness of the discourse included exchanges with scholars from non-socialist countries and with economic bureaucrats from other socialist states, especially from Yugoslavia. The 1980s were thus a time in the political field

very much characterised by the engagement with foreign expertise, including scientific exchanges, and policy experimentation (Weber 2021). These parallel trends speak to the alignment of cultural policy with the political-economic development of the PRC.

In the aftermath of the student demonstrations and the subsequent massacre in 1989, the purge of the political leadership also reached the state institutions of culture and propaganda. A change of leadership in these institutions also saw a revival of the “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” (*Yan’an wenyi zuotanhui jianghua* 延安文艺座谈会讲话), Mao Zedong’s 1942 programmatic statements on the political function of literature and art, which demanded that all cultural production serve workers, peasants, and soldiers under Party leadership (Mao 1942), as the canonical text for cultural policy in the PRC. This revival initiated an expansion of propaganda and thought work. In that spirit, Jiang Zemin called for the improvement and propagation of main melody films with popular appeal reflecting contemporary socialism. These films should provide an entertaining means of ideological and patriotic education (Meyer-Clement 2016, 62f). Yu (2013) argues that the production of the main melody film genre, which Yu conceptualises as an example of state-led postsocialist cultural practice, was the product of the ideological transition by the party leadership and state to legitimise its continued rule in a postsocialist market economy.¹⁸ The ideological discourse was adapted to meet the new ideological demands of the post-Mao era.

Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 “Southern Inspection Tour” (Nanxun 南巡), a series of visits to southern Chinese cities during which he forcefully reaffirmed the need to accelerate China’s Reform and Opening Up policies, marked a new turn towards liberalisation and the acceleration of market reforms following the 1989 crackdown. The hardliners who had been put in charge of the bureaucracy in 1989 were removed. Jiang Zemin called for “establishing and improving the socialist market economic system” (*‘jianli he wanshan shehuizhuyi shichang jingji tizhi’* ‘建立和完善社会主义市场经济体制’, Jiang 1992). According to this principle, cultural policy was essentially also economic policy. Market reforms were targeted at the cultural field, encouraging a market orientation in cultural production. At the same time, in pursuit of Maoist ideals of censorship and propaganda, public funding for propaganda work was increased. Anne-Marie Brady (2008) argues that the post-1989 propaganda system underwent a deliberate modernisation. Censorship practices were updated, monitoring structures expanded, and new

¹⁸ *Main melody* film will be further discussed below in Section 5.3.

“guidance” mechanisms (*zhidao* 指导) institutionalised to ensure ideological compliance, even as media institutions within the propaganda apparatus became commercialised (93-129).

The combination of these political and economic rationales supported the overall goal of upgrading the national cultural industry. Part of that development was the creation of state-produced popular culture. One particularly important institution in this development was China Central Television (CCTV), which integrated cultural workers into state production relations while also controlling market-regulating licensing and cracking down on perceived deviant cultural production. Another example of this mode of cultural policy was the renaming of the former “propaganda department” into “publicity department” in English. In Chinese, the department name remained the same (*Xuanchuanbu* 宣传部).¹⁹ This measure was also aimed at attracting private sector involvement in popular propaganda work. In general, this phase of cultural policy saw both a renewal of Maoist ideals and commercialisation in private and public cultural production, with increasing public-private cooperation (Meyer-Clement 2016, 64ff; see also Brady 2008, 93–129).

In addition to pursuing internal legitimacy, the PRC’s cultural policy also aimed to establish its legitimacy on the world stage. The PRC was recognised as a key player in global development, both economically and politically. The impetus for an increased cultural presence on the world stage originated from the United Nations’ 1998 Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development. The conference emphasised the need to include cultural policy in development strategies. In 2005, the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression was established, further expanding the role of cultural policy from an instrument of development to one of cultural preservation (Meyer-Clement 2016, 70f). However, the argument for cultural preservation was essentially a way of legitimising local versus global commercial forces in the development of the cultural industry.

As Ben Garner (2015) argues, China played an active role in securing the Convention’s adoption and was one of its most important supporters. It then became the first state to cite the Convention in a WTO dispute in 2009, invoking the principle of the specificity of cultural goods, which the UNESCO declaration describes as “vectors of identity, values and meaning”

¹⁹ Full title: *Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui xuanchuanbu* 中国共产党中央委员会宣传部 [“Publicity/Propaganda Department of the central committee of the Chinese Communist Party“].

(UNESCO 2001, Article 8), to justify protectionist regulation of cultural goods. The declaration and its implementation reinforced China's shift towards redefining culture as a strategic resource for industrialisation, trade, cultural security, and soft power, rather than viewing it more narrowly as a tool of state propaganda. The UNESCO Convention functioned in China's case not as protection from markets, but as legitimation for market-oriented cultural development strategies (Garner 2015).

One driver of the shift in the PRC's political rationale towards market-oriented cultural development is the encounter with Hollywood. Wendy Su (2016) studies the impact of this encounter on China's cultural policy. She characterises it as "post-Cold War cultural war" (44). The PRC navigated the increasing pressures of cultural globalisation and the expansion of Hollywood companies in mainland China. The PRC-state largely retained control, using foreign capital through public-private joint ventures between private US film companies and Chinese state-owned enterprises to channel mostly Hollywood capital in a way that did not threaten national identity and, more importantly, allowed the state to retain control over ideological discourse (Su 2016). This further illustrates how political rationales in China mediated the increasing market forces and shaped cultural industries.

Before these international influences emerged, the term "cultural industries" (*wenhua chanye* 文化产业) was only slowly embraced in the PRC due to its connotations of cultural globalisation and commercialisation. In 2000, the term was officially recognised at the Fifth Plenum of the Fifteenth Central Committee, but it was only cautiously incorporated into policy papers until the WTO accession in 2001. From that point onwards, the development of the cultural industry was considered crucial to China's overall development. On a tour in Guangdong in 2000, Jiang Zemin introduced the Three Representations (*san ge daibiao* 三个代表). According to these the party represents "the needs for development of the advanced productive forces of China's society, the forward orientation of the advanced culture of China, [and] the fundamental interests of the large majority of the Chinese people" (Theobald 2017).²⁰ Based on the second represent, "advanced culture" (*xianjin wenhua* 先进文化), the CCP

²⁰ "Zhongguo dangju de zhizheng dang yao shizhong [...] daibiao zhongguo xianjin shehui shengchanli de fazhan yaoqiu, zhongguo xianjin wenhua de qianjin fangxiang, zhongguo zui guangda renmin de genben liyi[.]" "中国当局的执政党要始终[...]代表中国先进社会生产力的发展要求, 中国先进文化的前进方向, 中国最广大人民的根本利益[.]" (as cited and translated by Theobald 2017).

leadership initiated renewed efforts of ideological mass education through cultural production (Meyer-Clement 2016, 71f). Jiang Zemin formulated the development goal of political control through cultural production as “changing what is backward and resisting what is decadent” (Jiang 2002). In addition to this goal of civilisational social engineering, Jiang also described the goal of cultural industry development as meeting the needs of a society conforming to the socialist market economy:

Developing the cultural industry is an important avenue to enriching socialist culture in the market economy and to meeting the spiritual and cultural needs of the people. (Jiang 2002)

The cultural development plans differentiated between cultural public enterprises and cultural industries, with different objectives and administrative instruments. This distinction was abandoned in 2004, when both public and private entities were subsumed under the term “cultural industries”. In 2006, the Cultural Development Programme (CCP Central Committee and State Council 2006) was announced to make Chinese cultural production competitive on the international stage and expand China’s cultural influence in the world as a form of cultural soft power (Meyer-Clement 2016, 74f).

The gradual acceptance of the term “cultural industries” was driven not only by central-level ideology and policy developments, but also by transnational policy borrowing at the city level. Kristina Karvelyte (2019) analyses how Chinese cities such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Taipei selectively imported global “creative industries” cultural policies, adapting them to local and state political priorities. She describes Shanghai’s cultural-policy strategy as more state-centred and internationally oriented than those of Hong Kong and Taipei. Shanghai’s cultural turn is closely aligned with the CCP’s ambitions to build national soft power and increase the city’s international influence. This creates a strong focus on large-scale cultural projects that convey a “world-class” image, while also embodying an internationally recognisable “Chineseness” (Karvelyte 2019, 109). Unlike Hong Kong’s market-driven tourism strategy and Taipei’s community- and education-oriented approach, Shanghai invests little in audience development. Instead, it channels resources into display-oriented initiatives accessible mainly to elites and political functionaries (Karvelyte 2019). In that sense, the adoption of the language of the global cultural industry in China is not just a linguistic shift in policy documents, but an active strategy to strengthen the position of Chinese cities in global cultural competition.

Alongside this comparative analysis of cultural industry policies in Chinese cities under different political systems, Chung and Yi (2016) examine the transnational relations between Hong Kong and mainland China amid shifting political landscapes. Since the signing of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA) between Hong Kong and mainland China in 2003,²¹ the cultural industries of the two regions have become closely interconnected. Hong Kong companies received privileged access to the mainland film market. This led to a sharp increase in Hong Kong mainland co-productions, mainly benefiting large Hong Kong film companies to the detriment of medium and small companies. CEPA's opening of the Hong Kong film market to mainland co-productions increased the already fierce competition in the local Hong Kong film market, adding pressure from both mainland and Hollywood productions (Chung and Yi 2016, 212–20). CEPA also marked the prelude to Hong Kong filmmakers' strong involvement in main melody film productions (Chu 2022).

With the concept of “harmonious culture” (*hexie wenhua* 和谐文化), Hu Jintao's administration (2002–2012) laid the groundwork for a cultural policy orientation that Xi Jinping would later continue to build on during his leadership after 2013. In his report at the 17th Party Congress, Hu stated that cultural development should not only focus on cities, but also include rural regions and rural migrant workers. The report also calls for promoting socially healthy behaviour and integrity. It further emphasises the goal of making China's cultural industries internationally competitive (Hu J. 2007b).²² In 2009, the central government specifically targeted cultural industries as a national strategic industry in the Programme for Reinvigorating the Cultural Industries (*Wenhua chanye zhenxing guihua* 文化产业振兴规划, State Council 2009). The programme also mentions the aim of strengthening cultural conglomerates to compete internationally. The 2011 “Decision of the CCP Central Committee concerning several major problems with deepening cultural system reform and promoting the great development and prosperity of socialist culture” (*Zhongyang guanyu shenhua wenhua tizhi gaige ruogan zhongda wenti de jue ding* ‘中央关于深化文化体制改革若干重大问题的决定’, CCP Central Committee 2011) furthered these aims. The overarching goal was to improve the ideological or cultural “quality” (*suzhi* 素质) of the people (CCP Central Committee 2011). This laid the groundwork for Xi Jinping's patriotic socialist education campaigns, a

²¹ For more information on CEPA, see: Trade and Industry Department. 2025. ‘Mainland and Hong Kong Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement (CEPA)’. Tid.Gov.Hk. https://www.tid.gov.hk/en/our_work/cepa.html.

²² For an English translation of the report, see Hu (2007a).

continuation and further refinement of the strategy of fusing elements of Maoist cultural policy and commercialisation in cultural production (Meyer-Clement 2016, 75ff). In the film industry, the Xi era brought ideological tightening alongside industrial growth. This necessitated new ways of balancing market dynamics and censorship to provide social critique (Lu Y. 2022). It also provided new impetus to ideologically driven commercial film production, as manifested in the “new mainstream” (*xin zhuliu* 新主流).²³

The development of the cultural industry has become an increasingly important policy priority in the PRC, with the concept being repeatedly emphasised in official discourse. As a state-constituted field, it enables cultural producers to play an active role in commercial activities funded, regulated, and shaped by the state and the Party. This configuration reflects the dual function of cultural policy in mainland China, fusing political and economic rationales. The political logic is most evident in the increased focus on ideological work and cultural education since the late 2000s. In contrast, the economic logic is manifested in the aim of modernising and strengthening the competitiveness of China’s cultural industries on the global stage.

5.2 Art and industry in post-Mao China

Following this review of post-Mao ideology and cultural policy, particularly the increasing prominence of the cultural industries in PRC cultural policy discourse, the next step is to examine the internal differentiations within mainland cinema between art and industry. Within Bourdieu’s (1993) framework, this raises the question of whether and where to draw the distinction between the field of restricted cultural production and the field of large-scale cultural production.

During the Mao era, artistic fields were subject to intense politicisation and campaigns that sought to suppress professional autonomy and embrace amateurism as the ethos of cultural work. Themes were also constrained to official discourse and the imperative to serve workers, peasants, and soldiers. Following the tumultuous Cultural Revolution (1966–76), many artists returned to the cities from the countryside. The reopening of academies, a renewed emphasis on professional credentials, and the reactivation of professional organisations raised artistic professionalism. Within certain limits, open criticism of mistreatment during the Cultural Revolution became possible. Even at the highest level, Deng Xiaoping elevated the status of

²³ For *new mainstream*, see Section 5.3.

artists by declaring them to be members of the working class. This transition firmly established artists and filmmakers as members of an emerging cultural profession, thereby elevating the hierarchical position and autonomy of the field of cultural production (Kraus 2004, 143–82).

Berry (2004) identifies an early shift in filmmaking discourse following Mao's death in 1976. The films produced between 1976 and 1981 were the first films to shape the cinematic discourse of postsocialism. As in other artistic fields at the time, filmmakers gradually gained more autonomy after Mao's death, with political prescriptions and constraints gradually decreasing. Thus, mainland cinema shifted away from the overtly propagandistic nature and ideological-pedagogical function of Maoist cinema. Even in the early days, films began to address the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. While they continued to operate within the limits of politically sanctioned discourse, these films expanded the scope of representation to include trauma and ambiguity, and redefined the relationship with the audience and the state (Berry 2004). Through the genre of political melodrama, directors such as Xie Jin experimented with the limitations of sensitive topics, exploring subjective experience within ideological discourse. The Fourth Generation of filmmakers deepened these cultural reflections. In particular, female directors expanded the filmic vocabulary of the time with regard to gender roles and identities, as well as sexuality (Zhang Y. 2004, 228–35).

The discourse on filmmaking generations in China may help to delimit the field of restricted production. It constructs each new generation as an avant-garde, with each adding its own reinterpretation of cinematic practices to the field. Zhang's (2004) account of the generational shifts between 1979 and 1989 very much emphasises these generational reinterpretations of mainland filmmaking (226–240). The generational succession could be interpreted to provide the core of the field of restricted cinematic production. However, separating a field of large-scale production from these filmmakers and the discourse surrounding them is not straightforward, as many generation-specific "auteur" directors also experimented with commercial cinema (Zhu and Robinson 2010). During the early 1980s, mainland cinema was still largely a field of restricted cultural production. Though limited in its autonomy by socialist cultural institutions and aesthetic norms, it was already a field with its own logic that at times subverted official discourse.

With the increasing market liberalisation under Deng Xiaoping came the rise of cultural markets. These challenged elite aesthetic authority and the authority over moral education, which artists

had been accustomed to during Maoist times. Instead, the loosening of political control and the increasing dominance of market logic shifted the priority of cultural production towards entertainment value. Additionally, the professionalisation of art turned the role of the artist into a more routine and mundane job, limiting the distinction and sense of identity as an artist (Kraus 2004, 183–212). From a field-theoretic perspective, the emergence of cultural markets can imply a greater subordination of the field to economic logic, resulting in reduced field autonomy and increased pressure on filmmakers to yield to commercial imperatives.

Larson (1999) argues that mainland cinema at the time of her study was still a “third world cinema”,²⁴ characterised by scarcity of economic resources and a strong dependence on international funding. In the global cultural economy, mainland filmmaking did not occupy a privileged position in the global hierarchy of cinemas. The increasing integration into global economic competition in filmmaking has limited the field autonomy. In this environment, Fifth Generation directors pursued a dual strategy, making films for both international arthouse audiences and domestic audiences (Larson 1999).

This dual strategy is the result of the transition of the Fifth Generation auteurs from avant-garde cinema to popular film that retains its international reception as art house cinema. In other words, it is a shift towards becoming the “film ‘establishment’ in China” (Zhu and Robinson 2010, 161). Dai Jinhua describes the later transition of Fifth Generation filmmakers into mainstream commercial filmmaking as a “‘resubmission’ to power [...] of both political and economic regimes” (Dai Jinhua cited in Zhang Y. 2004, 238). This shift results from the position and role of these filmmakers within cultural globalisation and Hollywood’s dominance in film, particularly its imprint on narrative structure. It also reflects their engagement with domestic discourse on their films from critics, as well as their perception of opportunities for funding from international investors (Zhu and Robinson 2010, 160).

The encounter with Hollywood was also actively mediated by the PRC’s cultural policy (Section 5.1). Hollywood films were already allowed to be screened in state-owned theatre chains in the 90s to finance educational films, i.e., the newly developing genre of main melody. With joint-venture rules and state control over film releases in China, a level of control over film imports was retained. However, starting in the early 2000s, transnational investments took

²⁴ For a discussion of Larson’s (1999) use of the term, see footnote 7.

off, state-owned enterprises actively sought cooperation with transnational film corporations (Su 2016). An important element of that is the role of mainland-Hong Kong co-production. Under CEPA, there has been an increase in the industrialisation of the film industry in cooperation with Hong Kong companies (Chung and Yi 2016). Surprisingly, as a share of all domestic releases, relatively few internationally co-financed films were released annually, including those with Hong Kong and Taiwanese investments. However, co-funded films accounted for between 40% and 50% of the market, and on average, seven or eight of the ten highest-grossing films between 2003 and 2013 were co-productions (Su 2016, 39ff). Thus, transnational coproductions were the most visible share of the market.

The influx of Hollywood films prompted different reactions from mainland filmmakers depending on their position in the field. Jia Zhangke, who works within the field of restricted production and positions himself within cinephile ethics, was rather critical of the development of CGI-heavy blockbusters. In response, he reflected on the form and function of cinema as a historiographical archive. In contrast, Feng Xiaogang and other filmmakers who cater to larger domestic audiences and are active in industrial filmmaking sought to encourage China to catch up with Hollywood in terms of technological developments and narrative techniques, especially after the release of *Avatar* (2009) in China in 2010, to emulate its success in the domestic industry (Braester 2015).

Underlying this differential response towards the commercial pressure from Hollywood imports are different trajectories of filmmakers, roughly mirrored in the generational shift. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the new avant-garde in the field, the Sixth Generation of filmmakers like Lou Ye, Wang Xiaoshuai, and Jia Zhangke, were making “underground cinema” (Zhang R. 2008, 73). Their films were basically unknown to domestic audiences, since many films were either censored or not shown in commercial theatres. The changing regulatory landscape allowed them to resurface in the mid-2000s. Though many of them continued to make critical art films that received international film festival awards, the Sixth Generation also moved towards commercial film starting in the late 2000s and early 2010s (Zhang R. 2008, 116–19; Su 2016, 134ff).

Feng Xiaogang is an interesting case in the commercialisation of Chinese film. Like Zhang Yimou, Feng early on engaged in commercial filmmaking to reach larger domestic audiences. In his case, he also did not seek international film festival audiences, even if some of his films

were shown abroad. His films incorporate commercial demands, making light-hearted and visually appealing comedies. At the same time, these films provide a subtle form of social critique. While during the early 90s the pressure came more from censorship, in the 2000s, commercialism increasingly led him to cater to commercial demands in its visual appeal (Zhang R. 2008).

Throughout his filmmaking career until the early 2000s, Huang also used comedy to deliver social criticism, albeit in smaller and less commercial productions. The only exception was his work as producer on the commercial comedy *Big Shot's Funeral* (Section 4.2), a film by Feng Xiaogang that ridicules the commercialisation of everyday life and the endless search for profit by turning everything into an advertisement. Making commercial comedies infused with social critique could have provided another trajectory for Huang, rather than *Founding*. Although comedy is seen as rather low in the hierarchy of film genres, it allows for a higher degree of freedom in critical expression, within the constraints of political and economic pressures.

One particular form that Feng excelled in was the New Year celebration film (*hesuipian* 贺岁片), which incorporates holiday marketing, a line-up of popular stars, and irony and parody in the style of Hollywood romantic comedies (McGrath 2005, 101). Within that form, Feng offers a critique of the social issues that have arisen with China's postsocialist transformation, including housing speculation and the affordability crisis, environmental issues, and government corruption and incompetence, while staying within censorship limits (Lu Y. 2022). These subtly subversive New Year films have received little acclaim from foreign audiences. They are less exotic representations of China compared to Zhang Yimou's films. They depict a China that appears more similar to the US and Europe. Audiences in the US and Europe may perceive critiques of commercial culture and socioeconomic inequality as reflections on their own societies, which they might not appreciate (McGrath 2005; Zhu 2010). Zhang (2008) explains the poor reception of films on contemporary social issues in urban Chinese comedies by directors such as Feng and Huang, as well as Sixth Generation directors like Lu Chuan, with American cultural imperialism. This ideology results in a stereotypical and isolationist view of the world, which limits the reception and demand for films like these outside mainland China (Zhang R. 2008, 133f).

Indeed, as the field became increasingly commercialised and the state became more actively involved in productions aimed at the box office, the most economically successful films were

“kung fu movies that combined spectacular Hollywood-style special effects with traditional Chinese cultural elements” (Su 2016, 42). Feng (2014) considers *Hero* (*Yingxiong* 英雄, 2002) to be a turning point in the inevitable trajectory of Chinese cinema towards domestic blockbusters and the newly found ideal of box-office success. Accordingly, Huang adapted effectively by turning to mainstream production and fusing the depiction of revolutionary culture with a commercial production model (Feng 2014). Wang (2006) noted that while the market for realist films was limited, the box-office success of *Life and Death: Niu Yuru* (*Shengsi Niu Yuru* 生死牛玉儒, 2005) demonstrated the largely untapped potential of the “market for film as ‘educational material’” (‘zuowei “jiaocai” de dianying shichang’ ‘作为“教材”的电影市场’, Wang Z. 2006, 95). While not exactly a propaganda-infused blockbuster, these films can be considered an intermediate step leading up to the creation of the genre. A more direct precursor is main melody film.

5.3 From propaganda to main melody and new mainstream

Bourdieu’s field theory does not explicitly address the role of state ideological production. Nevertheless, this aspect can be accommodated within field theory. The PRC’s propaganda system can be conceptualised as a field of power that is both vertically and horizontally interrelated with the field of mainland cinema. However, one issue with this conceptualisation is that main melody film is not merely propaganda. Instead, it resists clear field-theoretic categorisation, emerging as a hybrid form that embodies both commercial and political logic.

The term “main melody” emerged in 1987 as a cultural counter-policy to the commercialisation of film, a result of the market reforms of Reform and Opening Up, which, to some extent, included the film industry. These films were intended to have an educational function, providing ideological legitimacy to the Communist Party leadership by shaping historical narratives (Yu 2013, 167). After 1989, the main melody genre became a centrepiece of cultural policy under Jiang Zemin (Meyer-Clement 2016, 63), a response to the “post-1989 ideological crisis” (Yu 2013, 167). Yu (2013) describes this cultural policy as postsocialist, noting that traditional socialist tropes are avoided due to the fundamental transformation of Chinese society, driven by the expansion of the market economy and the traumatic experience of the Cultural Revolution. For example, unlike Maoist revolutionary films, main melody films do not show mass action. Rather, they focus on individual “consumable ‘political stars’ in historical films” (Yu 2013, 180) and cater to Maoist nostalgia (Yu 2013, 167–80).

During the 1990s and 2000s, larger state investments flowed into “leitmotif film” projects, the term Zhang (2004) uses to describe main melody. However, these did not translate into box-office success (Zhang Y. 2004, 285f). In particular, the commercialisation of the Chinese film industry took off after 2002, coinciding with an influx of Hollywood films. This led to a crisis of main melody. As Trausch (2019) argues, Hollywood films had accustomed audiences to a particular cinematic style. As a result, main melody film adapted to this development by commercialising and popularising political messaging, converging to “mainstream blockbuster” (*zhuliu dapian* 主流大片), which can refer to commercial blockbusters that mirror popular culture, or, in the case of state-led productions in the PRC, commercial films that are infused with official ideology (Trausch 2019; Yin and Liang 2018).

The PRC’s cultural policy regarding Hong Kong also shaped the production of main melody (Section 5.1). CEPA granted Hong Kong filmmakers privileged status within the mainland film market. Consequently, Hong Kong directors increasingly recognised the commercial opportunities offered by main melody film. In this context, Huang is seen as predestined for Hong Kong-China co-productions, given his in-depth knowledge of and experience in the Hong Kong film industry. Several Hong Kong filmmakers were also invited to participate in main melody film productions on his behalf (Chu 2022). These filmmakers helped create a new type of blockbuster that propagated nationalist ideology. The three *Founding* films are the most visible example of this, appropriating transregional and transnational cooperation to serve projects celebrating mainland power and national identity ultimately (Lu S.H. 2021).

In the discourse on these films, the differentiation between main melody film and mainstream blockbuster is not always clear. Chen and Liu (2009) describe “new mainstream” (*xin zhuliu* 新主流) as a combination of capital-driven blockbuster and politically led main melody film (48). According to their argument, this new model represents the realisation of Deng Xiaoping’s theory in filmmaking practice. Yin and Liang (2018) describe the new mainstream film genre in slightly different terms. They define it as the combination of mainstream values with the mainstream market. They argue that the emergence of new mainstream film is the result of main melody becoming detached from contemporary life and of mainstream commercial films lacking social values. While presenting new mainstream as a positive development for the industry, the authors argue that the genre remains limited in both cinematography and themes.

They suggest expanding into other genres, such as romance, thriller, and fantasy, and incorporating more individual experiences of society.

Some of these suggestions already seem to have been realised. Liang and Gao (2025) argue that new mainstream film departs from the depiction of heroes and focuses on ordinary people. It includes more diverse portrayals of national culture and development, while still aligning with official discourse on history. They view the emergence of this form as stemming from a shift towards subtler methods of conveying official ideology and from the significant influence of Hollywood. Additionally, they attribute it to the legacy of *Founding*, from which new mainstream film adopted commercial techniques and strategies. Xu (2022) goes even further to argue that Huang was at the centre of the development of new mainstream, in particular, *Founding* as the “initial stage in this innovation” (‘*zai chuangxin qi bu jieduan*’ ‘*在创新起步阶段*’, Xu 2022, 114) in filmmaking practices.

Shelly Kraicer (2009) introduces the term “post-main melody” to describe films such as *City of Life and Death* (*Nanjing! Nanjing!* 南京!南京!, 2009). These state-endorsed productions seek to appeal to audiences more subtly, selling official ideology through entertainment. “In true Hollywood fashion, it substitutes spectacle for thought, mythology for history, and ideology for reality” (Kraicer 2009). By contrast, Kraicer describes *Founding* as “honest propaganda”, a star-studded spectacle that does not pretend to be a serious portrayal of history, but rather an entertaining presentation of official discourse on PRC history.

6 Huang Jianxin in the field of mainland Chinese cinema

Having positioned the field within its changing political and socioeconomic context, I now turn to the field's internal configuration, in which Huang's filmmaking is situated. The first step here is to reconstruct and map Huang's trajectory, taking into account the field's institutional structure and Huang's positions within it. Finally, the analysis of the dispositions and conscious choices underlying his trajectory is approached by examining his reflections on his own position and the space of possibilities at these critical points. Before going into the analysis, I start with a summary of Huang's biography:

I was born in 1954 in Xi'an and grew up in Xi'an. At seven, I started school. I went to middle school during the Cultural Revolution and joined the army at the age of sixteen, where I stayed for nearly six years. Then, as part of the last batch of workers, peasants, and soldiers, I entered the Chinese Department at Northwest University. In 1979, I joined Xi'an Film Studio, first as an editor, and then to study directing. In 1985, I directed my first film, *Black Cannon Incident*.

我是 1954 年出生, 生在西安, 长在西安。7 岁上学, “文革” 中上的中学, 16 岁当兵, 在部队呆了近 6 年, 然后作为最末一届工农兵学员进西北大学中文系学习。1979 年进入西影, 先做编辑, 后学导演。1985 年执导了我的第一部影片《黑炮事件》。(Huang Jianxin quoted in Chai 1994, 37)

In this 1994 interview with Chai Xiaofeng, Huang succinctly summarises his biography. He uses it as a reference for his subsequent description of his approach to filmmaking, which is to explore the cultural experience within every individual. To set up this argument, he starts from his own experience and interests (Chai 1994). This approach, according to which his life experience shapes his understanding of contemporary China and thus guides his filmmaking, is a prominent theme in his interviews and articles (Section 6.2.3).

In the quotation above, Huang mentions several key points in his biographical reconstruction that have informed his filmmaking trajectory. One is growing up in Xi'an, the capital of the Western Chinese province of Shaanxi (陕西). He also attended Northwest University in Xi'an and spent a significant part of his filmmaking career at the Xi'an Film Studio. This regional background is one aspect that sets him apart from other Fifth Generation filmmakers. Notably, he did not study at the Beijing Film Academy, which is widely regarded as the root institution of the Fifth Generation of filmmakers (Ni 2003). He only had a short training class there, shortly

before his film debut (Ye and Zhu 2012, 80). Xiao (2009) also emphasises the Western Chinese regional embeddedness of Huang's filmmaking, drawing attention to his distinctive use of irony and urban satire as a means of cultural critique focusing on ordinary people's lives – an approach less common among other Fifth Generation filmmakers (Xiao Y. 2009).

Another detail Huang mentions in the quotation above is attending middle school during the Cultural Revolution. In one of the analysed interviews, he says that he was too young to participate ideologically. For example, he recalls dropping revolutionary pamphlets from high buildings just for the fun of it. He generally grew up without much parental guidance, as both his parents were imprisoned at the time. He says that this experience instilled in him a sense of freedom (I 2007 6). During the latter half of the Cultural Revolution, he joined the People's Liberation Army Air Force, which enabled him to enter Northwest University in Xi'an as one of the last professionally designated student groups, as a "worker-peasant-soldier university student" (*gong nong bing daxuesheng* 工农兵大学生). When he started working as an editor at the Xi'an Film Studio, he already had some background in the field, including his father's position as head of the Xi'an Film Corporation. He then became an assistant director and, after a training class at the Beijing Film Academy, debuted with *Black Cannon Incident* in 1985 (Ye and Zhu 2012, 80f). He went on to direct nine films at the studio (Appendix II, Table C).

6.1 Huang's position as a director

As a film director, Huang coordinates the crew and cast, who bring their own filmmaking practices to the set. Furthermore, he works closely with one or several film studios, which enable and constrain the types of films that can be made. His position as a director therefore depends on the network of crew members, cast, and production companies with which he is associated. These networks have shaped his cinematic trajectory.

The crew member network in Figure 2 shows that only a few crew members participate in more than five films. Crew members change continuously from one film to another, with many overlaps. Not even Huang's first trilogy (highlighted in the graph with blue edges) was made by a consistent crew. Nevertheless, there are marked differences in the number of common overlaps.

The densest part of the network comprises films from the 1990s and early 2000s. Even *The Wooden Man's Bride*, which caters to the rural root-searching genre (Section 4.2), is firmly

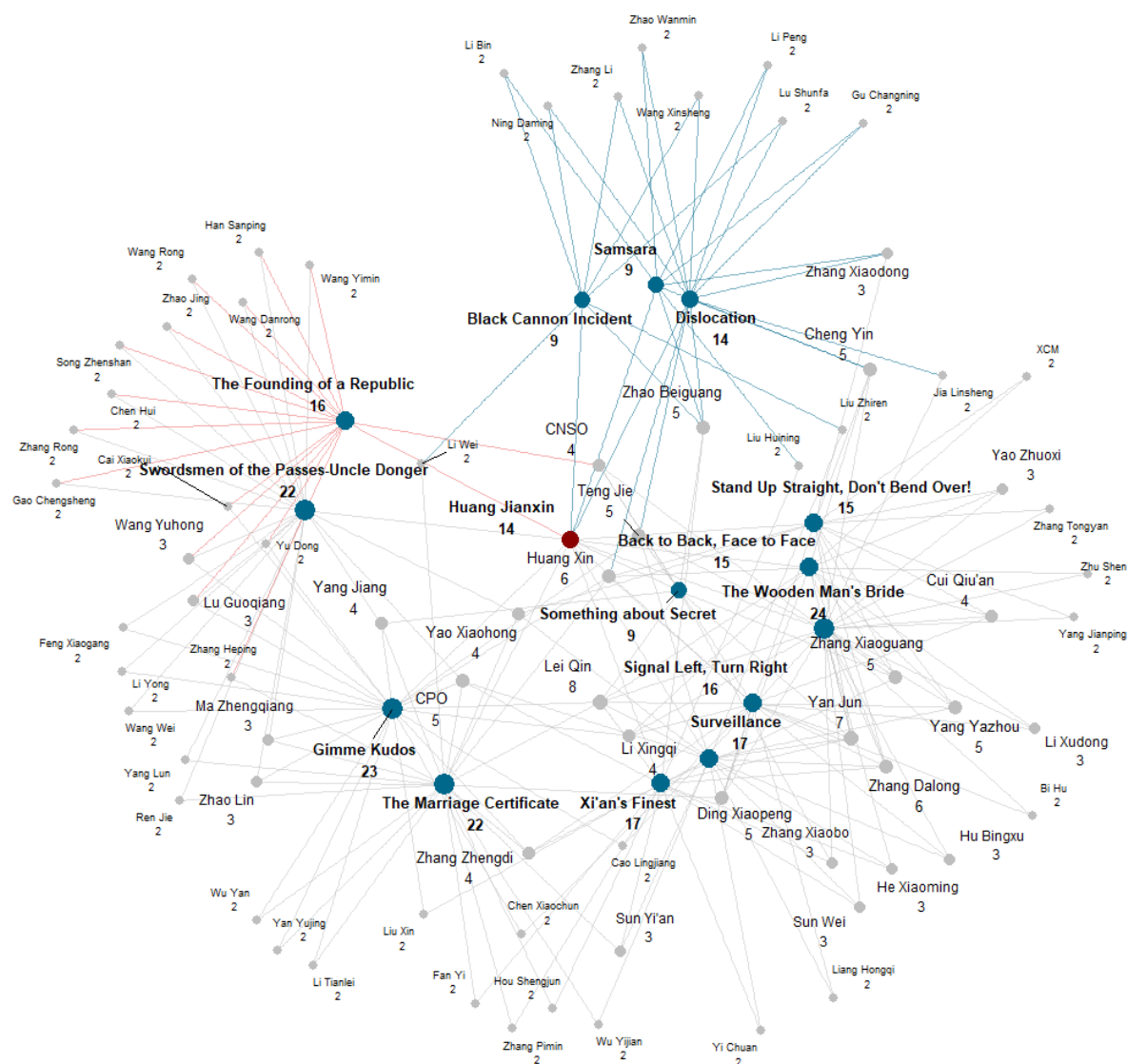
embedded in the crew member network. According to Huang, the film was led by Taiwanese investors aimed at foreign audiences (I 2011 5). The first trilogy is less interconnected, but there are edges connecting these films to almost all of the films from the 1990s and early 2000s. *The Marriage Certificate* and *Gimme Kudos* are slightly separated from the denser part of the network. These films connect *Swordsmen* and *Founding* to the rest of the network, except for specific crew members (Figure 2).

Besides Huang himself, the only crew member node linking *Founding* to his films from the 1990s is the China National Symphony Orchestra (CNSO), which performed the film scores. Similarly, the China Philharmonic Orchestra (CPO) connects *Swordsmen* with Huang's later urban comedies (Figure 2).

The crew members with the most connections within the network tend to have technical or film-art-related roles. For example, among the crew members associated with the first trilogy, Cheng Yin was in charge of makeup, and Zhao Beiguang was in charge of lighting. Yan Jun was responsible for sound recording in seven of Huang's films of the 1990s, while Zhang Dalong was in charge of the music, and Zhang Xiaoguang was the cinematographer. Huang Xin is another central node connecting Huang's earliest films to his urban comedies, including his most recent tragicomedy, *Gimme Kudos*. However, this is simply the pseudonym Huang Jianxin used as scriptwriter (Ye and Zhu 2012, 80). After Huang Jianxin, the second most central node in the network with eight connections is Lei Qin. He was the editor on eight of Huang's films, from *The Wooden Man's Bride* to *Gimme Kudos*. The assistant directors also remained relatively consistent throughout this period. Yang Yazhou worked on five films, from *Stand Up Straight, Don't Bend Over!* to *Surveillance*. He also acted in three of Huang's films, including *Black Cannon Incident*. Furthermore, his company, Simpson Communication Ltd. (*Senxin wule fazhan youxian gongsi* 森信娱乐发展有限公司), co-produced *Back To Back*, *Face To Face* (Appendix II, Table C). Yang Jiang succeeded Yang Yazhou as producer of the subsequent films until *Swordsmen*. Among the producers, Ding Xiaopeng stands out, having participated as a producer and in other production-related roles in four of Huang's urban comedies, as well as in *The Wooden Man's Bride* (Figure 2 and Appendix II, Table A). The crew members who form the links between Huang's later urban comedies and *Founding* include Wang Yuhong, Lu Guoqiang, Zhang Heping, Yu Dong, and Cai Xiaokui, all of whom were in production roles, except for Wang Yuhong, who was the sound editor. Interestingly, film director Feng Xiaogang was part of the crew on *Gimme Kudos* and *Swordsmen*, working as a production executive, but

he also performed as an actor in *Founding* and *The Marriage Certificate*. Han Sanping, who co-directed *Founding* with Huang and produced *Swordsmen* (Figure 2 and Appendix II, Table A), was also chairman of China Film Group from 2007 to 2014 (Frater 2014).

Figure 2: Crew member network

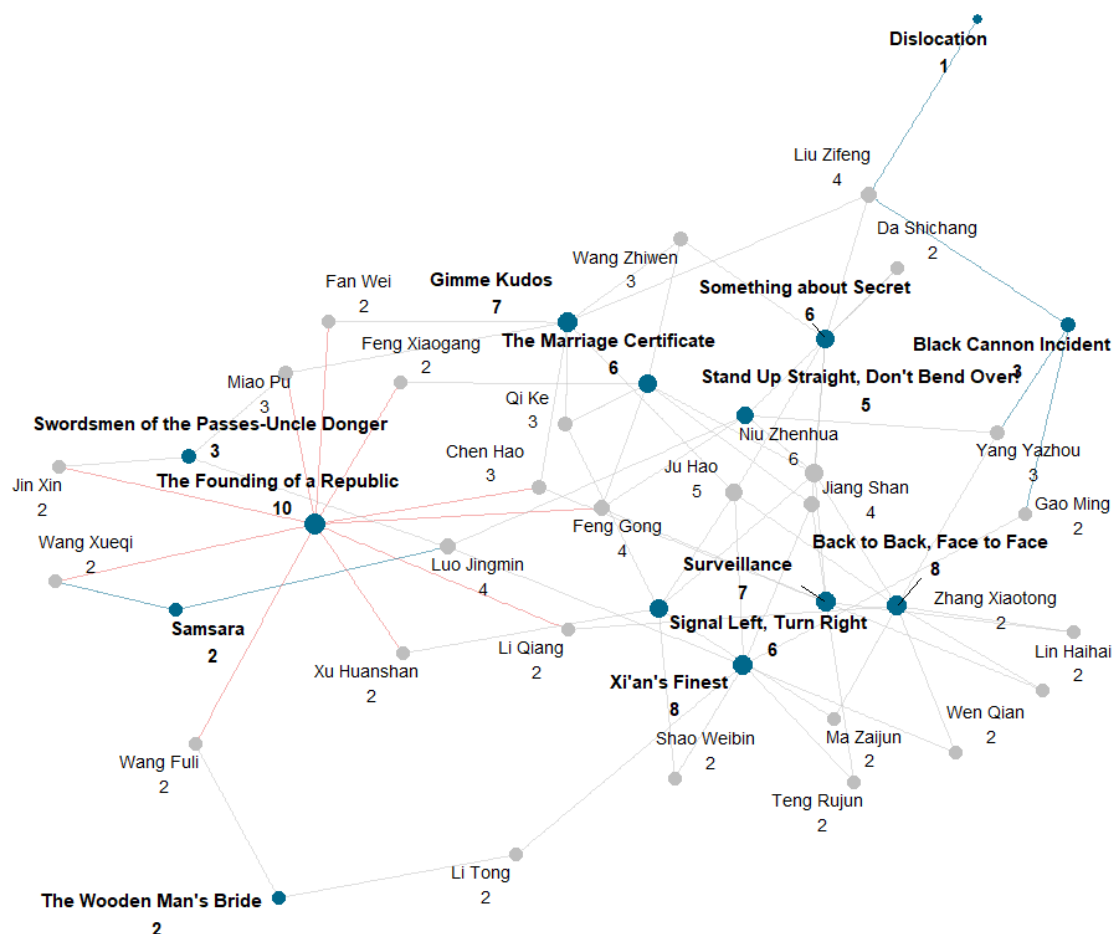


The graph shows all the crew members involved in at least two films. Dark blue are the nodes of the films and gray the crew members. The number measures the degree, i.e. the number of adjacent edges or connections, of each node. Larger nodes have higher degrees. Additionally, the edges adjacent to *The Founding of a Republic* are marked in red and the edges adjacent to the films of the earliest trilogy are marked in blue. “CNSO” stands for the China National Symphony Orchestra, “CPO” for the China Philharmonic Orchestra and “XCM” for the Xi’an Conservatory of Music Orchestra.

The actor network has a less consistent trajectory. *Samsara* is linked to *Founding*, but not to Huang’s first two films. *Founding* has the most links, with ten actors in common with other films, who, in turn, are connected to a wide range of films. This is consistent with the marketing strategy of showcasing a star-studded line-up and significant participation by actors from the

mainland film industry, with actors as the most visible aspect of the film. In line with the crew member network, Huang's urban comedies and the police drama *Xi'an's Finest* are more closely interrelated. All the non-comedy films, except the latter, are grouped to the left of the network graph and are mostly connected to less central nodes in terms of the number of adjacent edges (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Actor network



The graph shows all the actors participating in at least two films. Dark blue are the nodes of the films and gray the actors. The numbers underneath the names and titles show the degree, the number of adjacent edges, of each node. Larger nodes are of higher degrees. Additionally, the edges adjacent to *The Founding of a Republic* are marked in red and the edges adjacent to the films of the earliest trilogy in blue.

According to Figure 4, the geographical trajectory of Huang's work as a director is very concentrated in two locations. While most of the participating film companies are based in Beijing, Xi'an Film Studio is the most central, having produced nine of his films. Interestingly, the locations on the company map and the films in the company network are mostly a mix of public and private companies (Figures 4 and 5).

In locations with only one or a few production companies, all of the companies participating in Huang's films are state-owned or state-run, including the three in Shanghai. As might be expected, the foreign companies involved are all private. There are also Japanese film production companies, but they are involved only in *Back to Back*, *Face to Face*, and *The Wooden Man's Bride*. The production of *Black Cannon Incident* also involved the German company Manfred Durniok Produktion für Film und Fernsehen. *Founding* involved the largest number of companies and the greatest geographical diversity of any production, including state and party entities such as the Beijing Municipal Committee of the CPPCC and the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department. Several private companies were also involved, including Emperor Classic Films and Media Asia Films, both headquartered in Hong Kong, as well as DMG Entertainment, headquartered in Los Angeles (Figures 4 and 5).

Finally, China Film Group is the main organisation linking most films through its subsidiaries.²⁵ The vast network and functioning of the China Film Group is the subject of other studies. For this thesis, it is important to note that the variety of films produced in terms of genre and ideological content demonstrates that, in postsocialist China, the China Film Group is not merely a propaganda organ, but rather a state-owned media corporation. This is particularly evident through its subsidiary, the China Film Co-Production Corporation, which is responsible for co-productions with foreign companies in mainland China. The subsidiary also co-produces entertainment films, some of which contain social critique, as in *Back to Back*, *Face to Face*, but also propaganda-infused blockbusters, as in the case of *Founding* (Figure 5).

The graphs only show company locations or headquarters, not film set locations. The set locations are listed in Appendix II, Table C.²⁶ However, as these are more connected to the film content than the institutional context of film production, they were not analysed separately. Thus, Figures 4 and 5 show the geographical trajectory of Huang's work in terms of institutional actors for each film project rather than Huang's own physical trajectory. This institutional map can nonetheless be connected back to the crew member and actor networks in which Huang is embedded.

²⁵ Direct subsidiaries of China Film Group are marked with ".CFG" in the graphs.

²⁶ The distribution companies and set locations are listed in Appendix II, Table C. Since these are not directly linked to the filmmaking ecosystem, they were not included in the network analysis.

network. *Founding* shares production companies with Huang's more recent film projects, but not his older films. This is partly explained by the short lifespan of some of these companies, but it also shows that *Founding* was a large-scale production characterised by a different institutional configuration. This institutional configuration is not differentiated by the state-versus-private binary, but rather by the sheer number of participating companies and the involvement of television broadcasting companies and specific political entities.

Figure 5: Film-company network



Red nodes are state-owned companies, blue are private, and pink is the public-private partnership of the CITIC Group and China Film Group (China Hero Film Investment, Co., Ltd.). The darker shade of blue represents the films. Companies are connected to all the films they were involved in producing, including financing. The numbers below show the degree of each node. Larger nodes are of a higher degree, i.e. have more adjacent edges. Table 1 below shows the list of production companies and their abbreviations.

Table 1: List of production companies and abbreviations

Production Company	Abbreviation
August First Film Studio	AFFS
Beijing Hualu Baina Film & TV Co. Ltd.	BJ Bination
Beijing Municipal Bureau of Radio, Film and Television	BJ.BRFT
Beijing Municipal Committee of the CPPCC	BJ.CPPCC
Beijing Dayu Culture and Art Co. Ltd.	BJDCA
Beijing Forbidden City Film Company	BJFCF
Beijing Film Developing and Video Technology Factory (China Film Group)	BJFDVTF.CFG
Beijing Film and Television Laboratory	BJFTL
Beijing Shu Nan Music Workshop	BJSN
Beijing Xingbaoyuan Movie & TV Investment Co. Ltd.	BJXBY
Beijing Xinyingjia Investment Consulting Co. Ltd.	BJXIC
China Central Newsreel & Documentary	CCND
China Film Archives	CFA
China Film Co-Production Corporation (China Film Group)	CFCPC.CFG
China Film Group Corporation	CFG
Century Hero Film Investment Co. Ltd.	CHFI
China Movie Channel	CMC
China Southern Securities Co. Ltd.	CSS
DMG Entertainment	DMGE
Emperor Classic Films Co. Ltd.	ECF
Etsong Tobacco Group Co. Ltd.	ETG
Fuji Film	FF
Beijing Guoli Changsheng Film & TV Production Co. Ltd.	GLCS
Guangxi Film Studio	GXFS
Hua Long Film Digital Productions Co. Ltd.	HLFDP.CFG
Happy Pictures Culture Communication Co. Ltd.	HPCC
Japan Far East Corporation	JFEC
Jiangsu Broadcasting Corporation	JSB
Media Asia Films Ltd.	MAF
Manfred Durniok Produktion für Film und Fernsehen	MDP
Malin Post Production	MPP
Modern Sky Records Co. Ltd.	MSR
Nikkatsu Recording Studio	NRS
Soundfirm Beijing	SBJ
Simpson Communication Ltd.	SC
Salon Films Hong Kong Ltd.	SFHK
Shanghai Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department	SH.PD
Shanghai Film Group Corporation Shanghai Film Studio	SHFS
Shanghai Film Technology Factory	SHFTF
State Production Base of the China Film Group	SPB.CFG
Shaanxi Jinhua Film and Television Production Co. Ltd.	SXJFTP
Taihe Film Investment Co. Ltd.	TFI
Tokyo Laboratory	TL
Warner New Asia Co. Ltd.	WNA
Xi'an City Police	XA.CP
Xi'an City Culture and Entertainment Co. Ltd.	XACCE
Xi'an Film Studio	XAFS
Xi'an True Colour Advertising Co. Ltd.	XATCA
Xiaoxiang Film Studio	XXFS
Zhejiang Film Studio	ZJFS
Zhenbeibao West Film Art Center	ZWFAC

6.2 Huang's dispositions as a director

In the analysed interviews and articles by Huang,²⁷ he touches on several themes related to his filmmaking practice and his trajectory in the field. I categorised these into five overarching dimensions: his self-construction and self-reflection as a film director; the production relations of his films; the audience relationship in his filmmaking; social critique in his films; and transnational relations within his filmmaking. The first of these is a broader dimension that encompasses the latter dimensions to some extent. It provides the broadest scope for analysing Huang's self-described role as a film director.

6.2.1 Self-conception and role as film director

I begin by comparing Huang's self-described role as a film director in his 1986 and 2009 articles, highlighting a clear shift from engaging with theoretical discourse on art and film in 1986 to directing films focused on box-office results and the social responsibility involved in making political-historical films celebrating the PRC anniversary in 2009. Additional articles by and interviews with Huang provide insight into his trajectory in between. Rather than showing linear development, they demonstrate shifting dispositions towards filmmaking and varying levels of engagement with economic and political forces.

In the first analysed text sequence, Huang reflects on his filmmaking style, discussing the difficulty of adapting a literary text for the screen. He raises the question of how the medium of film can be used to create a work that equals or exceeds the literary source. The text sequence is part of an article by Huang, published in 1986 after the screening of *Black Cannon Incident*, in which he reflects on his first film project, the ideas and processes involved in making it, and its shortcomings. The article was published in the film journal *Notes on Creative Works* (*Chuangzuo shouji* 创作手记) as part of a series, in which other filmmakers involved in *Black Cannon Incident* also reflect on the film and their roles in the production process. Consequently, the text focuses on film style, technique, and the medium of film. In the article, Huang presents the director's function as choosing the film's style and conceptual framework in light of the medium's options. In this function, the director engages in literary discourse, selecting a literary material to be transformed in style within the medium of film (A 1986 1). More generally, the role of the director is to provide the film's conceptual framework and structure, while leaving the concrete acting and performance techniques more open to the actors themselves (A 1986 6).

²⁷ Listed in Appendix III.

Apart from the film director, the conceptual phase of filmmaking also involves other crew members researching and studying film theory, philosophy, scientific research, and artistic discourse more generally (A 1986 2). This engagement with other intellectual fields, specifically film-theoretic discourse, is the requirement to create a system of references, symbols, and connotations that the audience can make sense of. Therefore, the conceptual preparation also involves reflection on audience reception and the target audience (A 1986 3).

In another section, under the subheading “Mastering the Whole” (*Zongti bawo* 总体把握), Huang likens the role of the director to that of a music conductor. The director brings together the different components, combining and coordinating the artistic subparts to create a new whole. For that to succeed, the director must possess an understanding of all the artistic disciplines that contribute to filmmaking. In this regard, Huang contrasts his own understanding of filmmaking with the dictum of Austrian artist Desiderius Orban that logic has no place in art. He argues that filmmaking requires consideration of technological factors, rational planning, and artistic sensibility, as well as engagement with other artistic discourses (A 1986, p. 7). Clearly, Huang positions his filmmaking within the realm of the arts by engaging with art theory, but never as an isolated, pure art form created solely for artists.

The 2009 article already begins with praise of the great box-office success and the public attention *Founding* has received. This success is framed as a milestone in the development of the mainland film industry. The textual perspective on the film industry, rather than on the film itself, mirrors the lifeworld of the article’s authors, Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin. Han was chairman of the China Film Group Corporation at the time of writing and filming of *Founding*, a key position for the development of the Chinese film industry. Huang did not hold a position at any major film corporation, but he was involved in private film productions abroad and public-private co-productions in mainland China. As he mentions in a later interview (I 2011 19), he also set up his own film company, Happy Pictures Culture Communication Co., Ltd.²⁸, which also co-produced *Gimme Kudos* and *The Kite Runner* (2007). Thus, Han and Huang speak as representatives of the film industry and, as such, frame *Founding* as a commemoration of the success of the mainland film industry as a whole (A 2009 1). The question remains as to who is included in this commemoration of the film industry. Artistically oriented filmmakers

²⁸ *Beijing kuaile xinsheng wenhua chuanbo youxian gongsi* 北京快乐新升文化传播有限公司 (Appendix II, Table C).

may feel that *Founding* does not celebrate their work, as it is more of a celebration of political and commercial film.

Regarding the role of the film director, the article describes them as a motivator of the film crew, trying to create a shared experience of the production process and a shared vision of the film that will resonate with the filmmakers and, consequently, the audience (A 2009 9). The broader function of the director involves both commercial and political dispositions. Han and Huang speak of making films for the paying audience, for the enjoyment of the customers (A 2009 15). They state, prescriptively, that filmmakers should be conscious of their role as service providers to the audience. Filmmakers have to convey educational messages in a way that the audience can enjoy. It is not the attitude of a teacher giving lessons from above, but rather that of a cultural worker serving the audience (A 2009 18).

The article also describes the strategy of Han and Huang to use the draw of stars, applying the “stars effect”, to improve box-office results (A 2009 12). The novelty of this application of the commercial star system lies in its use for a political state celebration. The success of the star-system is perceived not only through commercial measures but also by Han and Huang, who reflect this as the ideological success of the project, which succeeded in getting actors to participate without remuneration (A 2009 13). Furthermore, the article emphasises that *Founding* keeps within the educational or ideological function of main melody film (A 2009 16). The use of commercial methods is also legitimised by the perception that entertainment has become omnipresent, supplanting more ideologically focused or educational cultural products. The authors further elaborated on their argument, suggesting that the subtle, persuasive power of film to educate and guide the masses derives from its capacity to entertain:

Undeniably, this is an era of mass entertainment. Those who can entertain the public will earn recognition and support, securing both box-office success and critical acclaim. By the same principle, those who can entertain the masses can subtly educate and guide them.

无可否认，这是一个全民娱乐的时代，谁能娱乐大众，谁就会得到大众的认同和支持，谁就既能赢得票房又能赢得口碑。同样的道理，谁能娱乐大众，谁就能在潜移默化中教育大众引导大众。(A 2009 17)

The social agents crafting entertainment exert power over its recipients, thereby heightening their own public recognition and symbolic power. The power that can be acquired through the

creation of entertainment could also be a motivating factor in itself for both the political and the commercial agents and institutions in the field to participate in *Founding* (A 2009 17).

Comparing these reflections on the role of the director and filmmaking more generally, Huang clearly moved away from conceiving himself as a director engaged in the artistic and intellectual fields, towards state-led commercial productions. A common element of both analysed texts is the theme of audience reception. Huang emphasises the importance of making films that people enjoy watching, rather than films that are created purely for artistic, political, or ideological aims. This point will be analysed further below (Section 6.2.3).

Missing from the second text is Huang's self-conception as an individual director. Instead, the focus is on filmmaking and directing in mainland China more generally. The main remaining question is how Huang's dispositions developed between these two points in his trajectory, from a director who emphasises his engagement with the artistic fields to one who aims to fulfil the social responsibility of crafting a commercially successful political-historical film celebrating the PRC anniversary.

Samsara, released just before the 1989 turmoil, represents the climax of Huang's subversive and critical filmmaking (Section 4.2). The interview following the film's release mirrors its narrative trajectory. The making of *Samsara* is based on the perception of Huang that he was free from constraints and had the freedom to deal openly with issues of sexuality and love (I 1989 5). For this film, Huang argues that he was not necessarily basing it on his own life experience. On the contrary, he was dealing with the artistic challenge of portraying the protagonist Shiba and other characters, despite his own life experiences being very different from theirs (I 1989 2). Huang further mentions that some filmmakers believe the relationship between the director and the constructed characters should be clear-cut and distanced. In contrast, in *Samsara*, the film technique and narrative structure mirror the characters' own confusion and awkwardness (I 1989 3). In that sense, the film was not autobiographical, yet it was still shaped by Huang's perception of the reality experienced by Chinese urban youth. Aesthetically, Huang emphasises that he has expanded his style to explore new cinematic forms. Specifically, for *Samsara*, he moved towards a more subtle relationship between form and content (I 1989 6). This point underscores Huang's disposition as an autonomous filmmaker who crafts his own works based on his perception of reality and his engagement with filmmaking as an art.

Based on these reflections, Huang seems to have become an even more artistically and intellectually engaged director up to *Samsara*. Neither the market nor the audience features in the interview on *Samsara*. This mirrors the film's distance from the market and the political field in style and form.

After a break from filmmaking following *Samsara*, Huang returned to his urban cinema. He reflected on this period in his filmmaking as an expression of his experiences of growing up in a Xi'an *hutong* (胡同). In this socio-demographically diverse neighbourhood, different political groups coexisted in proximity. It is this formative experience that is reflected in his urban films (A 1997 1). He further argues that his life experience, as reflected in his films, connects him and his films to "ordinary people" ('*putong ren*' '普通人' A 1997 3). Finally, he views this approach as a form of freedom in filmic expression. Portraying political developments through the experiences of ordinary people allows more space for filmic expression than a film that directly engages with political history would (A 1997 4). From this perspective, the films are not intended for an audience of artists, nor for maximising box-office success.

Huang also brings up another argument for his focus on ordinary people. During the 1980s, exploring filmic forms and symbolism was an end in itself. In that period, Huang focused strongly on colour symbolism and symbolic narration. However, during the 1990s, on his return from lectures in Australia, Huang perceived a shift in society and the artistic field towards greater commercialism and pragmatism. According to Huang, ordinary people adapted well to these changes, whereas cultural elites, still driven by idealism, have been unable to cope with commercialisation and wider societal change. In line with these reflections, Huang's filmmaking also shifted from the more idealistic and stylistic cinema of the 1980s toward a more commercially oriented approach. Nevertheless, in this approach, he continues to critically and humorously address fundamental socio-cultural changes in China (A 1997 5).

Finally, Huang is conscious of film commercialisation but sees it as rather pragmatic given the economic limitations filmmakers have to operate within. He and his crew made a conscious decision to experiment with film and make films on less popular themes rather than take the secure route of established techniques, which would have guaranteed box-office success (A 1997 8). In addition, his autobiographical reflections suggest that the themes of his films should have a personal connection to his life rather than being intended to appeal to the market (A 1997 3).

In the analysed 2007 interview, Huang reiterates the significance of his life experiences as a key influence on his filmmaking. The interview focuses on Huang's filmic trajectory until *Gimme Kudos*, with a focus on his films from the 2000s, framing these films as depictions of ordinary urban life. Once again, he draws parallels between these films and his own life. More specifically, he emphasises the influence of his experience of the Cultural Revolution on his approach to filmmaking. Despite the traumatic impact of these experiences, he describes the lack of parental guidance and displacement as a source of freedom. According to Huang, this freedom is evident in the diverse experiences of the Cultural Revolution, which influenced the different approaches, styles, and careers of the Fifth Generation of filmmakers (I 2007 6).

Alongside the more traumatic experiences of the Cultural Revolution, Huang's films also draw on more random, comedic experiences in life. He reflects that he channels his at times confused state of mind and thoughts into his films (I 2007 3). His self-conception as a filmmaker is also evident in his emphasis on intrinsic motivations for filmmaking, such as personal joy, rather than extrinsic incentives like pay and popularity. He goes on to argue that his joy in filmmaking extends beyond the role of film director. He enjoys working as a producer on set as he loves the films themselves, not just his role in the filmmaking process (I 2007 11).

One theme that the 2007 and 1986 interviews have in common is the idea of the filmmaker as an artistic and intellectual function. Since most of his films are based on novels, he sees his role as guiding the “systemic transformation” (*tixi zhuanhuan* 体系转换) of the novel into film (I 2007 1), shaping the film structure and, consequently, its connection with the audience in terms of symbols and associative meanings (I 2007 2). This function also involves conducting preparatory research for his films, such as reading theoretical literature — particularly psychological theories — to inform his character constructions and use of symbols. He also expects other crew members to undertake this task (I 2007 8).

In the 2007 interview, Huang also reflects on the need for the development of Chinese cinema. He discusses exploratory and intellectual films, citing European auteur cinema as an example and describing Fellini as the pinnacle of the genre, elevating film to the level of higher art and intellectual endeavour. He also considers commercial films to be a legitimate form of filmmaking that will contribute to the development of China's film industry. He believes that for China to have a successful film industry, these two types of film must coexist (I 2007 10).

He argues that he learned from the development of the US film industry that its strong engagement with philosophy, sociology, and related fields helps explain part of its success. He wants to return Chinese cinema to the forefront of international filmmaking and thus believes that Chinese filmmakers need to engage more with other intellectual fields (I 2007 9).

In the 2011 interview, Huang describes the underperformance of domestic films as a significant challenge that the industry must address. In the system of commercial cinema chains, this creates a problem, since films are quickly pulled if they are not successful. Huang compares the box-office numbers of US films to those of domestic films. In the years leading up to the interview, domestic films had not enjoyed great box-office success. None had grossed more than 200 million yuan, whereas *Kung Fu Panda 2* (2011) grossed around 300 million yuan in China in just one week. Huang adds that China Film Group makes more money showing foreign films than domestic ones. If the profit motive trumped everything else, as in South Korea, domestic films would not be shown in cinemas (I 2011 18). In this context, the filmmaking model of *Founding* can be seen as a remedy. State companies continue to produce domestic films, involving filmmakers who can make them more appealing to Chinese audiences, as evidenced by the box-office results. Based on this reasoning, I would argue that Huang intended to play an active role in transforming the Chinese film industry through this approach, which motivated his shift towards *Propaganda-Infused Blockbusters*.

The 2011 interview also offers other explanations for Huang's trajectory. One potential route that other Fifth Generation filmmakers took was to make films that appeal to international arthouse audiences. Huang explicitly mentions this as a potential trajectory (I 2011 5), but argues that his own ideals preclude this path. Films should be a reflection of one's ideals and thoughts. They should startle the audience and encourage them to reflect on the social issues the films raise. To achieve this, they must remain grounded in reality rather than mirroring the audience's desires. At the same time, social critique in film must also appeal to the audience. Along these lines, Huang argues that making films to the taste of "Western" audiences is not possible in line with his ideals, since Western audiences are distanced from current Chinese reality. He is particularly critical of "Western" audiences' reception of Chinese films and of filmmaking aimed at appealing to their tastes, as he believes they still consume Chinese films through a "Western" gaze. He believes that foreign audiences are ignorant of the subtle yet meaningful cultural differences in China, as they demand a preconceived image of China, an orientalist vision (I 2011 4).

Huang did go on to make one film aimed at foreign audiences. After witnessing the international success of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige's Chinese "Western films"²⁹ (*xibu dianying* 西部电影), investors began to view the genre as a profitable model and hired Huang to create one as well. Huang describes the production of *The Wooden Man's Bride* as a rather unpleasant experience. In particular, he highlights the discrepancy between his artistic ideals and investors' demands, as well as the limitations of the Chinese Western model. He describes this model as a typifying film production, a genre with binding conventions. He gives the example of the mismatch between the supposed location of the film and the dialects of the actors, which investors chose. Nevertheless, he made the film as part of his search for new approaches to film production and collaboration. In this context, *The Wooden Man's Bride* was Huang's attempt to emulate the success of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige's Chinese Western (I 2011 5).

While Huang explicitly describes the production of *The Wooden Man's Bride* as being at odds with his own ideals, he portrays the creation of *The Founding of a Republic* and *The Founding of a Party* in a decidedly positive light in the same interview. He describes it as an entirely new way of making political films that focuses on audience appeal (I 2011 16). Unlike in his previous productions, Huang was not the driving force behind this film. Instead, he describes China Film Group as the initiator of the project to create a popular film celebrating the PRC's 90th anniversary. As director, Huang's role was to transform the given material, the political figures and events, into dramatic characters with an appealing story (I 2011 10).

Huang also reflects on the legacy of the main melody film genre, perceiving a difference in work ethic between the former main melody filmmakers and himself. While he believes that former directors saw their work as a political task, he views these projects as artistic and commercial opportunities to make the most of the historical material and create a vivid and appealing film. Furthermore, the goal of former main melody films was to educate viewers about the political history of the state and the Party. In contrast, his goal for the *Founding* films was to make them appealing to the audience. In his filmmaking practice, this meant creating

²⁹ Huang describes the Chinese Western as a type of film that "includes a historical background, natural surroundings, folk customs, gender relations, and antifeudal themes" (*ta baokuo lishi de beijing, ziran jingguan, minsu, liangxing guanxi, fanfengjian de zhuti sixiang* 它包括历史的背景、自然景观、民俗、两性关系、反封建的主题思想, I 2011 5).

movie heroes from historical figures and disregarding historical accuracy if needed to improve the cinematic experience (I 2011 16). The *Founding* films thus create a universe of heroes based on historical figures and their roles in official historiography.³⁰

Another part of the process is the star system. Huang reflects that, by combining Han Sanping's persuasion skills with his own network in the field, they were able to engage a large cast of stars. Huang hints that some of the roles, or rather the historical figures, were chosen and developed to include a star-studded cast. In some cases, the actors were chosen for their resemblance to the historical figures, particularly Tang Guoqiang for the role of Mao. Combined with the idea of pursuing a central theme in the narrative, the recipe was there for box-office success (I 2011 16).

Huang further explicitly acknowledges commercial motivations for making these films. The interviewer mentions the strong appeal of mainstream culture, which they define as including martial arts and revolutionary themes. In response, Huang argues that political films have the greatest market potential in China. If a political film is well made, it is guaranteed to be commercially successful. As Huang explains, this means depicting political themes not as mere ideology, but as material for a commercial drama that maximises the psychological impact on the audience (I 2011 14).

In the final part of the 2011 interview, Huang is asked about his future plans. While he remains intent on making more films, he offers general advice to other filmmakers rather than sharing his own plans. This suggests that he sees himself as an experienced filmmaker and mentor, offering motivational advice to aspiring Chinese filmmakers (I 2011 19).

These points support the hypothesis that Huang's role as a filmmaker was to contribute his experience of working in foreign film industries to the development of the Chinese film industry, and as such, increasingly, to act as a mentor to other filmmakers.

³⁰ I would argue that it is a heroic universe, much like the Marvel Universe, but with political-historical figures given by official historiography.

6.2.2 Production relations and collaboration

While the 2009 article has a strong focus on production relations, Huang does not address this topic in his 1986 article. The 2009 article mentions that the principle of “making happy films” (*‘zuo kuaile de dianying’* ‘做快乐的电影’, A 2009 2) guided the work on *Founding*.

Huang argues that films should fundamentally bring joy to audiences by emotionally engaging and aesthetically uplifting them, irrespective of genre, whether considered art or entertainment. He links this principle to the production relations underlying the film, which involve the mode of collaboration between and among the production crew (A 2009 2). The director’s role is to create a positive, happy work environment from production through distribution, as the production atmosphere and certain aspects of the process are reflected in the final film (A 2009 4). The text makes no mention of power hierarchies or of working conditions, including working hours and pay. Huang argues that crew members should be motivated emotionally as well as materially to participate in productions like *Founding*. They should be emotionally invested in their work instead of maintaining a professional distance; in other words, the work should be personal (A 2009 9).

The role of personal engagement in the production process is also evident in the way the star system was applied in *Founding*. After initially recruiting a few famous actors, Huang and Han began receiving an increasing number of requests from stars wanting to participate in the film for free as the cast grew and media coverage increased. Huang attributes the successful draw of stars and the subsequent box-office success to the actors’ sense of moral obligation to celebrate the PRC’s anniversary, likening it to celebrating one’s elders’ birthdays. Finally, he sees the effectiveness of the star-system as a result of the development of the political-economic environment, characterised by well-functioning markets and a strong nation-state (A 2009 14). In that sense, the industrial filmmaking process celebrates the PRC’s economic development, which is conducive to this mode of commercial filmmaking.

Neither the 1986 interview nor the 2009 article clarifies the production relations in terms of the roles played by the different crew members and their agency, nor the roles of the financial and institutional backers, i.e., the production companies and state institutions that initiated the film and shaped the mode of production. The 1997 interview describes the conception phase of the urban films of the 1990s as a collaborative process in which all crew members participated in discussing and deciding on the filming style and central themes of the film (I 1997 8). Huang

provides no further details about the production relations on set. However, he does discuss how economic conditions shape filmmakers' ability to work in certain ways. Filmmakers must live with and adapt to the limitations imposed by investors and audiences. He mentions that, when making *The Wooden Man's Bride*, he felt particularly constrained by these factors (I 1997 6). With regard to the other films, the economic limitations merely set the boundaries within which Huang and his crew could work with a certain degree of freedom, albeit at the risk of failing to achieve box-office success (I 1997 7).

Unlike in his earlier films, except for *The Wooden Man's Bride*, Huang was not the initiator of *Founding* but rather performed an executive function. As mentioned earlier, the project was initiated by China Film Group. Huang's role was to transform the given material into an appealing story for the state anniversary (I 2011 10). He describes rushing into the filmmaking process after arriving from another project in Hong Kong, fifteen days before shooting for *Founding* was due to start, to work as co-director with Han Sanping (I 2011 15). This change in role may also explain why, unlike in the 1997 interview, he does not mention the economic limitations of the filmmaking process here.

A continuous element throughout the interviews is Huang's emphasis on the collaborative work process. In one segment, the interviewer asks why Huang uses the word "we" when discussing his films and filmmaking. Huang responds by emphasising the collective nature of their filmmaking, which is based on a tacit understanding of the film and filmmaking process. He describes it as "a machine that just has to be set up and started" ('*ba jiqi jiahao*' '把机器架好', I 2011 6). This metaphor does not imply commanding or controlling the crew. Rather, Huang aims to provide an overall understanding of the message of the film and the individual scenes. He describes his approach to directing as informal, based on close team integration and the formation of a network of filmmakers who share his vision or a common understanding of filmmaking. That also includes making each participating crew member feel recognised for their contribution (I 2011 6). Consequently, Huang believes that other filmmakers envy his ability to maintain a close-knit and well-functioning crew. He explicitly recalls summoning the crew for *Back To Back, Face To Face* (I 2011 7). This film is indeed connected to several central nodes in the crew member network — namely, crew members who participated in multiple films, particularly his urban comedies (Figure 2). It is a conception of filmmaking collaboration that is less technical or rational and more something created through

communication and interaction (I 2011 8), conscious of the psychological needs and emotions of the crew members (I 2011 6).

6.2.3 Relationship with the audience

All of the analysed interviews and articles, except for the 1989 interview, discuss the role of audience reception in his films and filmmaking. However, the form and function of audience reception change throughout the analysed texts.

In his 1986 article, Huang ascribes to the audience the role of actively shaping the reality conveyed by the film through their own understanding. Audiences make sense of the film by interpreting the connotations and symbols inserted into it (A 1986 3). As a filmmaker, Huang shapes the film's reality and considers how the audience might receive these connotations and symbols. Ultimately, however, the filmic reality is experienced subjectively by the audience. Their understanding of the symbolic reality forms the link between the filmmaker and the audience (A 1986 4).

Moreover, Huang is eager to receive feedback, particularly from other professionals in the field, but also from the audience's response to his film, to improve his subsequent filmmaking (A 1986 8). Therefore, he considers how his film is received to be important in both the field and among the broader audience.

The audience focus is more pronounced in the 2009 article, albeit with a more simplistic conception. Rather than describing the active sense-making of the audience and the connection between filmmaker and audience through symbols and implicit connotations, Huang emphasises the need to meet the entertainment demands and emotional needs of the audience. He describes the contemporary audience as an information-saturated generation, in particular, younger audiences (A 2009 5), that seek simple entertainment to relax and find joy (A 2009 3). Films have to please the audience. This means that producers must internalise the market in film production to make the audience want to watch them (A 2009 6). In reference to Mao's question of who art is made for, Huang asks who films are made for in contemporary China. He responds by arguing that, given market reforms and commercialisation, films are made for paying audiences. This is the new guiding principle for Chinese filmmaking (A 2009 15). However, for Huang, this principle does not just mean creating visually stunning images. The box-office success of Hollywood productions like *Transformers 2* is down to their visual appeal,

but there is a lack of genuine emotion (A 2009 8). Chinese films, particularly historical films with a political focus, should instead aim to create an emotional bond with the audience, providing a shared experience for viewers with diverse tastes and varying historical knowledge (A 2009 7). Filmmakers should strive to understand the entertainment needs of their audience without providing empty entertainment. Films like *Founding* should educate as well as entertain, but they should not be educational material per se (A 2009 18). In that sense, Huang aims to be aware of audience tastes, striving to provide entertaining education that resonates emotionally with a broad audience.

The 1997 article describes Huang's target audience and their relationship with his films, which he describes as ordinary people's films. He describes them as products of his own life experience, which he shares with ordinary city-dwellers in China and which they can relate to intimately (A 1997 3). In addition to the autobiographical explanation, he suggests an economic rationale for these films. Larger productions have to engage the fantasy or imagination, whereas smaller ones have to engage with the audience's life experience (A 1997 6). Inspired by Mao, he describes his approach as human-centred. This approach encompasses his own person: "the way of the masses is also the way in my own heart" ('*wanzhong zhidao yi shi wo xinzhong zhidao*' '万众之道亦是我心中之道', A 1997 10). As he emphasises in several sections of the article (A 1997 3, 4, 6), Huang implies that this approach does not necessarily involve creating mass culture but rather making films that resonate with the life experiences of ordinary people.

The 2007 interview only touches on the relationship with the audience when discussing the relationship between literary source and film adaptation. Huang emphasises that a successful film adaptation of a novel lies in the audience's ability to make sense of the film independently of the original novel (I 2007 1).

As with the 2009 article, the 2011 interview presents a narrower conception of the relationship with the audience, again likening it to an emotional bond. This contrasts with the more abstract notions presented in earlier texts. In the 2011 article, Huang criticises the lack of audience appeal of previous historical and political films, namely Main Melody films. These films lacked dramatic storylines and intriguing characters (I 2011 13). In contrast, the *Founding* films present historical figures through psychological dramas, offering the audience an emotional connection to these figures (I 2011 12).

In the 2011 interview, Huang also discusses the prospect of making films for foreign audiences. He criticises the “Western” orientalist gaze of audiences consuming Chinese films, which stems from their knowledge of China being stuck in the pre-revolutionary era (I 2011 4). By taking a critical stance towards Western audiences’ reception of Chinese films, Huang is also criticising filmmaking that is aimed at appealing to their tastes. This suggests a deliberate decision not to target Western audiences.

6.2.4 Social critique in filmmaking

Huang does not directly refer to his own films as critiques of the prevailing sociopolitical system. While his social critique is not explicitly mentioned, it is implicit in many of his reflections.

The 1986 article focuses mainly on filmmaking as a craft and an art. Although it focuses little on the social critique in *Black Cannon Incident*, there is a section that discusses how the film portrays individuals in modern Chinese society who are held back by tradition. Huang relates the film’s narrative and the character psychology to the concrete historical reality in which the film is set. This reality was characterised by the massive material transformation and the economic modernisation of China, but also by the reluctance of people to change alongside this transformation. In his view, people are held back by tradition despite their optimism towards modernisation. Based on this observation, he questions the prospects for achieving the goals of the officially proclaimed Four Modernisations (*Si ge xiandaihua* 四个现代化) in view of the constrained mindset of individuals in contemporary Chinese society. In the film, he crafts the characters according to this perception, reflecting critically on the contradictions in society and the contradictions inherent in China’s modernisation (A 1986 5).

By contrast, the 2009 article does not suggest that historical and cultural factors constrain the characters. The article’s emphasis is on psychology as a universal foundation for all humans, rather than viewing it as an impediment to modernisation. The authors view individual psychology as a non-historical basis common to all humans that can be used to create a bond between film characters and the audience. This is achieved by portraying historical figures as human beings beneath their political shell:

The so-called “humanisation” essentially means stripping away the political packaging and seeking out the deeper inner qualities common to humans.

所谓“人性化”，其实就是去掉政治包装，去追寻每个人内心深处作为人的那种共性。
(A 2009 11)

Through this portrayal, historical figures take on emotional connotations rather than representing historical facts or political understanding. Huang and Han thus propagate a more psychological than political conception of the Communist Party (A 2009 11).

The 2009 article makes no mention of a discrepancy between China's socioeconomic modernisation and individual psychology. In fact, the authors attribute the success of *Founding* to its box-office performance, which they equate with the success of China's socioeconomic development. At the individual level, this is reflected in the voluntary participation of numerous stars who felt obligated to celebrate the PRC's anniversary. Through their participation, the individual actors and crew members demonstrate their active engagement with China's modernisation (A 2009 14).

The article does not mention the social-critique function of film, instead focusing on its political and educational roles. As a successor to main melody film, *Founding* has to follow and further propagate political and historical narratives, i.e., ideological discourse. The crucial difference from main melody film is that here ideological discourse serves only as a basis or source of material for creating an emotionally engaging film (A 2009 16).

Although Huang does not explicitly discuss social critique in his 1989 interview on *Samsara*, he touches on it in his discussion of the relationship between art and society and how art reflects the changing socio-psychological ideal types emerging in contemporary Chinese society. Through film, Huang attempts to explore and characterise the emerging ideal type of modern individualism created by China's recent socioeconomic development. The cinematic portrayal of the “awkward individual”, as represented by the character Shiba, challenges both the director's personal life experiences and the artistic traditions of the PRC. Huang creates a new set of characters in film that arise from the conflict between the emerging individualist consciousness and its social environment in China (I 1989 2). Huang argues that art mirrors social life and vice versa, as seen in the slow, gradual artistic reception of modern individualism in China. While his film is itself a product of literary discourse, it also actively engages with that discourse, thereby shaping artistic discourse (I 1989 1).

A common aspect of both the 1986 article and the 1989 interview is the idea that filmmaking reflects social reality. In the case of the 1989 interview, this reflection also encompasses the evolving relationship between society and art, allowing for greater artistic freedom to explore emotionality and sexuality, which have evolved alongside China's modernisation. The economic development of China through market reforms brought about a new social group characterised by an emotional bourgeois ethos, which is reflected in the film and thus enters cinematic discourse and discourse on film (I 1989 4).

Huang critically engages with his experience of the Cultural Revolution as a formative period in his life. However, he does not consider it to be purely negative. In fact, he argues that it made him doubt reality. In his view, the experience of the “imperfections of reality” (*xianshi bu wanmei* ‘现实不完美’) provides the starting point for art in the form of doubt, scepticism, and criticism. Huang also describes how political theory and ideology, including Marxism and communism, emerged from the experience of life’s imperfections (A 1997 2). In this way, Huang reflects on his life experiences as the source of his critical perception, a pattern evident in his films.

At the same time, he considers his own life to be ordinary. He had an ordinary upbringing in a Chinese city and experienced the common trauma of the Cultural Revolution. For him, this experience has blurred the distinction between good and bad, black and white. This is also what he aims to convey in his urban films (A 1997 3). His social critique is thus depicted through the details of ordinary people, rather than major political-historical actors and events.

In the 2007 interview, as in the 1997 article, Huang describes his approach to filmmaking as focusing on the lives of ordinary people as a way to humorously address sensitive historical and political issues. The two analysed texts differ in their focus on psychology. While the 1997 article primarily focuses on the lives of ordinary people in urban areas, the later text more generally focuses on the psychology of the characters and their psychological crises to discuss moral crises and changes in values in film. Huang identifies a fundamental issue in Chinese society in the discrepancy between its rapid economic growth and the resulting moral disconnect. However, he argues that he cannot portray this directly in film, but only indirectly by depicting individual psychological crises (I 2007 4).

His approach of indirect criticism, providing a critical mirror of reality without direct criticism, is also touched upon in his gender perspective. “In my films, there is no gender” (*‘zai wo de dianying li meiyou xingbie’* ‘在我的电影里没有性别’, I 2007 7). He justifies this positioning, to make films without gender, by arguing that, when creating characters, gender is not his focus, as other artistic and creative considerations take precedence. Furthermore, he draws attention to the deterioration of women’s status in China following the economic reforms, a fact reflected in his films. Through his films, Huang reflects the gender inequalities present in contemporary Chinese society (I 2007 7). However, he does not critically engage with the issue itself or with the discourse surrounding gender inequality. In that sense, he offers a critical reflection of reality to some extent, but his work does not embody an active progressive force.

The 2011 interview provides an explicit description of Huang’s approach to social critique in film. He suggests that, since cinema is embedded in social reality, filmmaking carries a responsibility to critically analyse and reflect on it. He believes that people can perceive the irrational factors or social dynamics that suppress them, yet resort to irrational behaviour to resolve these issues. This is what he aimed to portray in *Black Cannon Incident*. For Huang, critical filmmaking therefore involves reflecting on the social relations and psychological factors that limit individual autonomy through film (I 2011 3).

For Huang, this approach to social critique emphasises cultural psychology over the sociopolitical system. In the interview, he reflects critically on the changes in values that he has witnessed in China. He argues his early films reflected the widespread “alienation” (*yihua* 异化) in China. Having spent time abroad, he observed a shift towards commercial relationships and capitalist values in social interactions. Despite China’s increasing embrace of capitalism, he realised that human relationships were still dominated by micro-power struggles and a tendency to judge people by their official status (I 2011 2). He frames these perceived social issues as cultural and psychological, rather than political:

This is not a matter of the institutional system or policies, but rather one of cultural psychology.

这不是制度上、政策上的，而是文化心理方面的问题。(I 2011 2)

According to this view, critical films are not necessarily political films. Conversely, his political films are not critical, yet they also focus on character psychology. Huang describes this

approach as “humanising history”, constructing political relations as based on psychosocial relationships, and humanising the official narrative of the PRC’s political history (I 2011 1). This approach does not even aim to be a social critique.

In *Founding*, Huang describes how the characters’ psychology was crafted to draw in the audience through emotional appeal, tying them to the film’s narrative and characters. This emotional appeal is combined with a careful reconstruction of state and party history. This reconstruction portrays historical logic as the driving force behind the unfolding drama, depicting the founding of the Party and the PRC as historically inevitable events (I 2011 12). In doing so, Huang departs from the earlier-described approach of providing a critical reflection on social reality. He mentions that to convey an understanding of history to audiences, the portrayal of the historical soul takes precedence over historical accuracy and fact. At the same time, he highlights the numerous absurd and comedic real historical events that serve as the source for the *Founding* films (I 2011 13). Ultimately, his goal is to create a historical narrative that audiences can experience and feel, rather than providing a stimulus for critical reflection on history.

6.2.5 Transnational positioning

Throughout the analysed texts, Huang discusses his own transnational experience in filmmaking, including international collaborations and his participation in foreign film projects. Another aspect of transnational relations in the field is the idea of Hollywood or European cinema as models for the development of the Chinese film industry. He references foreign film production and his own relationship towards it as part of his arguments for his filmmaking dispositions.

In the 1986 article, Huang reflects on working with the German actor Gerhard Olschewski for *Black Cannon Incident*. He describes Olschewski as a prestigious, professional actor who has won numerous film festival awards. However, Huang does not portray him as superior to the Chinese actors, but rather as different, drawing East-West comparisons in his description of the contrasting acting approaches on set (A 1986 6). I would argue that the international cooperation depicted in the film, where the German engineer clashes with the Chinese company, is reflected in Huang’s portrayal of the clash of acting approaches. The filmic reality is linked to the filmmaking reality through the role of the foreign actor, who symbolises China’s

openness to foreign professionals and, simultaneously, its difficulties in bridging cultural differences.

Interestingly, the 1986 article makes no mention of Hollywood. By contrast, the 2009 article discusses how Hollywood has been “bombarding” (*kuanghong lanzha* 狂轰滥炸) global audiences with visually appealing, computer-generated entertainment. Combined with increasing everyday stress, audiences have become oversaturated and now primarily seek relaxation and enjoyment at the cinema. Huang interprets this audience desire as a key indicator of a film’s success. Based on this understanding of the wider context of filmmaking in China, he describes the influx of Hollywood films as a rather negative phenomenon yet regards it as an unavoidable aspect of contemporary reality to which filmmakers have to adapt (A 2009 3). Overall, Hollywood is viewed negatively and is not held up as a model to follow, due to its perceived lack of integrity and historical and political emptiness. These arguments aim to demonstrate that, while the *Founding* incorporates some Hollywood entertainment techniques, it exceeds pure entertainment by virtue of its educational and emotional richness (A 2009 8).

In the analysed texts, aspects of transnational relations in film production are mentioned for various argumentative purposes, with no identifiable shift in argumentation over time, but with some recurring arguments. In both the 1997 article and the 2011 interview, Huang emphasises the distinct differences in how Chinese and Western audiences receive Chinese films. He attributes this difference to the latter’s limited understanding of China’s history, which is still stuck on images of China from the Opium War era in the 19th century (I 2011 4). He notes that *The Wooden Man’s Bride* was an investor-driven film project conceived of as a “Western model of film” (*‘xibu moshi de yingpian’* ‘西部模式的影片’, A 1997 5), intended for foreign audiences. Investors sought to finance Huang to make this kind of genre film, which comes with predetermined conventions and little room for artistic innovation. This creates a conflict between the filmmakers’ artistic ideals and the filmmaking model’s commercial interests, which often entail inauthentic representations of China (I 2011 5). In the 1997 article, he already notes that the film’s enthusiastic reception abroad made him aware of the cultural and historical gap separating Chinese and Western viewers. According to Huang, Western audiences are familiar only with images of pre-1949 China, leaving a blank space in their perception of the intervening decades. It is against this background that Huang emphasises the ideal of creating human-centred films directed primarily at Chinese audiences (A 1997 9).

In the 2007 interview, Huang highlights a more positive aspect of transnational relations with Europe and the US. He mentions that, following the Cultural Revolution, film theory, as well as philosophical and psychoanalytic theory from the US and Europe, became popular in China. These theories also inspired his choice of symbols and themes in his earlier films. Recently, he has developed a greater interest in psychology, which he argues is lacking in Chinese film. In this respect, he cites films such as *Amélie* (2001) as exemplary (I 2007 8). He goes on to discuss his experience of working in the US film industry, which he describes as a role model for the development of the Chinese film industry. He argues that the rise of computer-generated imagery (CGI) and blockbuster films in industrialised countries has put pressure on Chinese cinema, making Chinese filmmakers more commercially oriented, though with limited box-office success. The Chinese film industry lags behind. Rather than simply following the path of commercial cinema, Huang suggests engaging more with intellectual fields, particularly art theory and psychology, which he regards as a defining feature of the US film industry (I 2007 9). Both smaller artistic projects and commercial blockbusters are essential to the functioning of the US film industry. This provides a discursive argument for both commercial endeavour and artistic exploration in filmmaking. However, his emphasis on European auteur cinema and references to Fellini suggest that at the time of the interview, Huang was more focused on the intellectual than the business side of filmmaking (I 2007 10).

Finally, Huang discusses his own transnational role in the production of *Founding*, bringing the experience and knowledge from his participation in international productions to the set. He also talks explicitly about how he acquired technical skills, particularly in editing-driven film production, in his role as producer, particularly during Hollywood productions. In terms of film technique, Huang views Hollywood film production as a model to follow that can also be applied to Chinese film. Thus, Huang brings editing-driven production, multiple-camera setups, and extensive post-production to Chinese cinema. By applying Hollywood techniques, mainland films can become more appealing to audiences (I 2011 9).

In addition to his knowledge and technical skills, Huang's experience as co-producer on the Hong Kong productions *The Warlords* and *Bodyguards and Assassins* has given him a new perspective on filmmaking, in particular, historical films. This experience has instilled in him the overarching goal of creating films that appeal to audiences and provide an intriguing cinematic experience. In this sense, he imported filmmaking techniques and an ethos that prioritises film appeal and the cinematic experience over historical accuracy (I 2011 17). In this

way, Huang plays a key role in linking the fields of Hong Kong and mainland cinema and contributing to their convergence.

6.3 Huang as a producer

These reflections by Huang emphasise the significant impact of his experience working as a producer on mainland, Taiwanese, Hollywood, and, in particular, Hong Kong film productions on his filmmaking trajectory.

6.3.1 Producer trajectory

His first production role was working with the Taiwanese film director Wang Siu-Di on the film *Accidental Legend* (*Fei tian* 飞天, 1995), a collaboration between Taiwan and mainland China that involved Xi'an Film Studio. Soon after, Huang appeared in his first Hong Kong film, *Intimates* (*Zi shu* 自梳, 1997), a romantic drama about female independence and lesbian love directed by the Hong Kong-based director Jacob Cheung. Huang also acted as producer on three of Cheung's other films, including *Battle of the Wits* (*Mo gong* 墨攻, 2005). During the 2000s, Huang worked as a producer on several films by prominent mainland directors. These included the 2001 commercial comedy *Big Shot's Funeral*, directed by Feng Xiaogang and co-produced with Han Sanping, the music drama *Together* (*He ni zai yiqi* 和你在一起, 2002), directed and written by Chen Kaige, and *C.E.O.* (*Shouxi zhixing guan* 首席执行官, 2002), directed by Fourth Generation director Wu Tianming. Chen Kaige and Huang later collaborated on *My People, My Country* (*Wo he wo de zuguo* 我和我的祖国, 2019) and *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, two films that further developed the model of Huang's earlier propaganda-infused blockbusters. The 2000s also saw Huang working on several other dramas, crime-action films, and romantic dramas in mainland productions or in mainland-Hong Kong coproductions (Appendix I).

Huang also co-produced several Hong Kong comedy films, including *Love Undercover 2*, by Joe Ma; *2 Young* and *Drink-Drank-Drunk*, by Derek Yee; and *All About Women*, by Tsui Hark. Based on his earlier experience of making urban comedies and comedy dramas, these films could have provided the impetus for Huang to direct commercial comedy films with stronger commercial filmmaking techniques. Huang also gained production experience in other commercial film genres. He went on to produce the romantic drama *Embrace Your Shadow* (2005), which was also directed by Joe Ma, as well as the action thriller *Shinjuku Incident*,

another film directed by Derek Yee. Rather than directing films in these genres himself, Huang used his experience and network of filmmakers to pursue a different path in filmmaking, which had also emerged in his trajectory as a producer.

In 2003, Huang worked as a producer on *Zhou Enlai in Bandung*, a main melody film directed by Wei Lian, a veteran director in the genre, and produced by China Film Group, with Han Sanping also part of the production crew. This historical film portrays Zhou Enlai as a wise and hard-working political figure, who went to the Asian-African Conference in Bandung despite a plan by the Taiwanese secret service to kill him. The film symbolises China's presence on the international diplomatic stage (Baidu Baike 2026b). Aside from its genre links to *Founding*, the film also stars Tang Guoqiang as Mao, who played Mao in *Founding* and in Huang's later films.

Before co-directing *Founding*, Huang participated in several international co-productions, including *Kill Bill*, *The Kite Runner*, and *The Mummy 3: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*, all led by American directors and crews, the mainland Chinese-Japanese co-production *Phoenix*, and, in 2009, *Blood: The Last Vampire*, a Hong Kong, Japanese, French and US co-production directed by Chris Nahon. After *Founding*, Huang continued to produce commercial films without clear ideological narratives. At the same time, he continued to direct and later produce propaganda-infused blockbusters (Appendix I).

Notably, Huang does not attribute his career as a producer to materialistic motivations. In the 2007 interview, he talks about the joy he derives from filmmaking, whether as a director or producer. He views filmmaking as a personal passion rather than a business venture, emphasising the importance of personal joy as intrinsic motivation. This joy is also something he experiences as a producer on set, because it comes from the films themselves, not just from his role in the filmmaking process (I 2007 11). While this reflection does not fully explain his move into commercial filmmaking, it does highlight his inclination towards filmmaking in general, without focusing specifically on artistic or intellectual pursuits.

6.3.2 Integrating mainland and Hong Kong cinema

Huang's producer trajectory indicates that he has become an established transnational filmmaker, facilitating and actively shaping transnational coproductions. Most notably, Huang is connecting Hong Kong filmmakers with the mainland market, integrating them into mainland

cinema, and bringing Hong Kong's large-scale commercial filmmaking model to mainland filmmaking. This integration encompasses personnel networks, production models, themes, and narratives, rather than merely stylistic convergence. This network function of Huang is also apparent in the discourse on *Bodyguards and Assassins*, a historical martial arts film led by a Hong Kong crew, which he co-produced, bringing in mainland crew members. In Chen et al. (2010), the director of the film, Teddy Chan (*Chen Desen* 陈德森), mentions that Huang is well-versed in Chinese history and gave the director lots of advice for the film. He also says that Huang's involvement was crucial for collaborating with the mainland crew. A similar aspect is also highlighted by Yin Hong, one of the scholars discussing *Bodyguards and Assassins* in the same publication, who describes him as a master of balancing different polarities in his film, business and art, mainland and overseas, politics and business, big audience and selected audience (Chen D. et al. 2010). Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, this balancing of polarities can be understood as an in-between position between the *fields of restricted* and *large-scale cultural production*. However, by this time, Huang was primarily involved in large-scale commercial productions, rather than making films for cineastes or artistic endeavours. Moreover, the polarities identified by Yin extend beyond this binary differentiation. They also highlight the transregional balancing of mainland and Hong Kong filmmaking practices.

Yin further emphasises Huang's central role in co-productions with Hong Kong. In the production of *Bodyguards and Assassins*, for example, he acted as a mediator between mainland and Hong Kong filmmakers, facilitating a new fusion. Another of the discussants in the publication refers to this as "de-Hong Kongisation" (*qu Xianggang hua* 去香港化). Yin prefers the term "transcending Hong Kong" (*chaoyue Xianggang* 超越香港), whereby some elements of Hong Kong filmmaking are retained within a newly created fusion, the "Chinese blockbuster" (*da huayu dianying* 大华语电影). Teddy Chan describes the role of Hong Kong filmmakers in this model as being responsible for the action scenes and spectacle, as well as the technical aspects, while mainland filmmakers lead the narrative and the depiction of historical figures, most importantly, Huang himself (Chen D. et al. 2010, 48f).

Peter Chan, the main producer of *Bodyguards and Assassins*, together with Huang, played a key role in Hong Kong cinema's transition from a pan-Asian cinema to a more mainland Chinese one in terms of themes and narratives, as Chu (2022) explains. Chu describes this shift as a consequence of waning Hollywood interest in pan-Asian films. As a Hong Konger who

spent his adolescence in Thailand, studied film in Los Angeles, and worked on international co-productions in Hong Kong, Peter Chan was a central figure in Hong Kong film productions and was subsequently instrumental in the shift towards the mainland. Together with Huang and Polybona International, the leading distributor of mainland–Hong Kong co-productions in China, Chan established Cinema Popular, a new production company based in Beijing (Chu 2022, 80–93). This further illustrates Huang’s role in the 2000s as a nodal point for Hong Kong filmmakers seeking to access the Chinese market. He helped them adapt their filmmaking for mainland audiences and secure financing and administrative support from mainland film institutions. In doing so, he contributed to the shift in Hong Kong cinema towards the mainland, which in turn reshaped mainland cinema.

Huang’s engagement with Hong Kong filmmaking in the 2000s marked a significant reorientation of his own professional and aesthetic dispositions. Reflecting on this period, Huang notes that working within Hong Kong–mainland co-productions reshaped his understanding of filmmaking by foregrounding audience appeal as a central objective, particularly in the production of large-scale historical films (I 2011 17). His participation in *The Warlords*, directed by Peter Chan, further exposed him to the filmmaking process of high-budget historical films. Despite its box office success, generating 42.9 million dollars, the film made only a minimal profit due to a 40 million-dollar budget, 13 million of which went toward Jet Li’s salary. Nevertheless, it marked a successful shift in Hong Kong filmmaking, from pan-Asian cinema to Chinese cinema with a dominant mainland audience (Chu 2022, 82, 90f). For Huang, this may have shown the potential of historical war films as a recipe for commercial success, the effectiveness of the star system, and the burden of star salaries. In addition to its aesthetic and technical impact, the film brought Huang into contact with Hong Kong film stars such as Jet Li and Andy Lau, who subsequently appeared in *Founding*. Taken together, these experiences led to a shift in Huang’s filmmaking dispositions and his position within the increasingly interconnected fields of mainland and Hong Kong cinema.

6.4 Huang’s trajectory in comparison

I re-examine the reconstruction of Huang’s social trajectory in the field by comparing it with those of two film directors, Zhang Yimou and Feng Xiaogang. These two directors are situated in the same time and place, but they have produced different bodies of work. Their cases provide alternative filmmaking trajectories in China that may also have formed part of Huang’s “space

of available possibilities” (Bourdieu 1993b, 65). Nevertheless, these alternative pathways did not define Huang’s social trajectory, although they did influence its turning points.

6.4.1 Comparison with Zhang Yimou

Both Huang and Zhang are Fifth Generation filmmakers whose filmmaking trajectories span a broadly similar timeframe. While their trajectories diverge early on, there are some points of convergence in their filmic works, particularly in their alignment with official nation-building narratives and their involvement in state commemorations.

Zhang’s trajectory is closely linked to the institutional origins of the Fifth Generation. As a graduate of the Beijing Film Academy, he benefited from the symbolic power associated with this institution, which is credited as the origin of the generation (Ni 2003). His work as a cinematographer on *One and Eight* (*Yi ge he ba ge* 一个和八个, 1983) and *Yellow Earth* had already established a distinctive visual style that would later become central to his directorial work. These films achieved worldwide recognition, paving the way for a series of films that would become staples at global film festivals. Subsequently, Zhang’s directorial work, beginning with *Red Sorghum* in 1987, is characterised by strong colour symbolism and intricately composed scenes that provide abstract visual representations of Chinese culture, often set in rural historical settings. This aesthetic came to represent the Fifth Generation in the eyes of an international audience. In mainland China, and to a lesser extent among film scholars in the US and Europe, it sparked a broad discussion about the flawed image of China that caters to the limited perception of China held by foreign audiences (Larson 2017, 1–40).

Huang’s early trajectory emerged from a different institutional and regional context. Unlike Zhang, he did not study at the Beijing Film Academy, but only attended a short training class shortly before his debut with *Black Cannon Incident* (Ye and Zhu 2012, 80). Instead, his filmmaking trajectory was embedded in Xi’an and Western Chinese film institutions, in particular, Xi’an Film Studio. This regional positioning shaped his approach to filmmaking. This is reflected in the formalist aesthetics and focus on ordinary urban life in his early films, *Black Cannon Incident*, *Dislocation*, and *Samsara*. These films centre around the discrepancy between material development and individual cultural psychology in the process of China’s postsocialist modernisation. Rather than creating symbolic representations of national culture, Huang highlights everyday urban experiences, interpersonal conflicts, and micro-power relations, developing a satirical mode of critique grounded in the contemporary social reality of

Chinese cities. His later films mostly follow this trajectory, though with less stylised cinematography and a lighter tone (Section 4).

A turning point in Huang's career was *The Wooden Man's Bride*. The film can be seen as an attempt to enter the rural "Chinese Western" genre, which brought early international success to Zhang and Chen Kaige. However, Huang characterises the production rather negatively as a project shaped largely by investor expectations and the supposed demands of foreign audiences rather than artistic and filmic convictions. He criticises the genre's typifying conventions and the limitations imposed by commercial logic, including inconsistencies between the filmic setting and the dialect spoken by the actors. Further, Huang dismisses filmmaking intended for "Western" audiences, arguing that Western reception of Chinese cinema is shaped by an exoticising gaze, stuck in a vision of China from before 1949 (Section 6.2.5). This position aligns with Lu Tonglin's (2001) critique of the commodification of culture and the process of "cultural suture" in Zhang's films, which Lu terms the "Zhang Yimou model". By depicting Chinese characters as subjects suffering under a sexually repressive culture lacking the liberal and rational social order of Western societies through staged feminised suffering, invented traditions, and aestheticised repression, these films position Western spectators as consumers who are presumed to enjoy observing this suffering from an ethical distance (Lu T. 2001). Consistent with his own critical stance on this genre, Huang did not pursue this filmmaking path further and instead refocused on domestic audiences, urban themes, and comedic critique.

In contrast, Zhang Yimou's trajectory is characterised by a sustained engagement with global cultural circulation and commodification, albeit with some notable turning points. One such turning point is the film *To Live* (*Huozhe* 活着, 1994). Unlike his earlier, highly symbolic and visually composed films, this film centres on the commoner living his life as major historical events unfold. Rather than mythologising history, the film offers a character-driven comedic experience of modern Chinese history. Notably, the film still follows a hybrid strategy, targeting both broad domestic audiences and international arthouse viewers (Larson 1999). In her 2017 analysis, Wendy Larson offers a reinterpretation of *To Live*. Accordingly, she presents culture as being pervaded by political power. Even practices that are rooted in everyday pleasure and communal identity can be subject to political demands (Larson 2017, 167–96). Thus, ordinary people are at the centre of the film. However, in contrast to Huang's urban comedies, the characters do not drive the plot development. Instead, the "invisible sovereign" (Larson 2017, 167) governs their social context and standing, thus developing the plot.

This shift becomes more pronounced in Zhang's urban films of the late 1990s. *Keep Cool* (*You hua hao hao shuo* 有话好好说, 1997) and *Happy Times* (*Xingfu shiguang* 幸福时光, 2000) abandon the embeddedness of the themes and plot within Chinese history almost entirely, favouring contemporary, ahistorical urban settings shaped by commodification, affective labour, and precarious social relations. Larson argues that *Keep Cool* rejects history as a source of cultural authority, instead exploring how social bonds can form within a commodified urban space. *Happy Times*, meanwhile, questions the possibility of a rich cultural life arising from the heritage of Chinese socialism (Larson 2017, 197–270). Zhang's thematic focus partially converges with Huang's urban films, which centre on everyday social relations and urban subjectivity. However, the convergence remains limited. While Huang's urban cinema relies on character psychology, the absurdity of social interactions, and satirical institutional critique, Zhang frames similar social tensions through allegory, emotional resonance, and abstract ideational possibilities.

Zhang's 2002 film, *Hero*, is often interpreted as marking a shift towards affirmative representations of centralised authority in China. Indeed, Feng Ling (2014), for example, places *Hero* as a pivotal point in the development of Chinese cinema and thus, also in the context of Huang's later work, which fuses revolutionary stories with a commercial production model. This suggests that, apart from his production role in *Zhou Enlai in Bandung*, Zhang's films were already closer to official narratives in the PRC than Huang's at the time.

Norma Giannetta and Senta van de Weetering (2010) trace a shift in the reception of Zhang's work, from cautious systemic critique to the reading of his films as legitimising the authoritarian central state, also marking *Hero* as the pivotal point in this shift. However, they emphasise that Zhang himself resists assigning explicit political meanings to his films and criticises their reduction to ideological statements rather than acknowledging their aesthetic and cultural complexity (Giannetta and Van De Weetering 2010). Focusing more on the film itself, Larson argues that *Hero* stages a confrontation between cultural power and political-military power, rather than offering a straightforward embrace of authoritarianism. The film, she argues, rejects culture as the basis for the nation-state and the projection of power in an increasingly globalised world, instead basing itself on brute political and military power (Larson 2017, 271–304).

Nonetheless, only a few years later, Zhang directed the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, a pinnacle of national spectacle and state-sponsored cultural performance. Simultaneously addressing domestic and international audiences, the ceremony symbolised China's ascent to parity on the global stage for Chinese spectators, while presenting foreign audiences with an image of national achievement, cultural confidence and international openness (Larson 2017, 333–48). In contrast, *Founding*, released the following year, primarily aimed to appeal to domestic audiences, offering an entertaining narrative centred on state symbols and the founding of the PRC. This contrast is particularly noteworthy given Huang's extensive transnational experience working across the Hong Kong and Hollywood film industries. While Zhang's films were largely initiated and produced within mainland institutional frameworks, albeit often incorporating Hong Kong actors or crew, Huang actively integrated Hong Kong filmmakers into the mainland industry.

In short, Zhang's trajectory shifts from a hybrid of domestic status and international symbolic capital to state-aligned cultural spectacle, while remaining within the field of mainland-led film production. Meanwhile, Huang transitions from restricted, intellectually oriented productions to large-scale productions infused with official narratives. As part of this process, he integrates and collaborates extensively with transregional crews, reshaping the domestic industry to develop commercially successful, state-led productions.

6.4.2 Comparison with Feng Xiaogang

In Section 5.2, I introduced Feng Xiaogang's commercial comedies and the social critique that they offer. Based on these findings and additional sources, I present a few brief points of comparison. Although Feng and Huang faced similar challenges, including competition from Hollywood, regulatory reform, and a growing emphasis on box-office performance, their trajectories in the field diverged in terms of their positions, dispositions, and authorship, particularly their institutional embeddedness and strategies for navigating political and economic forces.

Unlike many Fifth Generation directors who had a hybrid focus on both domestic and international audiences, Feng embraced popular, domestically focused commercial filmmaking early on. He used light-hearted comedies to combine market appeal with social satire (R. Zhang 2008). In particular, his New Year celebration films (*Hesuipian* 贺岁片) deploy star ensembles, holiday marketing, and parodies inspired by Hollywood romantic comedies to address social

issues arising in a postsocialist society, such as housing speculation, corruption, and commercialisation, while remaining within censorship limits (McGrath 2005; Lu Y. 2022). As Qi Ai (2025) argues, these films function not merely as reflections but as industrial allegories that actively engage in state-led commercialisation. According to Qi's reading, *Party A, Party B* (*Jia fang yi fang* 甲方乙方, 1997),³¹ and *Big Shot's Funeral* allegorise industry restructuring, transnational co-production, and market reform, positioning Feng simultaneously as commentator and reform participant. This reflexive strategy, which the director continued in subsequent films, enabled him to shape investor and audience expectations while aligning with policy frameworks, particularly the 9550 Project (*Jiu wu wu ling gongcheng* 9550 工程). Formulated at the 1996 Changsha Conference, the 9550 Project was a state-led policy framework that used government investment, administrative support, and preferential promotion to foster "excellent" (*jingpin* 精品) films that were commercially successful. The aim was for state institutions to promote market-oriented filmmaking while ensuring consistency with official policy and narrative, to develop the film industry and preserve the propaganda function of cinema. Feng's New Year film projects navigated within this policy space, constituting what Qi terms "creative compliance" (111), a negotiated exchange in which commercial success secures creative authorship and censorship flexibility, without fundamentally challenging political authority (Qi 2025).

Comedy, and more specifically the northern Chinese tradition of *tiaokan* (调侃) humour, which translates as ironic mockery, was central to this strategy. By adopting various visual and narrative comedic styles, Feng managed to incorporate social criticism into popular entertainment that remained both politically intelligible and commercially viable. Although he was not widely recognised as a film auteur before the early 2000s due to his lack of formal film education and his early association with entertainment cinema, as opposed to Fifth and Sixth Generation filmmakers, he increasingly pursued aesthetic legitimacy in the 2000s. He reframed commercial filmmaking as a site of authorship rather than mere entertainment (Qi 2025). Zhang Rui (2008) describes Feng's approach to filmmaking using the Gramscian concept of "compromised equilibrium". This involves incorporating dominant discourse while also employing subtle forms of resistance. Operating under the dual pressures of party ideology and globalised market economics, Feng moves from implicit critique towards more explicit commentary (Zhang R. 2008).

³¹ Alternative English titles: *The Dream Factory* and *Our Dreams Will Come True*.

Like Feng, Huang used comedy to express social critique in the 1980s and 1990s, but largely within smaller-scale productions. His involvement in *Big Shot's Funeral* marked his most direct engagement with Feng's model of social critique-infused commercial comedies. However, he did not pursue this path in his own directorial work. As the industry shifted its focus towards box-office performance in the 2000s, Huang increasingly repositioned himself as a producer, mediator and institutional connector, particularly in Hong Kong-mainland co-productions (Section 6.3), utilising these networks and resources in his return to directing with *Founding*.

In short, Feng established himself in popular cinema through industry allegory and humour, as well as a consciously negotiated form of authorship that balanced commercial imperatives, such as investor demands, audience expectations, and state-private industry structures, with political imperatives. By contrast, Huang's trajectory marks a shift from critical art and comedy in filmmaking towards an institutional role that reshapes the conditions of production and mediation rather than the forms through which social critique can be conveyed in commercial cinema.

7 Discussion

This thesis examines Huang's changing positions and dispositions within the field of mainland cinema, underlying his trajectory from critical art film to propaganda-infused blockbuster. Although centred on an individual filmmaker, this research does not treat Huang's films as expressions of a coherent auteurist vision. Instead, it considers them as position-takings shaped by changing production relations, institutional configurations, and evolving filmmaking dispositions that shape the thematic focus and audience orientation of his films, and consequently their final form.

Starting with cinematographically formalist critical comedies in the late 1980s, Huang moved away from the aesthetics of his early trilogy towards urban narratives focused on everyday life. He maintained a critical approach and relatively small-scale production throughout this period, up to *Gimme Kudos*. At the same time, he became increasingly involved in large-scale commercial filmmaking through producer roles in the early 2000s (Section 4.2).

Huang's engagement with Hong Kong filmmaking was crucial in shaping his disposition towards the box office. The professional experience and transregional networks he accumulated through mainland-Hong Kong co-productions paved the way for his role as co-director of *Founding*, a state-led blockbuster that brought together a star-studded cast and production crew from mainland China and Hong Kong. This film marked the beginning of the large-scale integration of Hong Kong filmmakers into state-led, commercially driven cinema infused with patriotic, party-sanctioned narratives. Through this process, Huang came to occupy a nodal position within the field, mediating between state institutions, private capital, and transregional networks of film professionals (Sections 6.2.5 and 6.3). I argue that this position gave him access to substantial institutional and financial backing, reducing the economic risks and precarity associated with film production (Wasko 2005; DeVany 2004). However, it also entailed increasing constraints on narrative form, aesthetic strategies, and authorial autonomy.

These changing positions and dispositions must be situated within the context of broader, field-specific developments in mainland cinema. Following the end of the Mao era, the field experienced a loosening of political control, characterised by contradictory cultural policies and competing ideologies regarding the function of cultural production in the new era. Political films from this period aimed to make revolutionary history consumable, creating the main melody genre, though with limited box-office success at the time. Initially associated with

increased professional autonomy, this phase gave way to accelerating commercialisation from the 1990s onwards, driven strongly by the influx of Hollywood films. This culminated in the consolidation of a modern film industry in the 2000s, emerging from the confluence of political reinforcement, state institutional facilitation, and market-oriented commercial film production. Films produced within this new industrial structure promote official ideology through commercially successful entertainment (Section 5).

7.1 Theoretical synthesis

In this section, I present the results of the analysis and synthesise them with theoretical concepts to construct new arguments. First, I reassess Huang's trajectory through the lens of Bourdieu's field theory, addressing its conceptual limitations within the context of mainland filmmaking. To overcome these limitations, I discuss the findings of this thesis utilising the concepts of postsocialism, state-led film industry development, transnational filmmaking, and the notion of Sinophone cinemas. Finally, I develop a conceptualisation of Huang's changing authorship function in the field at the intersection of political and economic logic, institutional and professional networks, and individual agency. The theoretical synthesis also informs the reflection on the methodology and its limitations in the concluding methodological reflections in Section 7.2.

7.1.1 Reevaluating Bourdieu's field-theoretic framework

This thesis draws on Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production as a conceptual framework to delimit the phenomenon under study and to structure the methodology. Several critiques of field theory have been raised in the literature, particularly when applied to mainland cinema. These include its vague conceptualisation of individual action and decision-making, its tendency to lean towards social determinism (Van den Berg 1998). To some extent, the concept of disposition can counter criticism of social determinism, as it shifts the focus from structural determination to action-guiding orientations. Conversely, field theory has also been criticised for focusing on the individualised habitus at the expense of collective structures. In the context of mainland cultural production, authors tend to position themselves based on collective differentiations, where value and legitimacy depend less on individual textual strategies of distinction and more on collective norms and authorial persona (Hockx 1999a, 2002). This thesis addresses these criticisms by drawing on alternative approaches to authorship, which are discussed in Section 7.1.6. A further limitation of field theory lies in its nation-state-centred conception of field autonomy and heteronomy, which tends to overlook transnational relations

(Larson 1999). Section 7.1.4 addresses this issue, also invoking the concept of Sinophone cinemas.

First, the concept of individual position-taking must be reconsidered in the study of filmmaking. A film involves a crew and cast who shape the final work in crucial ways. For example, the aesthetic depends on the work of the cinematographer, art director, lead editor, and music and sound engineers, who collaborate with the director. The director provides a framework, but the crew's work is not determined by the director. This is evident in the stark shift in style from Huang's first two films to *Samsara*, and then again to his subsequent urban comedies (Section 4.2). Huang himself emphasises the collective and collaborative nature of the filmmaking process (Section 6.2.2). Some crew members were consistent throughout his filmmaking projects (Section 6.1), thus collectively shaping his work. Consequently, the director's position-taking is also the collective position-taking of the crew. However, the division of labour in the film production process is determined by the positions and authorial functions of the individual crew members. I would argue that the positions and dispositions that underlie Huang's social trajectory in the field remain individual, albeit shaped by a network of filmmakers and institutions.

Bourdieu describes the position of cultural producers within field-specific institutions and their relationship with the state, the field of power, which dominates the field of cultural production, depending on their position in the binary between restricted and large-scale production. However, he does not consider the possibility of a parallel trajectory in differentiated fields within the field of mainland cinema. Bourdieu refrains from describing artists' positions outside of their artistic trajectories, only describing their previous position within the overall class structure of society (Bourdieu 1993b). By contrast, to understand Huang's filmic trajectory beginning in the 2000s, it is essential to consider his trajectory as a producer. This involved gaining access to institutional resources and backing through his producer roles in commercial film productions.

Another aspect of Huang's position within the institutional network of the field is his connection to the Xi'an Film Studio. His father was head of the Xi'an Film Corporation, which provided Huang with early access to the studio. This early involvement with the Xi'an Film Studio shaped much of his subsequent filmmaking career. However, rather than reflecting on this, Huang reflects on his upbringing in Xi'an, the collective experience of the Cultural

Revolution, and ordinary life in a western Chinese city. This is an abstract collective, not a shared trajectory with specific individuals. An identifiable turning point was his transition from the locally embedded Xi'an film production network to the production network he acquired in his role as producer on several mainland and Hong Kong films. Han Sanping played a pivotal role in his shift towards propaganda-infused blockbusters. While this transition reflects the collective shift towards commercial film, it does not imply that state ideology determined Huang's subsequent dispositions. I discuss this point further below.

Lastly, Bourdieu's description of the mechanisms that arise from the binary differentiation between the field of restricted and the field of large-scale cultural production is insufficient to explain Huang's trajectory. It could be argued that Huang's earliest films fall into the former category, while the films he produced, as well as *Founding*, are large-scale productions aimed at a mass audience. However, this clear-cut differentiation does not apply to his films after *Samsara*, with which he aimed to appeal to ordinary people rather than other filmmakers. His articles and interviews are certainly aimed at other filmmakers. In particular, the texts from 1986 and 1989 mention welcoming criticism from filmmaking professionals in film journals. In these texts, he also considers the position of filmmaking within intellectual discourse. Nevertheless, the main focus remains on the relationship with the audience. While this binary field differentiation is not incompatible with a transnational perspective, it must be adapted to account for dependencies on foreign capital from the US and Europe, as well as on foreign film festival audiences in wealthier European and North American states. In Huang's case, a transnational perspective must specifically include Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Japanese production companies produced some of Huang's directorial work. He has participated in films led by Taiwanese crews or financed by Taiwanese investors. He has also served as a producer in Hong Kong cinema and collaborated with Hong Kong crew members on *Founding*. Hong Kong companies are also involved in the international distribution of his films. Clearly, the explanatory power of field autonomy and internal differentiation is lacking from this perspective.

7.1.2 Postsocialist filmmaking

Another aspect missing from Bourdieu's field theory is the ideological imprint on filmmaking. In response to Hockx' (1999, 2002) criticism of Bourdieu's overemphasis on the individualised habitus and his lack of consideration of collective dispositions and agency, I introduce the concept of postsocialism.

In its original conception by Arif Dirlik (1989), postsocialism is the ideology held by the political elite. He argues that postsocialism is a response to the experience of the deficiencies of both capitalism and socialism. In this conception, the PRC is neither merely socialist nor capitalist, but postsocialist. This socioeconomic system is characterised by compromises with capitalism in the pursuit of socialist goals. Furthermore, it is shaped by the experiences of both capitalism and socialism in its socioeconomic reality and ideological work. In this configuration, the option of returning to a more traditional socialist practice is kept open (Dirlik 1989). When revisiting the concept 25 years later, Dirlik argued that the CCP continues to derive its legitimacy from the socialist revolution. While the party leadership was always characterised by experimentation, the postsocialist leadership is characterised by new forms of governance, Marxist reinterpretations, and transitional developments on the path towards socialism. Although China is integrated into global capitalism, it does not embrace it ideologically. Postsocialism instead denotes an ongoing search for alternatives to both its socialist past and capitalist modernity (Dirlik 2014).

What Dirlik describes is the official ideology, as reflected in official historical narratives, as in *Founding*. In contrast, Huang's earlier films offer reflections on the postsocialist state of Chinese society as works of postsocialist popular culture. Paul Pickowicz (1994) raised this understanding of the term. He argues that the experience of socialism and its failure continues to shape both the economic and political institutions, as well as the experiences and social lives of individuals in contemporary postsocialist societies. He also suggests that this shared experience is a stronger unifying factor than long-term historical and ethnic ties. Examining Huang's earliest trilogy, *Black Cannon Incident*, *Dislocation*, and *Samsara*, he argues that postsocialist cinema documents this shared experience by subverting the ideology of the traditional socialist system and depicting individuals' alienation from it (Pickowicz 1994, 2012). I agree with this reading of Huang's earliest films and would extend it to a lesser degree to his urban films from the 1990s up to *The Marriage Certificate* in 2000 (Section 4.2). The latter film intimately explores the psychological impact of the socialist legacy and the postsocialist transition. It depicts characters who are unable to cope with the transition and live in a precarious state in the city, mirroring the precarious social state of postsocialism.

Gimme Kudos marks the endpoint of Huang's postsocialist trajectory. While the film continues to engage with Cultural Revolution trauma and the contradictions of contemporary Chinese

society, such as inequality and overlapping ideological and cultural norms, even within the family, it is no longer overtly critical of postsocialist society. The focus on individual psychology and general issues of urban life, already present in Huang's films of the late 1990s, becomes more pronounced in *Gimme Kudos*. Official ideology is no longer presented as opposed to society and barely features as a theme at all. Therefore, I would argue that postsocialism is no longer the defining concept. Instead, his films are defined by his innate skill in crafting character drama and psychological drama. In other words, throughout his filmmaking career up to *Gimme Kudos*, Huang gradually moves away from the disposition of postsocialist filmmaking, instead foregrounding the cinematic techniques of character construction and individual psychological exploration (Section 4.2).

While *Founding* clearly diverges from the trajectory of his earlier postsocialist films, it aligns with Arif Dirlik's conception of postsocialism as a party-state ideology. Indeed, Yu Hongmei (2013) goes so far as to argue that the film is a case in point for the postsocialist ideological consolidation, a process she describes as "the conversion from propaganda to consumerism through the spectacular" (186). A counter to that is that the narratives and symbols of *Founding* are nationalist and nativist rather than socialist. According to Dirlik (2014), the strong nativism in official ideology is not at odds with postsocialism, as the socialist revolution remains the main source of legitimacy. *Founding* also incorporates socialist revolutionary symbols into the plot, notably the portrayal of Mao as a charismatic state founder (Section 4.1.3). Thus, the film aligns with Dirlik's conception of postsocialist ideology.

The question remains as to what subverts and what is subverted in the postsocialist consolidation of the ideological messaging conveyed by commercial products. As Huang and Han Sanping argue in one of the analysed articles (A 2009), *Founding* is a necessary adaptation of filmmaking in response to short attention spans, the influx of Hollywood films, and the disinterestedness of Chinese youth. Furthermore, entertainment has the power to educate covertly and convey historical narratives and symbols more subtly, thereby guiding audiences. As Huang and Han argue in the text, the film's final success represents the success of the Chinese political and economic model, with the combined forces of state institutions working through market-based filmmaking (A 2009 14). This political economic model is based on postsocialism as an ideological foundation for the state to experiment with and increasingly appropriate capitalist means to achieve its political goals. In the process, the state itself becomes more capitalist, and, in the case of *Founding*, the film's audience is further reinforced in its

consumerist dispositions. I would argue that selling official narratives as profitable entertainment products necessarily positions the state institutions involved as part of the film industry complex and cultural enterprise. The discourse on postsocialism is limited in this respect. In the following section, I discuss Huang's institutional positioning, particularly regarding the state's role in developing the mainland film industry.

7.1.3 State-led film industry development

One aspect not addressed in the discourse on postsocialist film is the institutional configuration and the state's role in film production. *Black Cannon Incident* was produced by Xi'an Film Studio, distributed by the China Film Distribution and Exhibition Company, and shot mostly at the premises of the Dalian Heavy Machinery Plant and Anshan Mining Company, all of which are state-owned enterprises.³² The same goes for most of Huang's films until *The Marriage Certificate* in 2000. State institutions played an active role in the production of postsocialist films and were therefore indirectly involved in creating subversive content. This demonstrates that state involvement in mainland China does not necessarily equate to the production of state ideology.

Conversely, both private and state involvement can be associated with the production of state ideology, commercial films, or critical art films. During the 1980s, there was relatively open space for autonomous filmmaking, with little pressure from international film markets. This changed in the 1990s and 2000s. This period saw an increasing impetus for commercial filmmaking due to Hollywood's growing presence in the mainland film market (Section 5). This led to a transition among Fifth Generation directors "from art to commerce" (Zhu and Robinson 2010, 145). However, for Huang, it was a transition from art to state-led commerce and state-ideological production. The confluence of increasing market integration and active political involvement in the allocation of private capital during this period shaped *Founding*.

While *Founding* is not postsocialist in the meaning of the term as defined by Pickowicz (1994), it does embrace capitalist production relations. The propagation of official discourse and patriotic socialist narratives and symbols is pursued through cinematic practices embedded in the Chinese „state-constituted market economy“, a term Isabella Weber and Qi Hao (2022, 2) use to describe the PRC's historically formed political-economic configuration. This

³² All participating companies including the set locations are listed in Appendix II, Table C.

configuration is characterised by state-led market creation, state participation in market forces, and state guidance of these forces (Weber and Qi 2022). It is shaped not only by the PRC's own socialist experience, but also by the experience of market reforms in the formerly socialist states of Eastern Europe (Weber 2021). This is the economic dimension of postsocialism emerging as the guiding ideology of the party-state.

The openness of Chinese film censors in the 1980s is paralleled by the openness to foreign economic ideas and policy experimentation described by Weber (2021). This openness is evident in the experimentation with new film forms and the legitimisation of alternative film narratives in the 1980s, as seen in Huang's postsocialist film. However, this came to an end with the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 and the subsequent crackdown. As in the economic sphere in the 1990s, a similar institutional mode continued in film, albeit with reduced artistic autonomy and a greater commercial focus (Section 5).

In the 1990s, state capital was channelled into creating the new genre of main melody film as a direct state project (Y. Zhang 2004; Yu 2013). The 2000s saw a greater focus on encouraging and guiding foreign private film investment towards certain projects through co-production with state-owned enterprises (Su 2016). Thus, the development of the film industry was characterised by state-guided investment in commercial film production and the exploitation of the commercial film market for state ideological aims. *Founding* is a case in point. It was initiated and led by the China Film Group, represented by its chairman at the time, Han Sanping, who was also the film's co-director. Other state film studios and political organisations, such as the Beijing Municipal Committee of the CPPCC, were also involved. Notably, private film companies were also heavily involved in the production and distribution of the film (Figure 5). Huang joined the project straight from working on a purely commercial Hong Kong film. I would argue that Huang's role in this production was to contribute his filmmaking experience, skills, and professional network of filmmakers - particularly those from Hong Kong - acquired in his transnational role as producer, to this state-led commercial film production.

Huang reflects on his role in *Founding*, which he sees as contributing to the development of the film industry by applying commercial film techniques such as Hollywood-style editing, star line-ups, and CGI. He recognises the need for the film industry to develop in competition with Hollywood, with the aim of surpassing it by creating meaningful, educational blockbusters. This involves taking on the responsibilities that come with main melody filmmaking. The stated

mission is to educate through entertainment by creating a blockbuster that celebrates the current state and economic model of the PRC and educates audiences about its history and symbols (Section 6.2).

The institutional configuration underlying postsocialist ideological production, as exemplified by *Founding*, demonstrates state-market relations in filmmaking that differ markedly from the field relations described by Bourdieu. Political power is realised through economic means. Specifically, the symbolic power of state-sanctioned narratives relies on their entertainment appeal and mass reach. At the same time, the reverse is true: economic power is exercised through political logic. The film's market success is based on state support and resources, which enable large-scale production while reducing the risk of economic loss.

7.1.4 Transnational filmmaking and the limits of national fields

A key criticism of Bourdieu's field theory is the absence of transnational and transregional relations. An initial approach to addressing this is to examine the field from a geographical perspective. Therefore, as part of the social network analysis, I constructed a map of the companies involved in Huang's filmic works, showing their geographical locations and distinguishing between state and private companies. Notably, the majority of Huang's films were produced in Xi'an by state-owned companies rather than private ones. However, the majority of companies are headquartered in Beijing, including several state-owned or -administered and private companies. The prominence of Beijing is due to the industrial production model underlying *Founding*, which differs greatly from the small-scale filmmaking and relatively consistent crews of Huang's earlier postsocialist and urban films. Companies from other cities in mainland China were mostly state-owned. In contrast, all of the companies in Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Los Angeles, and Berlin are private. One company that has played a key role in Huang's career is China Film Co-production Corporation, a subsidiary of China Film Group, which was involved in producing four of Huang's films and several others in which he acted as producer (Section 6.1). This points to state control over international co-productions with private foreign companies being a key feature of transnational filmmaking in mainland China.

A regionally grounded analysis can provide a more in-depth examination of transregional relations. Huang's filmmaking is associated with Western Chinese cinema, which was largely shaped by the Xi'an Film Studio. Most of Huang's films are set in Xi'an, with others set in

Qingdao, Beijing, and other eastern Chinese cities. They are primarily coherent in terms of their urban comedy style and genre, with a strong visual and thematic presence of Xi'an. This regionally based mode of filmmaking continued until 2000 with *The Marriage Certificate* (Section 4.2 and Appendix II, Table C). Soon after, Xi'an Film Studio sold its physical facilities, which were converted into entertainment venues and theme parks. Instead, film studio work was outsourced to domestic and foreign private companies (Zhang R. 2008, 113). Regional film production institutions and the associated regional filmmaking are evident in Huang's films up to *Gimme Kudos*. *Founding* clearly diverges from this, pivoting towards central filmmaking in terms of its official state-history narratives, as well as production centred around Beijing studios and companies, with few elsewhere (Section 6.1).

Another fundamental criticism of Bourdieu's field theory is the absence of a conceptualisation of transnational relations within the field. Larson's (1999) critique of the missing perspective on global economic inequality and dependence, and the hybrid strategy of Fifth Generation filmmakers to cope with these relations of dependence, is also highly relevant to this study. Zhang Yimou is most well-known for his hybrid strategy of targeting both foreign film festival audiences and domestic audiences. Huang is more of an exception to the Fifth Generation, who has not enjoyed the same international success as his peers (Wang Z. 2006). At the same time, Huang actively engaged in international co-productions and collaborations. Already following his first film, *Black Cannon Incident*, made in collaboration with a German actor and a German film company, Huang reflects deeply on international collaboration. However, he never embraced a focus on foreign audiences. In his interviews and articles, he expresses a rather negative view of foreign audiences and of Chinese films aimed at them. He believes foreign audiences lack an understanding of modern China and desire distorted images of China that fit their orientalist gaze. Huang thus mainly targets domestic audiences. He describes his role in the development of the state-led film industry as also being a result of this conscious decision to find another way of circumventing dependence on foreign capital (Section 6.2).

As argued earlier, Huang acquired the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for commercial filmmaking through his roles as producer in international co-productions. Specifically, this involves editing-driven filmmaking and the creation of entertaining historical films that appeal to a mass audience. A transregional perspective is essential for understanding his trajectory. As well as impacting his filmmaking disposition through his producer role in Hong Kong commercial comedies and other genres, Huang also found himself mediating

between mainland and Hong Kong crews on Hong Kong films, and increasingly between Hong Kong and mainland crews on mainland films (Section 6.3.2). In this social role, I would argue that he is actively shaping transregional filmmaking relations, thereby affecting the regional and professional identities of Hong Kong filmmakers.

7.1.5 Conceptualising Sinophone cinemas

These insights also touch on the question of how to define the cinematic fields in which Huang is engaged. Zhang Yingjin's (2004) critical application of the term "Chinese national cinema" to differentiate between mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong cinema is close to Bourdieu's field conception. It implies a notion of a national cinema, an ethnic-linguistically autonomous field with specific histories. While I agree with the notion of place-based specificity, this study has clearly shown how transnational and transregional links have permeated these fields and that mainland cinema cannot be isolated as a national field.

Shao Peiren (2014) coined the term "Huallywood" (*Hualaiwu* 华莱坞) to emphasise the transnational span of Chinese cinema and its interaction with Hollywood. Based on the word *hua* (华), the term includes a focus on *huaren* (华人), Chinese ethnic people, as film subjects, *huayu* (华语), Chinese languages, as film language, *huashi* (华事) and *huashi* (华史), Chinese history and Chinese affairs, as major themes or sources for the films, and *huadi* (华地), Chinese places, in a film industry shaped strongly by its interaction with Hollywood (Shao 2014; Fu et al. 2016). While this study confirms the strong influence of Hollywood on mainland film development, Huallywood risks narrowing transnational analysis to Sino-American interaction. It underemphasises the embeddedness of Chinese-language film within pan-Asian cinemas, particularly in Japanese film production, and insufficiently accounts for Hong Kong's position as an intermediary between Hollywood and mainland cinema, as a nodal point in filmmaking networks linking other Asian cinemas, and as a specific cinema of its own. Moreover, its industry-oriented perspective leaves less room for auteur cinema, European art-house influences, and festival circuits, all of which Huang explicitly references in interviews and articles.

The term "Sinophone cinema" deliberately resists China-centred perspectives and foregrounds the dispersed Sinophone cultures, localisation, and postcolonial conditions of cultural production. In Shih Shu-mei's (2011) conception, the term rejects cultural production at the centre of the PRC, including only marginal cultures in the mainland context. In line with

Sheldon H. Lu's (2012) critique of this limited definition, this study takes a more encompassing view of Sinophone cinemas, incorporating mainland cinema within its transnational and regional relations while paying attention to local specificity. As was highlighted in the film readings and in Huang's own reflections (Sections 4.2 and 6.2), his urban comedies explore Chinese history and modernity through the lens of the local and the ordinary. In contrast, his later state-sanctioned and commercially oriented productions, starting with *Founding*, adopt a more nation-centred perspective. This differentiation highlights how commercial and political projects re-centre the nation state, whereas earlier, more autonomous postsocialist and urban films articulate more localised and relational narratives.

Another aspect of Sinophone cinema concerns the construction of Asianness in the international co-productions in which Huang was involved. I suggest that the roles of Huang and the mainland film crews in films such as *Kill Bill*, *The Kite Runner* and *Blood: The Last Vampire* was to depict stereotyped elements of East Asian culture, such as Kung Fu and Japanese sword fighting in *Kill Bill*, or simply to depict Asian places using mainland Chinese locations without grounding the filmic world in the actual local historical context. This raises the question of the extent to which his role as producer can be considered pan-Asian. A related issue is the growing centrality of the PRC for Hong Kong filmmakers, and the ensuing integration of Hong Kong cinema into the mainland field. Stephen Y. Chu (2022) has highlighted that Hong Kong filmmakers have increasingly been involved in state-led commercial film projects that propagate hegemonic narratives of the party-state. He describes this as the shift of Hong Kong film from pan-Asian to mainland cinema. The results of this thesis strongly support this argument.

Ultimately, the notion of a closed, autonomous cinematic field, or even a national field, cannot explain all these aspects of transnational filmmaking and the changing relations among Sinophone cinemas.

7.1.6 Huang's authorship function

This subsection revisits the question of authorship, asking how Huang's authorship function can be conceptualised in light of his position within mainland cinema. Moving beyond the distinction between propaganda and apolitical entertainment or auteurist art, I conceptualise mainland cinema as an evolving field in which political, economic, and artistic logics intersect.

Within this field, Huang's authorship function reflects his changing positions, dispositions, authoring statements, and role.

During the production of his first trilogy, Huang established himself as an autonomous filmmaker and auteur of critical comedy, with an aesthetic style that set him apart from other Fifth Generation filmmakers. He was embedded in the filmmaking network of the Xi'an Film Studio, which facilitated the open exploration of themes and styles beyond state-sanctioned narratives and genres. He continued on this path with urban comedies, but with a less auteurist style. Huang describes this as a shift towards less formalistic filmmaking, establishing a connection with ordinary people through his life experiences and translating them into films. The network of film institutions and crew members remained similar, enabling a coherent filmmaking infrastructure and positioning, with more consistent crews and actors in the 1990s and 2000s (Section 6).

From the late 1990s onwards, Huang's position in mainland Chinese cinema was characterised by several potential and actual trajectories rather than a single directional shift. The first of these was the continuation of his urban comedies, which he pursued intermittently until *Gimme Kudos* in 2005. A second direction briefly emerged earlier with *The Wooden Man's Bride* in 1993, a "Chinese Western" initiated by investors seeking to replicate Zhang Yimou's international festival success. In retrospect, Huang chose not to pursue this internationally oriented filmmaking, citing constraints imposed by investor expectations and pressure to satisfy what he perceived as a distorted foreign gaze on representations of China. While *Swordsmen* followed the model of the Chinese Western in terms of language and style, it was clearly intended for domestic audiences rather than international festivals. Finally, it is the project closest to *Founding* in terms of shared cast and crew (Sections 4.2 and 6.2).

The third and ultimately most significant development was his expanding role as a producer. Starting with mainland and Taiwanese projects in the late 1990s, Huang moved on to Hong Kong and international co-productions, particularly during the 2000s. This shift was enabled by broader structural changes, such as the influx of Hollywood into the Chinese market, state policies aimed at strengthening the global competitiveness of Chinese cultural industries, and institutional changes like CEPA, which facilitated collaboration between mainland China and Hong Kong. During this period, Huang worked on projects by major mainland and Hong Kong directors, including commercial comedies and large-scale productions. While he did not imitate

their styles, he adopted key elements of commercial filmmaking, such as market orientation and the editing-driven pacing associated with Hollywood, as well as the operational logic of Hong Kong's star and production system. Crucially, he also built an extensive network of contacts in mainland China and Hong Kong, which he would later utilise in state-led blockbusters (Section 5).

His central role as director of *Founding* can be explained by his previous filmmaking endeavours and developments in the field. From his earlier directorial works, he inherited a disposition toward crafting complex, emotionally engaging characters and character-driven plots. Through his nodal position in transregional filmmaking networks spanning mainland and Hong Kong cinemas, and his contact with Han Sanping, the chairman of China Film Group at the time, he was able to actively link this network of professional filmmakers with state institutions, securing financing, administrative support, and state media promotion. This created a self-reinforcing cycle of increasing star participation to aid commercial promotion. Following the ideological incorporation of mainland cultural industries and the stated aim of making them internationally competitive, the ground was fertile for a large-scale, self-celebratory film project that celebrated state symbols and their historic legacy according to the official narrative (Sections 4 and 6.2). Huang's enthusiastic involvement in the production of *Founding* established him as a pivotal figure in China's state-led film industrialisation. His subsequent involvement in a series of films that promote state symbols through commercial appeal underscores his enduring authorship within this filmmaking model, which later gave rise to the new mainstream film genre.³³

Figure 6 illustrates the theoretical synthesis and conceptualisation of Huang's changing authorship. On a broader level, it situates his trajectory within post-Mao ideological and cultural policy developments. These include the opening up of China's fields of cultural production to previously banned practices, and also to foreign cultural imports during the 1980s, alongside incoherent reform-era cultural policies. This was followed by state-led cultural industry development in the 1990s and, in the late 2000s, "postsocialist ideological consolidation" (Yu 2013, 186), which manifests itself in the form of the propaganda-infused blockbuster. Within this ideological development, Huang's filmmaking shifted from relatively autonomous critical art cinema, including post-socialist films and critical urban comedies, to his role as producer

³³ On *new mainstream*, see Section 5.3.

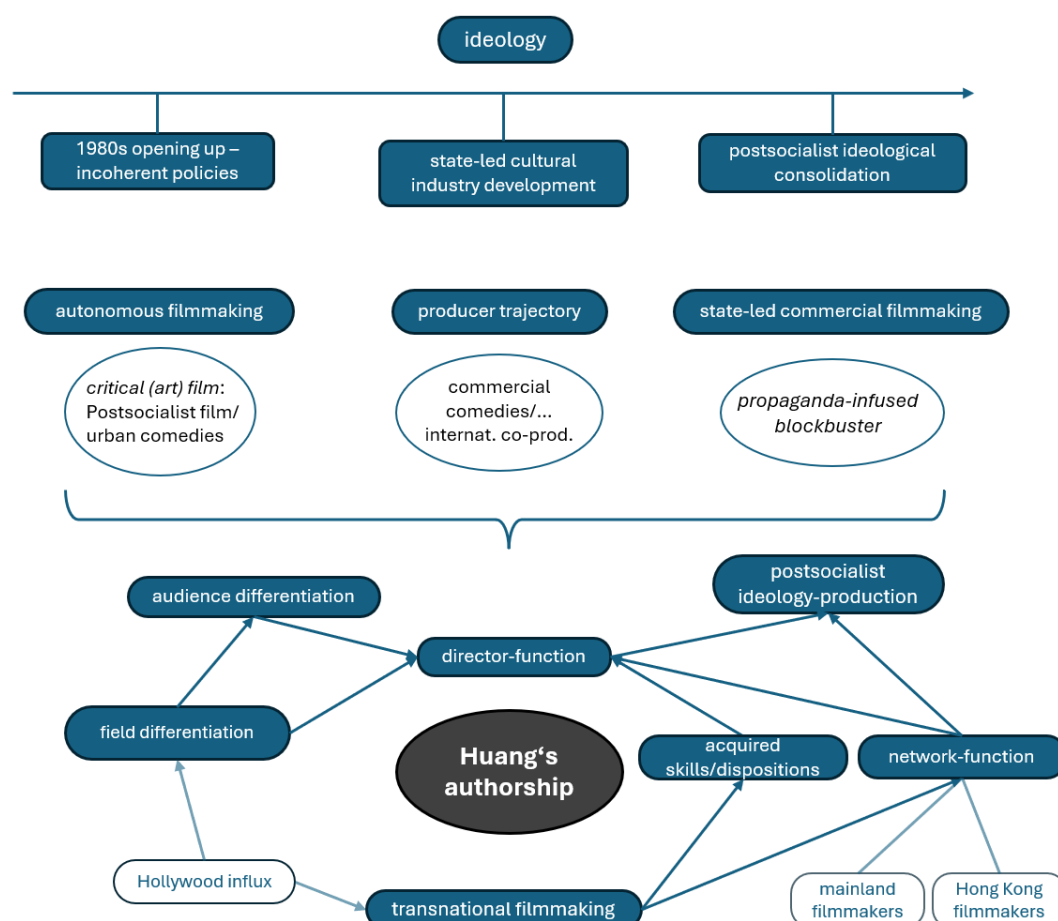
during the late 1990s. In this capacity, he collaborated on commercial comedies and various other genres, primarily in mainland China, Hong Kong, the US, Japan, and Taiwan. Finally, he took on the role of director in state-led commercial filmmaking for propaganda-infused blockbusters.

Within the field, the lower part of Figure 6, Huang's authorship can be conceptualised as a function of increasing field and audience differentiation. Beginning at Xi'an Film Studio with formalist art comedies, he gradually moved away from intellectual formalism toward films centred on ordinary urban dwellers, while later shifting from smaller productions to large-scale commercial-political film. Yet this shift cannot be adequately described using Bourdieu's binary of restricted versus large-scale production. Films such as *Gimme Kudos* occupy an intermediate position. Another key aspect of field differentiation is the hybrid focus of filmmakers on both domestic and foreign festival audiences, a strategy often associated with Zhang Yimou. The Hollywood influx in the 1990s added further impetus to field differentiation, intensifying pressures towards commercialisation. In Huang's case, however, this was less evident in his directorial work than in his work as a producer and his involvement in international co-productions. His brief attempt at a "Chinese Western", prompted by investors seeking to replicate the successes of other Fifth Generation directors, did not become a sustained path. Instead, he acquired new skills, a disposition toward commercial filmmaking, and an expanded professional network. His work as a producer positioned him as a mediating node between filmmakers in mainland China and those in Hong Kong, thereby constituting his network function. The acquired skills, dispositions, and network position fundamentally transformed his director-function for *Founding*. This involved shifting from an auteurist approach, in which he directed artistic and technical elements to create a unified work, to that of a producer-director who coordinates technical and dramatic elements and utilises state-institutional and ideological resources within a commercial production mode.

In this thesis, I do not argue that Huang's trajectory is structurally determined. Instead, I consider his sustained interest in the artistic and industrial dimensions of filmmaking, as well as the socioeconomic and psychological transformations of postsocialist China, to be instrumental in shaping his parallel trajectories as a director and producer and to the filmmaking dispositions associated with these. While the ideological trajectory of the PRC and the consolidation of a state-led film industry created the structural conditions for the directorial role in *Founding*, Huang's authorship lies in how he shaped that role. He mobilised an extensive

transregional network linking mainland and Hong Kong filmmakers, private investors, and state institutions of the PRC, not merely adapting to field differentiation, but actively reconfiguring his authorship function. In this sense, I conceptualise Huang's authorship not as auteurist stylistic coherence, but as a changing social function that enables individual agency to shape films and the field itself.

Figure 2: Theoretical synthesis – Huang's authorship



7.2 Methodological reflections

Methodologically, this thesis utilised a novel theoretical and empirical approach to the study of Sinophone cinemas, moving beyond close readings of individual films to a sociological analysis of Huang's trajectory within mainland cinema. This study places him at the centre of the inquiry by linking his filmmaking to his social trajectory within the field. It is a sociological study of authorship, examining individual filmmaking in the context of field developments.

The theoretical framework draws on field theory, a cultural-industries perspective, and approaches to authorship. While field theory has previously been applied to the Chinese literary field and, to a lesser extent, to cinema (Hockx 1999b), it has not been systematically used to reconstruct the social trajectory of a mainland film director. The transnational and transregional perspective, aided by concepts from cultural industry studies, expands and revises this theoretical approach. This framework also provides the conceptual basis for integrating multiple methods and heterogeneous data sources within an interpretative research design. These methods include film analysis and field analysis, the latter of which combines elements of social network analysis, interpretative systems analysis of interviews and articles, and small case comparisons. The aim was not to reach theoretical saturation in each aspect, but to arrive at a coherent conceptualisation of Huang's changing authorship function.

Nevertheless, several subparts of the study could be developed further. Social network analysis, while useful for visualising the filmmaking collective surrounding Huang, was limited to collaborations on his own films and did not extend to wider industry networks. The geographical and regional dimension, particularly the shift from regionally embedded filmmaking to centrally coordinated, state-led commercial production, an aspect evident in production relations and in the themes and narratives of the films, was addressed at a rather broad level. This aspect merits a detailed analysis focusing on cultural circulation, secondary regional effects, and transregional audience formations.

Similarly, Huang's trajectory as a producer deserves further investigation. This point only emerged as significant in explaining his shift towards propaganda-infused blockbusters during the analysis. Specifically, the structural argument that Huang's producer role embedded him within a transregional filmmaking network, giving him access to substantial institutional and financial backing and reducing the economic risks and precarity involved in filmmaking but also limiting his authorial autonomy with regard to narrative form and aesthetic strategies, requires further analysis to be substantiated. One potential approach would be to analyse selected interviews with Huang, focusing explicitly on his producer trajectory, and with Han Sanping, regarding their shared background. Further analysis of Han's role is also warranted, given that it was underemphasised in this research. The respective roles of the two co-directors in the production of the first two *Founding* films remain unclear based on the analysed texts.

Given the emphasis on state-led industry development and the turn towards box-office orientation, further analysis of financing structures and box-office data would broaden the scope of the argument. However, reliable data remains limited, particularly for Huang's earlier or lesser-known works. Despite these constraints, the framework developed here has broader applicability. The focus on the foundational role of the state, field differentiation, and transnational relations could be extended to other mainland filmmakers, including comparative cases such as Feng Xiaogang, as well as understudied collaborators within Huang's network.

8 Conclusion

In this thesis, I aimed to explain Huang Jianxin's cinematic shift, his shifting positions and dispositions, and his changing authorship-function in the field, from making postsocialist critical art films to propaganda-infused blockbusters. Apart from individual film analyses and a few Chinese-language sources on his overall cinematic work, Huang has largely been omitted from research. So far, there has been no reconstruction of his filmmaking that links his cinematic and social trajectory in the field. I addressed this gap by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's field theory and combining it with concepts from cultural-industry and authorship studies for the theoretical focus. I utilised a film analysis, a social network analysis of production crews, actors, and film companies, an interpretative systems analysis of Huang's articles and interviews, and small case comparisons with Zhang Yimou and Feng Xiaogang, following an interpretative approach. This multi-layered methodology provided an analysis that links Huang's filmic development directly to his changing positions and dispositions within a field increasingly shaped by commercialisation, state-led industry development, and transregional production networks spanning mainland and Hong Kong cinema.

In the broadest sense, this study argues that Huang's shift in filmmaking was not just an ideological or dispositional change from critique to affirmation, but rather a change in the authorship function associated with the emergence of possible paths in filmmaking within a changing field. Following the opening up of artistic spaces and the relative autonomy afforded to filmmakers in the 1980s, the 1990s and 2000s saw increasing pressure towards commercialisation for individual filmmakers, alongside state-led development of the film industry aimed at enhancing its international competitiveness. This was driven in part by the influx of Hollywood imports. During this period, Huang increasingly took on producer roles, particularly on large-scale transnational film projects in Hong Kong and Hollywood, acquiring new skills and a disposition toward commercial filmmaking, and expanding his professional network. At the same time, the state invested more in main melody films, film projects with an educational function that aimed to create entertaining historical narratives that legitimised the party leadership. Against this backdrop, Huang's authorship function changed from that of a relatively autonomous director of critical art and urban comedies to that of a nodal director-producer. This new function encompasses the mediation and integration of professional networks from mainland China and Hong Kong, as well as the mobilisation of institutional and ideological resources for commercial filmmaking. In this role, Huang was instrumental in

shaping propaganda-infused blockbusters, commercial spectacles infused with official narratives on the establishment of the PRC, party leadership, and its symbols.

This thesis revises Bourdieu's field theory by adapting it to the ideological underpinnings of postsocialism and by incorporating a transnational and transregional conception of the field within the evolving institutional configuration of contemporary mainland Chinese cinema. Furthermore, this thesis contributes to an understanding of authorship that moves beyond auteurist notions of stylistic coherence or notions of structural determinacy. Instead, it conceptualises authorship as a link between the social field and individual dispositions via an authorship function. Through the authorship function, individual agency can shape both films and the field itself. It is a relational conception of authorship, shaped by the ideological and institutional configuration of the field, transregional and transnational networks, and emerging pathways for filmmakers within the field.

At the same time, the analysed trajectory points towards an unresolved question. In the case of the propaganda-infused blockbuster, the postsocialist confluence of political legitimization and control, and commercial imperatives creates potential contradictions on what is subverted and what subverts in the process. These contradictions influenced the further development of propaganda-infused blockbusters beyond the *Founding* films. Future research could therefore extend this framework to include Huang's later productions and broader shifts in state-led commercial cinema.

Finally, this approach may have applications beyond cinema. The analysis of the interplay between political and economic logics and individual agency in this thesis may also shed light on adjacent and new cultural fields, including new media platforms such as Douyin (抖音)³⁴ and RedNote (*Xiaohongshu* 小红书), where cultural producers operate within similar contexts of ideological production, state-led commercialisation, and transnational and transregional networks of producers and audiences.

³⁴ The mainland Chinese version of Tik Tok.

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Zhang, Yimou. *Keep Cool* (*You hua hao hao shuo* 有话好好说). Guangxi Film Studio, 1997.

Zhang, Yimou. *Happy Times* (*Xingfu shiguang* 幸福时光). Beijing New Picture Film Co., 2000.

Zhang, Yimou. *Hero* (*Yingxiong* 英雄). Beijing New Picture Film Co., 2002.

Appendix

I. List of films directed or produced by Huang Jianxin³⁵

Director	Film	Chinese title	Release
Huang Jianxin	<i>Black Cannon Incident</i>	黑炮事件	1986
Huang Jianxin	<i>Dislocation</i>	错位	1987
Huang Jianxin	<i>Samsara</i>	轮回	1988
Huang Jianxin	<i>Stand Up Straight, Don't Bend Over!</i>	站直啰，别趴下	1993
Huang Jianxin	<i>The Wooden Man's Bride</i>	五魁	1993
Huang Jianxin, Yang Yazhou	<i>Back To Back, Face To Face</i>	背靠背，脸对脸	1994
Huang Jianxin	<i>Signal Left, Turn Right</i>	红灯停，绿灯行	1996
Huang Jianxin	<i>Surveillance</i>	埋伏	1997
Huang Jianxin	<i>Xi'an's Finest</i>	睡不着	1998
Huang Jianxin	<i>Something about Secret</i>	说出你的秘密	1999
Huang Jianxin	<i>The Marriage Certificate</i>	谁说我不在乎	2000
Huang Jianxin, Zhang Jianya	<i>Swordsmen of the Passes-Uncle Donger</i>	关中刀客之董二伯	2003
Huang Jianxin	<i>Gimme Kudos</i>	求求你，表扬我	2005
Han Sanping, Huang Jianxin	<i>The Founding of a Republic</i>	建国大业	2009
Han Sanping, Huang Jianxin	<i>The Founding of a Party/Beginning of the Great Revival</i>	建党伟业	2011
Huang Jianxin	<i>Beautiful 2015 ("Insomniac Diary")</i>	美好 2015 (《失眠日记》)	2015
Huang Jianxin, Ning Haiqiang	<i>Mao Zedong 1949</i>	决胜时刻	2019
Huang Jianxin, Zheng Dasheng	<i>1921</i>	1921	2021
Produced or Co-Produced by Huang			
Wang Siu-Di	<i>Accidental Legend</i>	飞天	1995
Jacob Cheung	<i>Intimates</i>	自梳	1997
Feng Xiaogang	<i>Big Shot's Funeral</i>	大碗	2001
Xie Tieli	<i>Feeling of Having Money</i>	有钱的感觉	2001
Teng Wenji	<i>A Single Shot/ A Fatal Attack</i>	致命的一击	2001
Sun Zhou	<i>Zhou Yu's Train</i>	周渔的火车	2002
Chung Shu-kai	<i>Reunion</i>	手足情	2002
Chen Kaige	<i>Together</i>	和你在一起	2002
Wu Tianming	<i>C.E.O.</i>	首席执行官	2002
Wei Lian	<i>Zhou Enlai in Bandung</i>	周恩来万隆之行	2003

³⁵ List is based on Baidu Baike (2026a) and Xiao (2011). Film titles are listed in simplified Chinese for coherence.

Quentin Tarantino	<i>Kill Bill</i>	杀死比尔	2003
Joe Ma	<i>Love Undercover 2</i>	新扎师妹 2	2003
Fang Gangliang	<i>The Story of Xiaoyan</i>	上学路上	2004
Xiao Jiang	<i>Electric Shadows</i>	电影往事	2005
Derek Yee	<i>2 Young</i>	早熟	2005
Derek Yee	<i>Drink-Drank-Drunk</i>	千杯不醉	2005
Joe Ma	<i>Embrace Your Shadow</i>	挚爱	2005
Jacob Cheung	<i>Battle of Wits</i>	墨攻	2006
Marc Forster	<i>The Kite Runner</i>	追风筝的人	2007
Peter Chan	<i>The Warlords</i>	投名状	2007
Jin Chen	<i>Phoenix</i>	凤凰	2007
Rob Cohen	<i>The Mummy 3: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor</i>	木乃伊 3: 龙帝之墓	2008
Tsui Hark	<i>All About Women</i>	女人不坏	2008
Derek Yee	<i>Shinjuku Incident</i>	新宿事件	2009
Chris Nahon	<i>Blood: The Last Vampire</i>	小夜刀	2009
Teddy Chan	<i>Bodyguards and Assassins</i>	十月围城	2009
Jacob Cheung	<i>Rest on Your Shoulder</i>	肩上蝶	2011
Zhang Jianya	<i>Hsue-shen Tsien</i>	钱学森	2012
Huang Lei	<i>Angry Kid</i>	愤怒的小孩	2013
Qian Xiaohong	<i>Little Tigers</i>	小小飞虎队	2013
Jacob Cheung	<i>White Haired Witch</i>	白发魔女传之明月天国	2014
Tsui Hark	<i>The Taking of Tiger Mountain</i>	智取威虎山	2014
Law Wing-Cheong	<i>The Iceman</i>	冰封: 重生之门	2014
Leon Lai Ming	<i>Wine War</i>	抢红	2017
Yi Zhenxing	<i>Surprise</i>	万万没想到	2015
Han Han	<i>Operation Mekong</i>	湄公河行动	2016
Andrew Lau	<i>The Founding of an Army</i>	建军大业	2017
Chen Kaige, Zhang Yibai, Guan Hu, Xue Xiaolu, Xu Zheng, Ning Hao, Wen Muye	<i>My People, My Country</i>	我和我的祖国	2019
Chen Kaige, Tsui Hark, Dante Lam	<i>The Battle at Lake Changjin</i>	长津湖	2021
Huang Lei	<i>Special Couple</i>	合法伴侣	2021
Shen Dong	<i>Ocean Rescue</i>	深海危机	2023
Xu Zhanxiong	<i>Burning Star</i>	盗火者	2023
Liu Haoliang	<i>Against All Odds</i>	营救飞虎	2025
Zhang Lü	<i>Mother Tongue</i>	春树	2025

Featuring Huang As Actor

Teddy Chan	<i>Purple Storm</i>	紫雨风暴	1999
Peter Chan	<i>Dearest</i>	亲爱的	2014
Feng Xiaogang	<i>I Am Not Madame Bovary</i>	我不是潘金莲	2016
Chen Jianbin	<i>The Eleventh Chapter</i>	第十一回	2021

Zhang Lü	<i>Mother Tongue</i>	春树	2025
Zhang Lü	<i>Gloaming in Luomu</i>	罗目的黄昏	2025

II. Crew, cast, and companies in Huang Jianxin's films until 2009

Table A: crew members

- HTML: https://jsfwrthoei.github.io/HJX_Film_Field/HJX_Film_Crew_Table.html
- CSV: https://github.com/Jsfwrthoei/HJX_Film_Field/blob/main/HJX_crew.csv

Table B: cast

- CSV: https://github.com/Jsfwrthoei/HJX_Film_Field/blob/main/HJX_cast.csv

Table C: companies and locations

- HTML: https://jsfwrthoei.github.io/HJX_Film_Field/HJX_companies_table.html
- CSV: https://github.com/Jsfwrthoei/HJX_Film_Field/blob/main/HJX_companies.csv

III. Analysed articles and interviews³⁶

Code	Segment
Article 1986: Huang Jianxin 黄建新. 1986. 'Ji dian buchengshu de sikao—《Heipao Shijian》 daoyan tihui' 几点不成熟的思考——《黑炮事件》导演体会 [Some immature thoughts: The director's experience of 'The Black Cannon Incident']. <i>Dianying Yishu</i> , 05, 15–21.	
A 1986 1: relation between literary source, script and final film	page 15/ paragraph 3
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