

## **Literary Production and Popular Culture Film Adaptations in China since 1990**

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Yimiao ZHU

Nanjing Normal University, China  
Email: zhuyimiao2013@126.com

### **Abstract:**

Since their invention, films have developed hand-in-hand with literature and film adaptations of literature have constituted the most important means of exchange between the two mediums. Since 1990, Chinese society has been undergoing a period of complete political, economic and cultural transformation. Chinese literature and art have, similarly, experienced unavoidable changes. The market economy has brought with it popular culture and stipulated a popularisation trend in film adaptations. The pursuit of entertainment and the expression of people's anxiety have become two important dimensions of this trend. Meanwhile, the tendency towards popularisation in film adaptations has become a hidden factor influencing the characteristic features of literature and art. While "visualization narration" has promoted innovation in literary style, it has also, at the same time, damaged it. Throughout this period, the interplay between film adaptation and literary works has had a significant guiding influence on their respective development.

**Key Words:** Since 1990; Popular culture; Film adaptation; Literary works; Interplay

Since its invention, cinema has used “adaptation” to cooperate closely with literature, draw on the rich, accumulated literary tradition and make up for its own artistic deficiencies during early development. As films became increasingly dependent on their connection with the novel, and as this connection deepened, accelerating the maturity of cinematic art, by the time cinema had the strength to assert its independence from literature, the vibrant phase of booming popular culture and rampant consumerism had already begun. Since 1990, under the impetus of marketization, audio-visual art has gradually replaced literary art as the cultural mainstream. Moreover, the exhibition and viewing of images has become the *modus operandi* of mainstream culture and the pattern of cultural life. Social culture began to pivot from the elite culture of the 1980s to popular culture. The context of the rapid rise of popular culture engendered within film adaptations the characteristic features of entertainment-orientation and the representation of anxiety. These characteristics of popularization also, in turn, directly influenced the features of literature, particularly clearly in terms of the transformation of literary style. For this reason, the interplay between film adaptation and literary production has become a phenomenon worthy of attention in art and literature.

## 1. POPULAR CULTURE AND THE COMMERCIAL CONTEXT

“Popular culture takes mass media as its medium and operates according to commercial rules. Its aim is to provide ordinary citizens with enjoyable, everyday experiences. Popular culture includes forms such as popular poetry, newspapers and magazines, best-selling books, popular music, television dramas, films and advertisements.”<sup>1</sup> Popular culture, a product of modern, industrialized society and the market economy, is, in essence, a kind of citizen culture. It differs from mainstream culture, elite culture, and also folk culture. Its fundamental characteristics are commodification, popularization, entertainment, dependence, the everyday and the mass media.

Step by step, since the 1990s, the robust socialist market economic system has replaced the socialist planned economic system, effecting deep transformations in Chinese society. The economic consciousness brought about by the market economy has gradually infiltrated all areas of social and cultural life. Chinese intellectuals, who had long held authority over the language of culture, have gradually become marginalized. The spirit of the humanities has been lost, elite culture has come under attack and popular culture has advanced strongly to become the mainstream. This new culture has, moreover, thoroughly changed people’s way of life, ideas and value system. The cultural context since the 1990s is such that, as Dai Jinhua has argued, “in present-day China, it is an unquestionable fact that ‘popular’ culture has not only become the constructor and main carrier of an ideology rooted in daily life, but also fiercely demands a leading position within an increasingly divided and diversified mainstream social culture.”<sup>2</sup> With the strong support of rapidly developing science and technology and under

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<sup>1</sup> Y.C. Wang 2004, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Dai 1999, 3.

attack from a surge of commercial goods, popular culture, permeated with commercial elements, “thoroughly reversed the weight of thousands of years of human collectivism, shifting society towards seeking contentment on an individualized, experience-oriented basis.”<sup>3</sup> The historical insight of New Period (xinshiqi, see others) Literature has quietly disappeared amidst the evolution of marketization. Traditional aesthetic standards have also been transformed. The old cultural elites could not resist the allure of commercial profits and one by one they went into business. Elite literature is no longer the centre of the cultural world, while works of “popular literature” enjoy great popularity; even alternative interpretations of literary classics, famous writers and classic literary figures have emerged... films influenced by the atmosphere of marketization are even more strikingly commercialized. Under the stipulations of popular culture and the market economy, “Theme Movies”, entertainment films and art films compete in a zero-sum game. Of these three, entertainment films have become the mainstream in Chinese cinema, while “Theme Movies” and art films have also gradually been infiltrated by entertainment elements. Film adaptations of literature have similarly developed in these three dimensions. Although the voice of literature has been sidelined in the age of image, films continue, as before, to draw inspiration from literature. Works of literature – predominantly the contemporary novel – possessing market potential and reflecting period features are still a favoured subject of filmmakers. Consistent with the overall trends of development in cinema, as literature becomes popularized and the film industry as a whole is marketized, film adaptations are increasingly coloured by commercialization. The box office has become the most important standard for evaluating the success of a film, while pursuing the artistic value of literature itself has already become secondary. The tendency towards entertainment and spiritual anxiety are typical indicators of the above developments.

## 2. THE TREND TOWARDS ENTERTAINMENT IN FILM ADAPTATION AND ANXIETY CONSCIOUSNESS

Film adaptations since 1990 are saturated with the commercial elements of popular culture. The entertainment trend and expression of anxiety are a kind of choice and acceptance by films of the visualization of literature in the context of the period.

### 2.1. Entertainment in the commercial context

From the perspective of cultural industrial production, adapting a novel for film is, in effect, the economic process of integrating the industrial capital of the film producers and the cultural capital of the novel. In a commercial context, adaptation is by no means simply converting the content of literature from words into images, but is instead the complex process of harmonizing the exploitation of the original work’s literary value, its adaptation to cinematic techniques of expression and appeal to the audience. The specific characteristics of the mass media have determined the universality of film propagation. The breadth of film propagation has also

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<sup>3</sup> Fu 2008, 3.

become the measure of whether or not a film succeeds; if box office returns do not reach a certain level, the film will be considered a failure. Pandering to the aesthetic tastes of the audience has, therefore, become the goal of film adaptations in the transitional period. Developing the literary value of the original work and realising the box office potential of a film are often two conflicting goals. Moreover, the trade-off between commercial appeal and artistic representation has become the greatest difficulty facing filmmakers. In order to maximize economic returns, filmmakers have no choice but to dilute literary value to achieve box office success. As a result, in the commercial context, entertainment elements such as novelty, excitement, voyeurism, violence, relaxation and comic effect are all popular with the audience. Chinese film adaptations as a whole demonstrate the development trend toward entertainment. We must acknowledge that the entertainment trend in the commercial context has been beneficial for some film adaptations. *Red Sorghum*, for example, which won countless awards, encases a core of mainstream ideology (the Chinese people's unyielding folk resistance against the Japanese) within an exterior of entertainment and visual beauty, telling a story of one character's individual distinction and a bold and unconstrained plot. *The Road Home* similarly reflects the pursuit of visual pleasure as part of this entertainment trend. It adapts a tale extolling local teachers into a beautiful, moving love story. Through the use of exquisite, rich imagery, the film constructs a stunning picture: as the seasons change, the hills and plains are blanketed in golden and green trees; bright yellow meadows stretch as far as the eye can see; young girls' faces are rosy and vivid, full of youthful spirit; red figures dash about endlessly in the mountain forest. Bright, full and poetic imagery like this is used to throw an everyday and moving story of true love into sharp relief, constructing film's warm, romantic atmosphere and moving countless viewers.

However, pandering excessively to the aesthetic tastes of the audience has led many film adaptations to blindly pursue sensory stimulation in forms in such as novelty, excitement, voyeurism and comedy. As a result, such films demonstrate poor artistic style and even the very essence of the films is damaged as their subject and style are influenced. Huang Shuqin's 1999 film *Mainland Prostitute*, which was adapted from Shen Congwen's novel *The husband*, provides one such example. A large number of commercial elements were added into this film. The narrative centre is transferred from husband to wife, while the main idea of the film is shifted from exposing the difficult lives of the lowest rung of society in Xiangxi, Hunan, to the spectacle of a husband sending his wife to be a prostitute, a bizarre phenomenon that society would normally find intolerable. The film also adds the sub-plot of salt merchant Mr. Zhang's desire to take the wife in as family and provides resolution to the original work's open ending, where the husband leaves secretly with his wife. In order to appeal to the audience, even the name of the film was changed to *Mainland Prostitute*. Novelty, excitement and popularization were this film's efforts to cater to the tastes of the audience. The film, thereby, forfeited the novel's original intention to reveal the hardship of poor in Xiangxi and also changed the leisurely narrative style of the original work. Even though the film's commercial awareness is pronounced and its catering to the preferences of the audience is obvious, it was still did not

meet with the audience's approval and failed miserably at the box office. The reason for this was the film's blind pandering to the audience's aesthetic tastes, with the result that it lost its artistic essence and lost sight of its key message, lost independent artist quality and unique artistic value, also therefore forfeited the most essential factors attracting the audience in the first place.

In contrast with the adaptation strategy in *Mainland Prostitute* of retaining the basic framework of the novel and adding in commercial elements, Jiang Qinmin's 2003 film *Sky Lovers* (adapted from the novel *Meiyouyuyandeshenghuo* by Dongxi) thoroughly subverts the subject of the novel and constructs an image space that caters to the aesthetic demands of the audience. The novel tells the story of a peculiar family with a blind father, deaf son and mute daughter-in-law as they strive to live normal lives with their disabled bodies. They are bullied, teased, humiliated and the daughter-in-law is even raped. They're forced to end their contact with "normal people". The novel criticizes the social disorder and spiritual poverty of the material age, and expresses humanistic concern towards the disabled. The film, however, reduces the novel's weighty theme of the difficult subsistence of disabled people to a fantastical love story of two women and one man which makes a show of paying attention to weak groups in society. The setting of the story is changed from a normal mountain village to a strange and romantic village that sits high above sheer cliffs and precipitous rock faces, and a giant balloon also floats in the air above the village. While the novel gives prominence to Zhu Ling's suicide, a hideous act in terms of traditional morality, this is cut out in the film, which instead coins a sentimental plot where Zhu Ling flies away on the giant balloon, constructing a romantic narrative atmosphere. The film does not even hesitate to contradict the reality of village life, Zhu Ling tends to the cows wearing a long, sleeveless dress, harvests maize wearing a halter top ... in this meticulously constructed, poetic village, everybody is simple, honest and natural, and they don't need to worry over the daily necessities (fuel, rice, oil and salt). The disabled also face no discrimination and insult in the film. Zhu Ling, Wang Jiakuan and Cai Yuzhen live simply, taking love to be the purpose of life. This kind of fictitious, idyllic landscape and rose-tinted view of humanity caters to the visual pleasures that the audience demands and is in accordance with the audience's mentality of seeking spiritual comfort in the restless metropolis. For this reason, the film won the unanimous praise of audience and critics. This sort of adaptation objective, however, leaves the film too thin on an ideological level, as it never strays beyond presenting formal beauty and does away with the tragedy and profundity of the original novel. The probing cultural theme of the novel, examining the recesses of life, is turned into an aestheticized, popularized love story. The film is essentially popular culture, flattened and attaching importance only to sensory pleasure and visualization, and it removes the elite culture characterized by individual expression and deep reflection, also illustrated from one angle that "the most important principle of visual representation has, in present-day China, become a universal rhetoric rule separating popular culture and high culture."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Y.C Wang 2003.

Similar in adaptation strategy to *Sky Lovers* is the film *Ripples Across Stagnant Water*, adapted from the novel *Slight wave of the dead water* by Li Jieren. The novel is about confronting the invasion of imperialism and the oppression of feudalism, the Chinese people rising up in resistance, but being suppressed. It expresses an attack on, and dissatisfaction with, social reality. The film, however, beneath the exterior of resistance to imperialism and feudalism, is about an extramarital affair and what leaves the deepest impression on the viewer is the lustful female protagonist Deng Yaogu. Deng and her lover Luo Desheng are inseparable, yet from beginning to end she protects her own stupid husband. In order to demonstrate the passionate feelings Deng and Luo have for one another, the film even adds in a crazy plotline where Deng finds Luo's room in the middle of the night and the two of them go hand-in-hand into the depths of the bamboo forest. This kind of adaptation adds in aesthetic interest and a relaxing atmosphere, but does away with the dignified subject and profound historical sense of the novel.

Moreover, films such as *Judou*, *Wukui*, *Rice* and *Yinshi* all consciously strengthen elements that cater to commercialized tastes, such as lust, incest, patricide and predestination. They use the visual language of spectacle and excitement to tell one fantastic story, concealed within a historical background, after another, in order to fulfill people's aesthetic demands and voyeuristic desires. *The Flowers Of War* has the tendency to use the erotic to save the nation and maliciously make entertainment of those who died for the nation for commercial ends/reasons\*. Similarly, *Assembly*, *Aftershock* and *Let The Bullets Fly* all exaggerate commercial elements, stress visual level enjoyment and pursue entertaining results. Faced by a deepening market economy and increasingly ubiquitous popular culture, we need to be vigilant of the excessive pursuit of commercialization and entertainment, as this will inevitably eventually result in Chinese cinema being reduced to a profit machine for reaping box office returns. Moreover, the way film adaptations have neglected literary value and pursued commercial elements also highlights the ever more marginalized position of literature in the popular cultural context: the elite consciousness of literature has gradually been eliminated, secularism has become fashionable and a sensory culture has expanded to a remarkable degree.

## 2.2 Anxiety in Desire Consumption

The economic boom has not only brought with it entertainment-oriented popular culture, but has also brought an end to the enlightened ideals of the 1980s intelligentsia. With regard to the socio-cultural context, at the same time as economic development cultivated great material abundance, it also shattered the traditional value system, creating a situation where there is a decay of morals, overflow of material desires and profit-before-everything mentality. The individual has lost sight of spiritual aspirations, able only to live in terms of immediate desire consumption. Hereby, at a time when people are losing themselves in the extreme abundance of material civilization and when all kinds of desires are being stirred up, what has followed is uncertainty produced by the sudden increase in anxiety and emotional strain. Film adaptations have been acutely aware of people's spiritual pain and helplessness in the transitional period, carrying out the present "re-reading" of literature.

Since 1990, the expression of people's anxiety in film adaptations has been focused mostly on the anxiety of people in spiritual predicaments. Sun Zhou's 2002 film *Zhou Yu's Train* (adapted from the novel *Zhouyudehanjiao* by Beicun) is a typical example. The novel tells the story of Chen Qing, who runs between two different lovers, Zhouyu and Lilan. He feels suffocated by Zhou Yu's love, but rediscovers himself in that of Lilan. In the romantic entanglement of one man and two women, humanity is gradually lost and people fall into desperate anxiety. The film, on the other hand, alters the subject of the novel, using Zhou Yu's wavering between the love of Chen Qing and Zhang Qiang to express people's vacillation between their spiritual ideals and worldly desires, revealing the opposition of spiritual needs and worldly desire in a highly materialistic society. Moreover, people are also gradually losing their nature within this opposition, becoming anxious and restless. The poet Chen Qing and veterinarian Zhang Qiang represent, respectively, Zhou Yu's ideals about love and her worldly desires. Chen Qing is the object of Zhou Yu's sacred love, he satisfies all of her romantic yearnings, but this kind of love is hard to grasp in the secular world; Zhang Qiang, with his strong vitality and sexuality, on the other hand, is representative of worldly life. He satisfies the release of Zhou Yu's desire and emotion, but is incapable of providing her with ideal love. Zhou Yu, therefore, can only dash about between idealistic love and giving free reign to her desires, and is wrought with anxiety over which course to follow. The subject investigated in the novel – the loss and searching of humanity in love – is manifested more concretely within the film as one woman torn between spiritual needs and worldly desire, ideals and reality, as she searches for love and the anxiety this gives rise to. To some extent, the film weakens the philosophical profundity of the novel's subject, but its relationship with reality is reinforced, rendering it more easily understood and accepted by the audience. This film both demonstrates the artistic quality of cinema and manifests its aesthetic nature, hinting at the ideological and cultural implications which lie behind the love story of an urban couple, making it an adaptation masterful in its expression of people's anxiety in spiritual predicament.

If *Zhou Yu's Train* uses people's vacillation between the spiritual and worldly dimensions of love to manifest the difficult choice between the world of ideals and worldly pursuits, then the film *The Missing Gun*, directed by Lu Chuan, directly uses an individual's "searching" to reveal the struggle of the soul in a dilemma. The novel *Xunqiangji* mixes a critique of society and humanity into simple, realistic writing. It tells the story of Ma Shan, a small town policeman, as he loses, searches for, and eventually finds his gun. The film, conversely, adopts "searching" as a general theme, focusing on the soul in a predicament, our questioning of the past and the conflicts of reality. After Ma Shan loses his gun, he becomes spiritually off-balance and everything from his biases to his persistence and final journey home has symbolic meaning. The process of searching for the gun is, in fact, the process of a person searching for the pillars and meaning of life. During this process, moreover, spiritual predicament and feelings of anxiety are given clear expression. The film alters the calm, restrained and unhurried narrative rhythm of the novel; it adopts a narrative rhythm infused with subjectivity, disorder and tension to completely externalize the character's internal anxiety: mist, alleyways,

a chaotic jumble of legs, scurrying Ma Shan . . . all kinds of montage usage, changes in camera placement, shaky cam and sound elements such as the monotonous soundtrack, deliberately exaggerated footsteps, jangling keys, frenetic sounds of locks being opened and hurried breathing collectively exaggerate an anxious internal world driven close to insanity in the search for the gun. In fact, the film manages to naturally blend the story's narrative rhythm and the character's subjective emotions. The film's selection of material from the novel is all performed in view of the "searching" theme and manifests the spiritual predicament of people in a given situation. Additionally, the film expresses the character's stream of consciousness by skipping and cutting between a large number of images, accomplishing the perfect integration of subject and form. The film does away with characters irrelevant to the "searching" theme and content that exposes the dark side of society. It devises an ending rich in conflict and drama, where Ma Shan sacrifices himself in order to complete the "searching" process: after he loses the gun, loses his job, loses the affection of his family and the thief uses the gun to kill somebody, Ma Shan, spurred on by the urgency of the situation, decides to risk everything on one final effort to retrieve the weapon. He disguises himself as Zhou Xiaogang in order to lure out the man who stole the gun. On the platform of the railway station, Stuttering Liu, the thief, does indeed appear and shoots at Mashan. To one's surprise, Mashan, who has just been shot, thinks, "I've already found two of the three bullets, there's only one left!" Mashan finally takes out a fake gun and aims it at Stuttering Liu, who returns fire and the final bullet is shot at Mashan. Mashan takes advantage of when Stuttering Liu comes over to take the fake gun to handcuff him and asks him when he stole the gun. Once he has the whole story straight, Mashan smiles and mutters to himself: "Chief, I've arrested the criminal who stole my gun." Trains hurtle past and the sun disappears behind the cloud, which seems the scene when he went to see his wife and son before. Ma Shan lies quietly on the floor and closes his eyes. Stuttering Liu shouts himself hoarse. Then the whole world becomes quiet. The police rush over in the silence and surround Ma Shan and Stuttering Liu. Now dead, Ma Shan stands up. He walks out beyond the crowd of people, carrying the gun that he has finally retrieved. He walks expressionlessly towards the camera for a long time before suddenly coming to a halt, smiling as if relieved of a great burden. His smile is one of both pain and satisfaction. Ma Shan has finally freed himself. This ending gives his "searching" a moving and tragic full stop, reinforcing the torment exacted upon people by spiritual dilemmas and the liberation that comes in the end with "finding".

Film adaptations like this, which express anxiety consciousness, touch upon all aspects of the spiritual predicament produced by this period. The endless quarrels in confined spaces shown in *Woaini* reflect not only the emotional restlessness of the male and female protagonists, but also the entire society's loss of security and the anxiety and confusion that this, in turn, generates. The quarrels are a metaphor for people's anxiety and restlessness at a time when they have lost control of their fate. *Little Red Flowers* -----the process of Fang Qiangqiang from rejection of integrating with the kindergarten management system to having no way to integrating, revealing how people can be pushed aside and isolated in collective life, and the

danger of humanity being distorted and stifled, a metaphor for the survival anxiety and spiritual dilemma between freedoms and restrictions in the adult world. *Green Tea*, on the other hand, gives distinct expression to the main character Chen's pain and uncertainty in the bustling metropolis. He's the kind of city person who, on the surface, seems brimming with passion for life, but who, inside, is perplexed and exhausted by restless and uncertain city life. He is an authentic portrayal of an ordinary person with nothing to rely on and the film truly reflects the present context.

In summary, film adaptations since 1990 show that people's anxiety in desire consumption is an inevitable choice stipulated by the practical context and have clearly revealed the psychological trauma caused by the interaction between people's internal world and the complex external world. This inward-looking creative trend deviates from the traditional realist narrative mode, yet authentically recreates people's internal world. The stipulations of popular culture prompt these adaptation films to conform to the overall trend of popularization in the arts, adopting an external form more acceptable to the audience and laying particular stress on the realistic representation of anxiety consciousness. This has provided new inspiration for the development of film and literature.

### 3. FILM ADAPTATIONS STIPULATING THE ARTISTIC STYLE OF LITERARY WORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF POPULAR CULTURE

Since 1990, as the economy has boomed and commercial principles and consumerism have spread rapidly in the field of culture, the influence of film has been constantly consolidated and expanded. Film adaptations in the context of popular culture have become a force that cannot be ignored. The entertainment trend and anxiety consciousness that these adaptations display have guided the direction of cinema by conforming to the popularization of the arts. The films of this period have even divided literature into two main varieties with distinct characteristics and totally different styles: one variety is elite literature, which defends and holds fast to literature's autonomy as an art of language, while the other variety is popular literature, which actively approaches film. However, no matter whether it is elite literature or popular literature, both are already powerless to evade the enormous influence of cinema. Popular literature is a slave to the narrative logic of film, meticulously devising the story's plot and as it turns literature into film, literature is increasingly being reduced to screenplays. Elite literature, on the other hand, uses experiments of language and narration to delineate itself from popular literature. It transplants the techniques of cinema to the written narrative and concentrates on the exploration of people's internal world, consciousness and even the realm of the subconscious. In converting film literature, it is striving to uphold the autonomy of literature and thus rebuild its glory. The features of literature have, consequently, been deeply transformed. Furthermore, film adaptation of literary works is subtly influencing the artistic style and features of Chinese literature via the aesthetic standards and tastes of the cinema. The most typical example of this is "visualization narration", which leads directly to the transformation of literary form.

“Visualization narration, ... refers in general to a narrative style which has the special qualities of visualization, it is also a unique kind of style form that grafts the creative thinking and narrative style of cinematic art onto novel writing”.<sup>5</sup> It involves methods such as montage structure, rapid cutting between scenes and spatial consciousness. When these methods are applied to novel writing, they completely alter the characteristics of the traditional novel. The traditional novel’s conventional adherence to the logic of time is overturned and replaced with the juxtaposition of - and switching between - multiple scenes in time. Moreover, the thought and techniques of montage are used to structure the novel, creating a sense of fragmentation in the plot. Such novels use mainly speech and actions to portray the characters’ image, while the psychological description of the traditional novel is increasingly sparse. The pursuit of mental imagery and the visualized expression of emotion has diluted the profound meaning of the art of language found in the traditional novel. If one is to investigate the assimilation of visualization narration into the form of the novel from a purely textual perspective, then its positive significance is clear: compared with novels, which take the form of writing and reading, film’s greatest gift to aesthetic culture has been providing a lifelike, real world and it has bestowed upon it a vitality independent of the passage of time; and for literature, which operates through the medium of words and ideas, in addition to the novel’s existing the use of rational, symbolic and metaphorical content to prompt recognition, imagination and reflection, visualization narration has also added a method of presenting the real world and exploring the subject that is more vivid and not confined to the traditional. In the context of marketization and popular culture, however, visualization narration has also been reduced to a tool which literature uses to pander to film adaptation, directly damaging the style of the novel.

### **3.1 Innovation in literary style promoted by film adaptations**

Montage was initially an architectural term, before it was introduced to cinema, referring to cutting and composition. Montage is also a narrative tool, artistic structuring method and way of thinking rich in meaning.

Pudovkin wrote in *On Montage* that “the inherent quality of montage is something innate to all kinds of art.”<sup>6</sup> This illustrates that montage thinking is not unique to film, but, rather, may be found in other art forms, including literature. The primitive ancient Chinese folk song *Tange*, for instance, reads, “Cut the bamboo, string it together, release the pellet, catch the meat.”<sup>7</sup> These eight characters and four phrases evoke four cinematic shots, reconstructing a picture of the laboring and hunting life of primitive humanity and revealing that ancient peoples used montage thought unconsciously. In the ninety-seventh chapter of *Hongloumeng*, too, for example, “*Tai-yu Burns Her Poems to End Her Infatuation, Pao-chai Goes Through Her*

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<sup>5</sup> Liang 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Pudovkin 1982, 152.

<sup>7</sup> Zhao 1994, 19.

Wedding Ceremony.”<sup>8</sup> making use of comparison montage, intertwining and advancing two narrative threads. Furthermore, in nineteenth-century Western literary circles, authors including Flaubert and Dickens had also begun experimenting with cutting and assembling images and scenes in novel writing. In the twentieth century, writers such as Joyce, Faulkner and Hemingway used the compositional style and structure of montage – as part of the rhetorical methods particular to language and words, like symbolism, metaphor and synaesthesia - to present the objective world and people’s internal world in a visualized way. These literary practices directly influenced early film, which was guided by literature. As film gradually developed and grew in strength, the montage mode of thought was also carried forward, developed and gradually perfected to become an artistic tool indispensable to cinema. By the beginning of the nineteen-sixties, the guiding effect of literature upon film was slowly weakening. Film began to stand up to literature as an equal and literary theory even started to come under attack from film theory. After analyzing, one by one, the connections between more than ten modern European and American authors and cinema, Edward Murray argued that “the history of the novel after *Ulysses* was published, is, to a great extent, the history of the development of the cinematic imagination in the minds of novelists, it is the history of novelists striving – often with ambivalence - to master the ‘most vivid art’ of the twentieth century.”<sup>9</sup> Novelists are using film as a catalyst to unearth and deepen the “montage” quality latent within the art of the novel. Montage techniques and thinking have been widely applied to novel writing, and have objectively provided literary art with the possibility to establish itself in new forms and dimensions.

Since the beginning of the New Era, film adaptation has brought literature and film ever closer and the use of montage thought and techniques in the novel has become an increasingly clear trend. One aspect of the use of montage techniques in New Era novels is that large numbers of novels have been successfully adapted for film, directly expanding the space within which literature communicates and deeply influencing the social landscape and cultural makeup. Authors have been influenced unavoidably by the image-driven real-world context. Wang Anyi, for example, has said that she “usually really enjoys watching films, films are both entertainment and study. We are full of curiosity towards the outside world and our desire for knowledge is intense. It’s a pity that language is the greatest obstacle.”<sup>10</sup> With a fondness for, and familiarity with, film, and having participated in screenwriting work (Wang Anyi was the screenwriter for Chen Kaige’s film *Temptress Moon*) and attempted translating between the languages of literature and cinema, we may infer that Wang Anyi’s writing has inevitably been influenced by elements of film. Chili also has experience similar to that of Wang Anyi. She claims to have become interested in film at a young age and has said “I like European art film and some avant-garde experimental films. I like some Latin American films, American

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<sup>8</sup> Cao 1980, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Murray 1989, 5.

<sup>10</sup> A. Y. Wang 1991.

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Hollywood action films, shoot-'em-ups, romances, biopics and animated films too. I also enjoy Soviet films. I like all excellent movies.”<sup>11</sup> Many of Chili’s novels have been adapted into film and television dramas. She has refined her own perspective on the contrast between the novel and screen versions of her work: “I’ve loved literature since childhood. I had always believed that only writing could express everything. I don’t see it that way anymore. Nowadays science and technology is unprecedentedly developed. Moreover, film art’s application of science and technology totally blends together time, space, reality and imagination; it uses lighting, colour, sound and other effects at will. Additionally, with the individualized performance of contemporary film stars, there is now an even greater space for expression in films. In contrast with this, written expression has its relative limitations”.<sup>12</sup> Chili’s interest in, and identification with, film is extremely clear. She is, moreover, happy to put her own novels up for adaptation. This attitude is bound to influence her writing.

On the other hand, the introduction of Western stream of consciousness novels has brought with it advanced ideas of the novel and these novels’ use of the film techniques of montage. Alongside the intrinsic motive of exploring stylistic innovation, authors have used a kind of unconscious consciousness to insert the montage structure of film and the montage composition style of cinematic language into novel writing. As a result, one may even argue that, to some extent, in the New Era, the visualized narrative of the novel has been indirectly influenced by Western films, since the montage thought of films influenced Western stream of consciousness novels and the use of the montage techniques of film in Western stream of consciousness novels in turn guided the development of novel writing in this period. The novels of Mo Yan are a prominent case in point. Mo Yan once claimed that “the five novels and dozen or so novellas that I wrote in 1985” were “influenced most strongly by *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez, and *The Sound and the Fury*, by William Faulkner”.<sup>13</sup> It should thus be noted that the reason why the style of Mo Yan’s novels is distinctly characterized by visualization narration is not unrelated to the film art of montage that he absorbed via Western stream of consciousness novels.

In the New Era, the use of montage in the novel is reflected primarily in the structural application of montage thought and montage cutting and composition techniques. The montage structure has become writers’ first choice when it comes to expressing a multi-threaded and complicated plot. Wang Anyi’s 1985 novel, *Baotown*, replaces the traditional plot structure with a juxtapositional narrative structure and montage consciousness is reflected in the overall conception of the plot. The novel resembles the shooting script of a film - apart from the introduction and ending, it is divided into forty short sections. The novel uses the criss-crossing techniques of montage to make the story of Laozha its main thread, while separately weaving between the stories of Qialai, Bao Renwen, Bao Bingde, Xiaocui and Wenhuzi. This montage

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<sup>11</sup> Chi 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Chi 2000, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Mo 1986.

structure makes the novel seem succinct, lively and beautifully chaotic. In *Tiantangzhige*, He Liwei employs an intersecting montage structure, advancing multiple characters' fates at the same time in order to unfold the plot of the story. The novel is divided into twenty-five sections and each section focuses on one character. The various sections are both independent and interconnected; the characters' fates develop separately, while influencing one another. It is a typical example of the criss-crossing montage structural style. Mo Yan's novel *Explosions* describes in the process of the first-person taking his wife to the hospital to have an abortion. The matter is simple and the events lasts but a few hours, yet Mo Yan narrates four threads simultaneously: the first-person taking his wife to the hospital to have an abortion; several planes circling in the sky above and constantly dropping bombs; a group of people taking a pack of dogs to pursue and trap a fox; a young couple speeding along the highway on a motorbike. Mo Yan applies the techniques of montage to weave these four threads together and advance them in multiple dimensions. Location is constantly varied, ingeniously revealing everything about everybody and everything occurring in this place and time, making the reader sense the vastness of the scene, while at the same time generating thoughtful interest in the connections that the complex structure aims to convey. Similarly, in *Daliuzhuang* and *Huangshanzhilian*, Wang Anyi employs the structural style of parallel montage; in *At Middle Age*, Chen Rong structures the story using a intersecting montage of reality and memories; Ru Zhijuan, in *Jianjicuoledegushi* makes use of the structural style of comparison montage, organizing the narrative through two different, independent times and places, having characters move freely back and forth between the "past" and the "present"; in Wang Meng's *Buli* and *Butterfly*, the criss-crossing montage style is used to intersect and edit together scenes from four different times; in *Wurenqingsu* and *Juefeiouran*, amongst other works, Zhang Xin adopts the structure of parallel montage to tell the story of emotional helplessness in the modern city.

Use of the editing style of montage is even more common. One example of this is provided by the "opening words" which begin Wang Anyi's *Baotown*:

It rained for seven nights and days. The sky had darkened. Flood waters rushed from the top of Bao mountain, rumbling down and, for a moment, all heaven and earth turned white.

The villagers of *Baotown* (at the foot of the mountain) saw a cloud of mist, like a great expanse of whiteness, issuing from the mountain. They took to their heels and fled.

Thatched, clay houses lay prostrate; sturdy, leafy trees had been thrown down, as if mere playthings.

The children had stopped crying. All was silence: the girls were no longer shouting, neither the chickens flapped nor the dogs jumped. The sky was not black. The earth was not white. The sky had gone. The earth had gone. There was not a sound to be heard. I do not know how much time had passed. It felt like it could have been as short as the blink of an eye. At the same time, it could have been as long as a century. A tree trunk emerged, marking out the meeting of land and sky. The trunk, coiled around which was a snake, bobbed up and down in the water (p. 2).

This excerpt resembles the assembly, in montage, of a group of different cinematic shots: a long shot of floodwaters rushing down from the peak of Baoshan; a full shot of people fleeing; a close shot of people struggling to run in the deep water; a close-up of a tree floating on the water and a snake coiled on top of it. In just a few words, Wang Anyi sketches this scene where floodwaters are about to engulf everything, reinforcing its visual quality and dynamism.

Another example can be found in Mo Yan's description of "Grandma getting married" in *Red Sorghum*:

A warming, fragrant breeze stirred the lush green sorghum growing beside the narrow mud track. From among the crops arose the cooing sound of a pigeon. Fine pollen flew up from the silvery ears just recently put forth. The sedan curtain before her face was embroidered with a dragon and phoenix pattern. The sedan had been rented out for a year and because of this the red cloth had already dimmed in colour. There was a large patch of grease in the middle. It was towards the end of summer and the autumn was approaching. All was glorious sunshine. The porters moved nimbly, making the litter gently quiver. The rawhide fastened on to the sedan pole was squeaking and as the curtain swayed, flashes of light and refreshing puffs of air would burst into the sedan. Grandmother's whole body was streaming with sweat, while her heartbeat pounded like a drum. Hearing the regular patter of the footmen and their harsh breathing, her mind alternated between the smooth coldness of a pebble and the coarse heat of a pepper (p. 38).

This paragraph is just like a series of shots in a film. First comes a group of long shots introducing the setting, sorghum fields. Then the shots draw closer and there is a close-up of pollen rising above the stalks of sorghum. Next, the camera cuts to a close-up of the door curtain of the sedan chair. After that the camera swings down to the bodies of the sedan-chair bearers, before a close-up on the rawhide fastenings of the sedan chair poles and on the sedan chair door curtain, and then finally coming to rest on the anxious character of Grandma. This section of description is analogous to a group of shots edited in montage, piecing together vivid and lifelike images with dynamic scenes, combining activity and stillness, vividly and incisively conveying Grandma's anxious and perturbed state of mind on her way to get married. When reading this passage the reader gets the impression that they are personally on the scene, just like when watching a film.

Additionally, in Liu Heng's *The Snow Was Black* and Fuxifuxi, Hong Ying's *Niyizhiduiwenrouxue* and in the writings of authors such as Su Tong, Liu Zhenyun and Yuhua, there are many instances of similar descriptions. Although this kind of description draws on the editing methods of montage, it still flows very naturally, because its point of departure is the author's sensory experiences and emotional sensibility. Furthermore, the authors integrate the filmic imagination into the artistic appeal of written language, using the great pulling force of words to bridge the gap between the two.

In the New Era, in the use of both montage structure and montage editing style, the visualization narration of novels has been a profitable imitation of film's narrative techniques

and mode of thought. It is based in literature, and not only has it not damaged the nature of literature, but it has, on the contrary, enriched traditional literary narrative methods. It is a valuable exploration of style, deserving of approval. In comparison with the experimentation of great masters of the modern Western novel, such as Joyce and Faulkner, however, it is still limited the formal level and far from replicating the modern Western novel's use of visualized language to present people's internal and spiritual world, and is even more incapable of using inner reality of the soul, which visual images cannot penetrate, to renew the boundaries of literary reality.

### 3.2 The harm to literary style caused by adaptation

While visualization narration has provided novel writing with an opportunity for stylistic innovation, there also exists the possibility for it to damage literary style. Murray Edward argues that "in the hands of an author whose main tool is language, the techniques of film may help to investigate his subject in a way that is more forceful and rich in meaning.... Even though, in practice, works of film need not necessarily have negative consequences for others, there are already clear signs that the influence of films has been damaging for too many authors. For those authors who are excessively interested in improving quality of life (material wellbeing?), this point is particularly true".<sup>14</sup> The harm pointed out by Murray Edward is that when authors excessively pursue a visual and sensory quality in the novel, they weaken its aesthetic function, eliminate the rational force of written language, bring about profound deficiencies and confusion in artistic style, and then damage the style of the novel. Although Murray Edward directed these arguments at the "film novels" widespread in the USA in the 1960s, the "authors excessively interestedly in improving quality of life" that he emphasizes match up closely with many Chinese writers since the 1990s.

Since the 1990s, in the wake of film's strong growth and the impact of the economic boom, the status of film and literature have undergone clear changes and the guiding influence for film adaptations has also reversed from literary works towards the creative needs of the cinema. The group of writers represented by Wang Shuo disregard literature's own development needs, making no secret of their desire to use film adaptation to improve their popularity and increase their economic returns. In their hands visualization narration is merely a temporary expedient for marching toward film adaptation. It has already been reduced to a way of courting film adaptation. Wang Shuo writes in *I am your Father*, for example:

The dark corridor was packed with children, pressed up along the wall. Their facial features were unclear, but they were shrieking with laughter, each using their bodies to push back and forth. As he walked over, he heard a group of boys jeering behind his back.

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<sup>14</sup> Murray 1989, 307.

The sun was streaming into the office. Most of the desks and chairs were shabby and worn. They were of various patterns and had been hurriedly assembled together. The wall was also in disarray. Forms, picture posters and various framed certificated had been nailed on in a jumble.

The office had the atmosphere of a public security bureau's interrogation room. Seven or eight teachers, all wearing severe expressions, sat carelessly at their desks. The hair of several women was untidy, as if they had recently come to blows. Despite the bright sunshine, their faces still looked grey (p.202).

This excerpt can virtually be seen as the shooting script for a film: children playing around in the corridor, the environment of the grade office and the circumstances of the teachers. Characters and scenery are visualized and presented as in film shots, while the montage editing style is used to piece them together. This is only surface-level narration, the narrative freedom and the analysis and presentation of characters' internal world – at which the novel so excels - is all gone and the artistic characteristics of literature have disappeared.

Another example may be found in Wang Shuo's *Kongzhongxiaojie*, in the section of dialogue:

“What did you think,” Amei aggressively interrupted me. “When did I say that I resented you, that I didn't need you anymore? I haven't even thought of that. I just thought that I had a responsibility to remind you. Do I have this responsibility, this right, or not? Come on you say something!”

I had no option but to say, “You have.”

“If I have, then what are you doing by not accepting it? And then in reverse cursing me.”

“Lower your voice. Don't let my family hear.”

“So you still have face then, I thought you were so stupid that you didn't care about anything anymore.”

“Don't hit me.”

“Hitting you would be to hit in vain, I hate you.” (p. 22).

This scene is composed entirely of dialogue, there is no description of the characters' emotions, their movements or what is going on inside their heads. Even the first-person's beating is expressed indirectly with the direct speech “don't hit people”. This way of writing barely differs from film scripts.

In addition to Wang Shuo, writers such as Hai Yan, Yang Zhengguang and Guo Xiaodong have also made rendering their work convenient for film adaptation a clear creative objective. Yang Zhengguan has proudly claimed that “my novels use the techniques of films, they are totally dramatized and plot-focussed. Not only do my novels have story and plot, but the story and plot also develop in a way that is vivid and dramatic, surprising readers with the unexpected. My

novels are most suited for film adaptation.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Guo Xiaodong has made it very clear that the reason why his novel *Feichangmili* employs a narrative style of visualization and rapid changes of scene is to prepare it for future film and television adaptation. Boasting shamelessly in this manner about their submission to film adaptation indicates that “writing on behalf of the silver screen” has already become consensus among these writers, moreover the independent and unique character of the novel is gradually fading away as literature engages in a one-way and excessive pandering to film adaptation. As these writers regard their duty as moving closer to film adaptation, concentrating their attention on constructing complicated and ingenious plotlines, designing lively and humorous dialogue, emphasizing visual impressions and using montage composition to construct a narrative that jumps around between different scenes, the novel has become a “film story” and the style of the novel has been damaged.

The emergence of “*Yingshitongqishu*” is typical of the erosion of the style of the novel. “*Yingshitongqishu*” are reproductions of works of film and television, literary “adaptations” of film texts. In the broader cultural context of literature, they may be viewed as a new intertextuality, where the literary text references the film text. This kind of intertextuality, however, lacks the special qualities of literary art. These are only simple mechanical copies, plagiarisms of film in written form. The essence of “*Yingshitongqishu*” is commercial speculative behaviour, using the popularity of films as a marketing strategy to enlarge the market for books. Beginning in the 1990s, “*Yingshitongqishu*” began to flood the book market. From the *Yingshitongqisheng: xiaoshuoxilie* published by *Jiangsuwenyichubanshe* to the “*Yingshitongqishu*” produced for *Let The Bullets Fly* and *The Flowers Of War* in recent years, they mostly use a simple style of writing to introduce the background upon which the story takes place and its events from beginning to end, adding simple descriptions of characters’ actions and detailed dialogue, creating the appearance of the screenplay, which is similarly detailed. There is nothing left of the independent and unique character of literature. “*Yingshitongqishu*” pander to the market, their ultimate goal is to cater to readers’ needs to review films and as a result they must maintain a high level of consistency with the films. This is akin to a return to the time of New Era 中 adaptation of literature and the adaptation principle of “loyalty to the original work.”

Another noteworthy phenomenon is that, in the New Era, writers who persist with the standpoint of Elite Literature have also begun to anticipate the adaptation their work. Mo Yan, for example, has admitted, “I hope my novels can be adapted more for film and television.”<sup>16</sup> After the novel *White Deer Plain* was adapted, in succession, for Shaanxi opera, Terracotta and graphic novel, Chen Zhongshi said that screen adaptation “must not be delayed any longer” and that “when compared to other forms of adaptation, screen adaptation is without doubt the best form.”<sup>17</sup> This eager desire for adaption will inevitably damage the original intentions of

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<sup>15</sup> L.Y Wang 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Zheng, Luo 2000.

<sup>17</sup> Geng 2001.

creative works. For instance, after Mo Yan's novel *Red Sorghum* was successfully adapted by Zhang Yimou, the two prepared to work together a second time. For this, Mo Yan specially wrote the novel *Cotton Fleece*, not only considering Zhang Yimou's filming in all respects and doing his utmost to write using the style of film, but even writing the female protagonist in accordance with Gong Li's approach. Bi Feiyu has also acknowledged that "*Shanghaiwangshi* is not a novel, it is the screenplay for the film *Shanghai Triad*. Since I'm not familiar with screenplay writing, I still wrote it in novel form."<sup>18</sup> Even though writers of Elite Literature claim that they will hold fast to their own literary standpoint, their yearning to have their novels adapted for film and television has already intangibly influenced their literary work and transformation in style. For example, in *Shanghaiwangshi*, as the first-person follows Er Guanxia, entering the house for the first time:

I said, "How can I listen to what money has to say. What can money say?"

"What can it say?" Erguanxia replied, "This year money certainly speaks Shanghainese."

I took two steps forward saying, "I can hear money speaking."

Erguanxia smiled understandingly, stroked my head and said, "Well you had better first listen to what I have to say...what do you want money for?"

"To return home and open a tofu shop. When I have money, I will open the best tofu shop."

"A tofu shop? A tofu shop is just a joke." (p. 147)

This section is very similar to a screenplay; it structures the plot with dialogue, using very few words to explain the characters' actions and expressions. It provides exceptionally good direction for the performance of actors, but has lost the charm of literature.

### Conclusion

Since 1990, in the context of popular culture, film adaptation has conformed to the trend of popularization in literature and art, striving to cater to the recreational demands of the audience. The changes adaptations make to original works reflect their commercial nature. Moreover, film adaptations take people's anxiety in the booming market economy as an implicit focus of expression, attempting to relay an interpretation of a period of complete societal transition. Furthermore, in the context of visual art's gradual replacement of literary art and occupation of the central place in mainstream social culture, film adaptation has exerted a hidden influence on the artistic style of literature. Pandering to the visualized narrative of film adaptation, which represents one aspect of this influence, symbolizes literature's loss of independent value. The interplay between film adaptation and literary production since 1990 has amply demonstrated the intersection and fusion of the two artistic forms in context of the New Era 中, providing us with much enlightenment and inspiration for thought. Films and literature are two independent art forms and only if they maintain their respective independence can they ensure their artistic

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<sup>18</sup> Bi 2004, *Author's Preface, Selected Works of Bi Feiyu*, 2.

character and value. Any instance of one party depending excessively on the other will form a barrier to their respective development. In the early days of film, dependence on literature was a rational appeal for external assistance; as they have matured, films have strived to shake off the fetters of literature in order to manifest their own, independent artistic character. In the age of the image, it is an undeniable reality that literature is in decline. However, literature and early film are different. Literature has a long history and rich internal resources, if it does not search introspectively for a point to break through, it will instead abandon its own artistic nature and succumb to film, starting along the path to ruin. The only correct approach is to draw on the advanced ideas of film, while unearthing literature's own accumulated wisdom, and thereby give literature with a whole new look. The use of visualized narrative should be carried out as part of an artistic pursuit rooted in written language, it should persist in adding to and enriching itself and not replace traditional literary narrative tools, thus developing new realms of literary expression and expanding and surpassing itself. Conversely, it is also especially important that film adaptations, while striving to adapt to the demands of the times, abide scrupulously by their own artistic principles and ideals.

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## APENDIX

*Red Sorghum*(《红高粱》), directed by Zhang Yimou, released in 1987, based on Mo Yan’s novel *Red Sorghum Clan*(《红高粱》).

*The Road Home*(《我的父亲母亲》),directed by Zhang Yimou, released in 1999, based on Bao Shi’s *Remembrance* (《纪念》).

*The Village Whore* (《村妓》), directed by Huang Shuqin, released in 2000, based on Shen Congwen’s novel *Zhang Fu* (《丈夫》) .

*Sky Lovers* (《天上的恋人》) , directed by Jiang Qinmin, released in 2002, based on Dong Xi’s novel *Life without Language*(《没有语言的生活》).

*Ripples Across Stagnant Water* (《狂》), directed by Ling Zifeng, released in 1992, based on Li Jieren’s novel *Ripple on Stagnant Water* (《死水微澜》).

*Ju Dou*(《菊豆》), directed by Zhang Yimou, 1990, based on Liu Heng’s *Fuxi Fuxi*(《伏羲伏羲》).

*The Wooden Man’s Bride* (《五魁》), directed by Huang jianxin,1994, based on Jia Pingwa’s novel *Wu Kui*(《五魁》).

*Rice* (《大鸿米店》), directed by Jian-zhong Huang, released in 2004, based on Su Tong’s novel *Rice*(《米》).

*Yin shi*(《银饰》), directed by Jian-zhong Huang, released in 2005, based on Zhou Daxin’s novel *Yinshi*(《银饰》).

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*The Flowers of War* (《金陵十三钗》), directed by Zhang Yimou, released in 2011, based on Geling Yan's novel *13 Flowers of Nanjing* (《金陵十三钗》).

*Assembly* (《集结号》), directed by Feng Xiaogang, released in 2007, based on Yang Jinyuan's novel *Guansi* (《官司》).

*Aftershock* (《唐山大地震》), directed by Feng Xiaogang, released in 2010, based on Zhang Ling's novel *Aftershock* (《余震》).

*Let the Bullets Fly* (《让子弹飞》), directed by Jiang Wen, released in 2010, based on Ma Shitu's novel *Daoguanji* (《盗官记》).

*Zhou Yu's Train* (《周渔的火车》), directed by Sun Zhou, released in 2002, based on Bei Cun's novel *Zhou Yu's shouting* (《周渔的喊叫》).

*The Missing Gun* (《寻枪》), directed by Lu Chuan, released in 2002, based on a Fan Yiping's novel *The Missing Gun* (《寻枪记》).

*I Love You* (《我爱你》), directed by Zhang Yuan, released in 2002, based on Wang Shuo's novel *Guo ba yin jiu si* (《过把瘾就死》).

*Little Red Flowers* (《看上去很美》), directed by Zhang Yuan, released in 2006, based on Wang Shuo's novel *Could be Beautiful* (《看上去很美》).

*Green Tea* (《绿茶》), Directed by Zhang Yuan, released in 2003, Jin Renshun's novel *Shuibian De Adilina* (《水边的阿狄丽娜》).