Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies

The Play of Morality in Feng Xiaogang's Films

Dian LI
University of Arizona

Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies. Vol.9, No.2.
 pp.231-241

AEAS
SUNGKYUN KWAN UNIVERSITY

Sungkyun Journal of East Asian Studies. Vol.9, No.2.
 pp.231-241

The Play of Morality in Feng Xiaogang's Films

Dian LI
University of Arizona

ABSTRACT

Among Chinese critics' frequent attacks on Feng Xiaogang's films, none is as unforgiving as the complaint of a general lack of morality in his narrative and characterization. Is Feng guilty as charged or has he been misread by some Chinese film critics? Does the obvious entertainment appeal of his films really come at the expense of his artistic and social values as a filmmaker? Taking the motif of morality as an entry, the paper will place Feng Xiaogang in the tradition of New Chinese Cinema since the fifth-generation directors. While similarly showing a clear social concern, Feng distinguishes himself from his predecessors by setting that concern in a depoliticized and mundane context. The paper will argue that by using the techniques of parody and satire Feng successfully constructs many "saleable" situations of moral crisis whose "truth-in-detail" alerts the audiences to their own frailty in such situations. On the other hand, the often-unsatisfactory solutions to the moral crisis are a reflection of values-in-conflict in contemporary Chinese society undergoing rapid change.

Keywords: morality, parody, redemption, commercial cinema, Feng Xiaogang

Moral action is action which affirms life.
– John Gardener[1]

Without a doubt, Feng Xiaogang (b. 1958) is the most influential Chinese film director in the wake of the fifth-generation directors. Son of a middle-class family from Hunan Province, Feng Xiaogang came to Beijing in the 1980s to seek a career in media and film industry. He toiled for years in various industrial roles including acting, art design, and screenplay and honed his skills at filmmaking in assisting the production some of the most popular TV drama series of the time such as *Haonan haonü* (Good man good women) and *Bianjibu de gushi* (Chronicles from the editors' bureau). In the 1990s, China's state studio system was becoming financially unsustainable because of artistic stasis and foreign competition, and independent filmmaking (meaning anybody working on a film while not employed or sponsored by a state-run film studio) reached an unseen height in the country. It was perceived not only as a new approach to cure the "ills" of studio-made films but also a way of saving Chinese National Cinema from distinction in the face of competitions from Hollywood films and declining Chinese moviegoers. It is in this context that Feng Xiaogang rose to the occasion and becomes a "signature personality"[2] of Chinese film industry who harbingers the arrival of "a new model of a Chinese national cinema."[3]

Feng Xiaogang's success is inseparable with the phenomenon of "*hesuipian*" (Chinese New Year's celebration films), which refers to films released around China's

email of the author: dianl@email.arizona.edu

long lunar New Year holidays. The concept of *hesuipian* can be traced back to the Hong Kong movie industry in the 1980s or earlier, but Feng deserves credit to popularize it in the Mainland. Although *hesuipian* does denotes certain artistic characteristics (such as comedy, family melodrama, or happy ending), it is foremost a marketing strategy intended to capture an audience in a festival spirit and with lots of leisure time at hand. Acutely aware of the "profit turn" in Chinese film industry and inspired by the marketing success of the Hong Kong film industry, Feng Xiaogang almost single-handedly pursued the creation of *hesuipian* and made it a jumping board for the revival of domestic-made films in the 1990s. Since 1994, his films – *hesuipian* or otherwise – have consistently garnered the largest audiences and routinely beaten competitions from China and abroad. According to one count, the total domestic box office receipts for Feng's films for the last twelve years have surpassed one billion Chinese yuan as of January 2009, a figure that is way ahead of any other Chinese director from the same period.[4] On the other hand, Feng is a very controversial filmmaker. He has been simultaneously touted as a box office king and a trendsetter in national cinema and condemned as a "pseudo-artist" and a "shallow" director. No other Chinese director in recent times has embodied the tension between the film as a serious art form and as an entertainment venue. The fact that up until now Feng Xiaogang has rarely been recognized by major domestic and international film festivals and award competitions seems to confirm an overlook by both his peers and film critics. For each Feng Xiaogang fan who exalts his elements of commercial filmmaking, which are taken as evidence either for his path- breaking ingenuity or for his departure from conventional film aesthetics, there are many detractors who accuse Feng for making crowd-pleasing films that offer nothing other than a temporary comic relief. Of these criticisms, perhaps, none is as unforgiving as the accusation of a general lack of morality in his narrative and characterization. That Feng is typically interested in characters of dubious distinction and his films sacrifice moral values in the pursuit of entertainment so as to disrupt the convention of "good triumphs over evil" in storytelling has been a black cloud hanging over Feng's stunning success at the box office in recent years.[5] Is Feng guilty as charged or has he been misread by some Chinese film critics? Does the obvious entertainment appeal of his films really come at the expense of his artistic and social values as a filmmaker? Taking the motif of morality as an entry, the paper will place Feng Xiaogang in the traditional of New Chinese Cinema since the 5th generation directors. While similarly bearing a clear social concern, Feng distinguishes himself from his predecessors by setting that concern in a depoliticized and mundane context. The paper will argue that by using the techniques of parody and satire Feng successfully constructs many "saleable"

[1] John Gardener, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 23.

[2] Wu Xiaoli 吳小麗 and Xu Shengmin 徐甦民, *Jiushi niandai Zhongguo dianyin lun* 九十年代中國電影論 (A study of Chinese films in the 1990s) (Beijing: Wenhua wenyi chubanshe 文化藝術出版社, 2005), 7.

[3] McGrath, Jason, McGrath, "Metacinema for the Masses: Three Films by Feng Xiaogang," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* (http://mclc.osu.edu/jou/abstracts/mcgrath.htm). Accessed 1/25/2009.

[4] http://ent.cn.real.com/15/20090108/14350.shtml. Accessed 9/12/2009.

[5] For a summary of Chinese film scholars' negative responses to Feng Xiaogang's films, refer to Wu Xiaoli and Xu Shengmin, *Jiushi niandai Zhongguo dianying lun*, 20-36.

situations of moral crisis whose "truth-in-detail" alerts the audiences to their own frailty in such situations. On the other hand, the often-unsatisfactory solutions to the moral crisis are a reflection of values-in-conflicts in contemporary Chinese society undergoing rapid change.

By the measure of frequency of exposure, Feng Xiaogang is probably the hottest name in China's mass media at the moment. Any casual Internet search will yield a result beyond a manageable scope, and the print and visual media follow him so closely that one has reasons to complain about a "Feng Xiaogang fatigue," at least before his next new film comes about. The newly minted celebrity culture in China has much to do with it, but Feng Xiaogang, being a master of self-promotion himself, is more than a willing participant. He clearly relishes his maximum exposure to the public eye judging by his frequent attention-grabbing and outlandish statements that have created quite a few controversies and raised the ire of some cultural critics. However, in some sober moments, a mellowing Feng Xiaogang does occasionally lead us into the inner world of his filmmaking aesthetics, such as this passage from a recent speech given to a university student audience:

> Of the drama films, from Chicken Feather (Yidi jimao), A *Sigh* (Yisheng tanxi) to *Cellphone* (Shouji), my work appears playful and indecent, which many an expert critic characterizes as lacking depth and values. They believe that my films are obsessed with mundane life and licentious men and women in terms of content, and are irregular and chaotic in following genre conventions in terms of form. I stubbornly disagree. I believe these films echo the main melody of our present-day life, reflecting various shapes of lived experience under reform. The audience offers an unusual spectacle when encountering such films: everyone wears this carefree, gentle smile on their faces, but inside they struggle with fear. An officious journalist once followed spectators to the washroom who had left in the middle of the film *Cellphone* and found them busily deleting text messages on their cell phones. After that, they returned to the theater, back to the realm of entertainment. How terrifying this film-watching experience is! I don't know what "depth" means, but what I see in this episode is that a film has become a great threat to their minds and hearts, letting them experiencing love and fear.[6]

The film *Cellphone* is a comedy of errors. Yan Shouyi lives a double life of glamour and deceit, one as a popular TV anchorman who dispenses "truth" to millions of viewers and the other as an unfaithful husband who steals time to be with two other lovers. All's well until his cellphone gives him up. His lies exposed by the electronic fingerprints of the cellphone, Yan Shouyi's life falls apart and he suffers from a dose of communication phobia, fearing the cellphone in particular. In the end, Yan Shouyi returns to his rural roots and his pre-cellphone memory to lick his wounds. He discards his cellphone but the fear it generates lingers on when the credits roll. If Director Feng Xiaogang sounds a little bit defensive in the above speech, it is for

[6] Feng Xiaogang 馮小剛, "Feng Xiaogang zishu" 馮小剛自述 (Feng Xiaogang talks about himself), in *Dangdai dianying* 當代電影 (Contemporary Films), no. 6 (2006): 42.

good reasons. Clearly he has been exasperated with the so-called "expert critics" who stand to ignore his success at the box office.[7] He has departed from his usual line of defense, i.e., citing the stunning revenue that each of his films has generated. Instead he would like to be regarded as a serious filmmaker who engages people's true living experiences that society has to offer rather than manufactures fantasies and dreams. Audiences are always at the heart of such filmmaking, but it is less about what they want, more about what a film can do to them. What a film like *Cellphone* can do to them, one can almost imagine that Feng Xiaogang is saying, filled with mirth and a grimace on his face, is generating "love and fear," which comes from a perceived "threat" to their personal well-being. Feng Xiaogang does not go into great detail as to where this threat comes from and how his film transmits it so vividly to its audience, but if he did, he would have to invoke the discourse of morality and ethics, two words he probably hates to use, at least in a public lecture. How else would one attempt to explain the actions of these audience members who delete text messages to avoid confrontations with their wives or girlfriends? This is to say, Feng Xiaogang's avowed goal of making films to "threaten" the Chinese audience relies on a social context of morality in which one experiences fear to affirm the feeling of love or approaches love with the fear of losing it. Either ways he creates a grand play on morality that seems to have seized the pulse of a Chinese society fighting for its own spirit under the weight of economic prosperity and commercialism.

From his directorial debut *Gone Forever with My Love* (Yongshi woai) in 1994 to his recent work *Assembly* (Jijie hao), Feng Xiaogang has created a colorful collage of characters caught in a moral and ethical crisis in which a filmic discourse of moral persuasion is employed to highlight the power of admonition and redemption. Seizing upon sensitive social currents of his days – such as transnational migration, private entrepreneurship, the misbehavior of the newly rich, sexual liberation, etc., Feng Xiaogang describes, through the struggle of his characters, a panorama of spiritual wilderness and value confusion, which demands self-examination and self-adjustment in the face of the endless supply of temptations from a society under transformation. The themes of admonition and redemption usually play out in the situations of family life, social interaction, and romance, many of which center on the experiences of love lost and found, particularly in Feng Xiaogang's early films.[8] In *Gone Forever with My Love*, Su Kai must resort to deception to extricate himself from the love of Lin Ge Ge and Yang Yan because of his fatal illness. In *Sorry Baby* (Mei wan mei liao, 1999), the kidnapper Han Dong, in order to make his employer Yuan Dawei pay up what is due to him, imprisons Yuan Dawei's girlfriend Liu Xiaoyun and ends up getting both his money and the girl's heart. Then in the film *Big Shot's Funeral* (Da wan, 2001), redemption takes on an international dimension. The Hollywood heavyweight director Don Tyler, aka "Big Shot," falls apart while

[7] *Cellphone* made a profit of RMB$15 millions from revenue of RMB$93 millions. See http://tyguide.cctv.com/20071218/103288_1.shtml. Accessed 9/18/2009.

[8] The Chinese critic Hu Po 胡泊 has provided a similar analysis of such themes in Feng Xiaogang's films, which is a source for this paper. See Hu Po 胡泊, "Zhengjiu shuo－Feng Xiaogang dianying de zhuti" 拯救說－馮小剛電影的主題 (Redemption: The theme of Feng Xiaogang's films), in *Fujian yishu* 福建藝術 (Fujian arts), no. 2 (2004): 47-49.

shooting in China because of his insecurity and poor health. He puts his fate in the hands of the down-and-out cameraman Yo Yo who conspires to stage an elaborate "comedy funeral" that ends up saving both Tyler's life and career. In the meanwhile, Yo Yo scores not only by being a gracious host but also by a demonstration of the superiority of China's civilization over that of the West. It is not a stretch to see Feng Xiaogang's alter ego in the characterization of Yo Yo, who has all these anti-hero traits and appearances – being charmingly ordinary, mischievous, and even cynical, and yet is able to pull off a very heroic act of salvation. Surely, his actions are deceptive and dishonest, but these impressions quickly evaporate in the elevation of his noble goal and the happy ending that results from it.

This strikes one as an evocation of the familiar jingle "the end justifies the means," which seems to stand behind many popular but morally questionable social guidelines such as the notorious "*qian guize*" (unwritten rules/ hidden codes) that have been prevalent in all aspects of China's grand march towards economic prosperity in recent times. Thus Feng Xiaogang stands up as a preacher and a guardian of moral values between the parallel worlds of his films and society and intends to save one soul at a time. This marks both his similarity with and difference from the fifth-generation directors such as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang. The works of the latter group disclose society's ills in order to reinterpret China's official history, to reach a philosophical understanding of China's predicament, and to bring attention to universal categories such as the nation, women, or masculinity, but Feng Xiaogang describes society's ills only to set it up as a background for individual self-redemption. In his view, an increasingly open and permissive society gives rises to all sorts of morally ambiguous behavior, to which one is tempted and finally succumbed often not by a fault of one's own. The emphasis is not on how to end such behavior through either self-examination or social reform but on how to extricate oneself from the resulting moral crisis by comic measures of cleverness and ingenuity that only lead to local and temporary resolutions. At the end of the film A *Sigh* the protagonist Liang Yazhou is relaxing on the beach with his family having weathered an extramarital affair with his beautiful secretary Li Xiaodan. Then a new amorous text message appears on his cell phone, which ominously interrupts his family bliss and suggests another round of temptation is always lurking in the corner. If such resolutions hint at a timid call for traditional values such as endurance, generosity, honesty, and sacrifice sometimes in his earlier films, this call becomes an allegorical ambiguity in Feng Xiaogang's signature film *A World Without Thieves* (Tianxia wu zei, 2005), one of his commercially most successful films up to date.

Many a critic believes that *A World Without Thieves* marks a complete turn to commercial filmmaking for Feng Xiaogang.[9] Such an impression, first of all, may have come from two events that happened in the film's making and promotion process. On December 6, 2004, *A World Without Thieves* premiered at Beijing Exhibition

[9] Yin Hong 尹鸿 and Tang Jianying 唐建英, "Feng Xiaogang dianying yu dianying shangye meixue" 馮小剛電影與電影商業美學 (Commercial aesthetics in Feng Xiaogang's films), in *Diangdai dianying* (Contemporary cinema), no. 6 (2006): 50-59.

Hall in the most lavish fashion for a Chinese film up to date. It was the hottest ticket in town, costing 5000 YMB, but only the famous in entertainment and the well-connected in businesses would get invited. On the red carpet and under the spotlights Feng Xiaogang led his sizzling group of movie stars – Ge You from the Mainland, Liu Dehua (Andy Lau) from Hong Kong, and Liu Ruoying (Rene Liu) from Taiwan among others – and paraded through an army of media people and screaming fans, staging a spectacle copied straight from Hollywood's playbook. Among the media frenzy and eager anticipation for the official release one month later during the Chinese New Year Festival, nobody paid much attention to Feng Xiaogang's pledge to donate all the proceeds from the premiere of the film to charity. Another event, which is far more offensive to some Chinese critics than the mildly upsetting premiere, is the film's product placement. Product placement has always been a Feng Xiaogang trademark, but until *Cellphone*, one can say that he has done it in a tasteful and measured fashion. All that has changed with *A World Without Thieves*, in which product placement is so extensive that it is almost integrated in its visual narrative: within six minutes of the film's opening, the audience has already been bombarded with recurring images of a Canon digital camera, a BMW sport coupe and an HP notebook computer. But perhaps the winners of this advertising battle should go to China Mobil and Nokia whose logos are on full display every time the characters call or text message. Indeed, *A World Without Thieves* has brought the Chinese film industry into a new age of product placement and commercial filmmaking,[10] for which Feng Xiaogang is always ready to take the credit and rarely feels the need to apologize.

There is no doubt that *A World Without Thieves* was conceived, made and promoted as a commercial film. The premiere event and product placement are just two of many Feng Xiaogang's surefire devices to promote a profitable return on the investment. Other devices included star power, stock storyline, stunning special effects, and dazzling kungfu moves, all of which were woven together to take the audience for a momentary escape into the exciting but otherwisely inaccessible underworld of thiefdom. Conventional wisdom is that morality and money do not mix well, but I am ready to argue that it is the scent of money in and out of *A World Without Thieves* that makes the film an interesting play of morality. Here I use the word "play" in two ways: first, the film is a play, a drama that, essentially, is an archetype of morality tale; secondly, "play" means to amuse oneself, to have fun in as in a game. In this particular game, morality is the goal of an allegorical pursuit but it is always frustratingly out of reach.

A World Without Thieves offers the audience a temporary escape into the world of thieves. Wang Bo and Wang Li are lovers and also partners in crime. A successful heist in Beijing begins their cross-country journey into Chinese's west, during which Wang Li announces her pregnancy and fights with Wang Bo about the future of their partnership. They board a passenger train to look for their next victim, and they meet Root, a young migrant worker returning to his home in the

[10] Sha Hui 沙蕙, "'*Tianxia wuzei*' yu '*zei han zhuo zei*'" 天下无賊與賊喊捉賊 ('A World Without Thieves' and "*A thief crying 'stop thief*'"), *Wenyi yanjiu* 文藝研究 (Studies of arts and literature), no. 5 (2005): 24.

east to get married. Root does not believe that there are thieves nowadays and even goes as far as announcing that he has 60,000 yuan with him to prove his point. Wang Bo is glad to have a target sitting next to him, but Wang Li is moved by Root's simplicity and innocence and persuades Wang Bo to let go of Root. Yet another gang of thieves on the same train is determined to rob Root of his hard-earned money. Turning from a thief into a guard, Wang Bo engages the gang in a running battle of wit and skill. He succeeds in the end but pays with his life. Meanwhile, Wang Li survives and looks forward to delivering a son into a world without thieves.

To call the film a morality is not far-fetched. The narrative centers on a familiar "good versus evil" theme and the good triumphs in the end as required by convention. It is worth noting that Wang Bo and Wang Li, the couple who personify this moral narrative, are two heroic figures that have been largely absent from Feng Xiaogang's earlier films. The fact they are morally deficient to start with – both are dishonorable thieves – and are able to elevate themselves by performing unselfish deeds and thus compensate for their imperfection adds a great deal of persuasion to their pedagogical voices. Han, the police detective, is another hero-like character in the film, who not only helps facilitate Wang Bo's transformation but also forms a bridge between the audience and a grayish fictional moral universe. He is a great good-doer in disguise who metes out punishment and reward as demanded in a typical morality narrative.

At the center of this morality narrative stands the character Root [Sha Gen], played by a new and incredibly plain actor, Wang Baoqiang. He is the key to the secret lives unfolding on this fast moving train that traverses both time and space; he is the motivation that holds together the actions of all players; and he sets the standard according to which the bad, the ugly and the beautiful are to be judged. Just as Feng Xiaogang explained: "In this film only he [the characterization of Root] had to be done right. If there was something wrong with his appearance, his expression or his language, the film would have failed."[11] The "right" Root on screen, of course, is the one we see: an orphan raised by the village, a migrant worker doing the ancient craft of temple restoration, a young man clinging to a simple life dream of marriage and family, a person of tremendous generosity and kindness who will not hesitate to give a hand to any stranger, and a personification of all sorts of virtues who seems unaware of his rare possessions. In other words, Root is a moral man in the fullest sense of the term. It is all summed up by the woman thief Wang Li's pronouncement: "He is by no means an ordinary person."

Wang Li's words of admiration signify the beginning of Feng Xiaogang's play with the characterization of Root, or to be exact, with the very idea of morality that Root personifies. In explaining his film aesthetics, Feng Xiaogang says: "My idea of making a film is to make an event a playful game. How do we do that? One common strategy is reverse thinking, which is to look at things from a reverse angle so that our mind will open up. For example, someone will weep over a sad thing as conditioned by his imagination. But if you make him laugh over the same thing, you will achieve

[11] Quoted from "Zhongren xiangshan, tianxia wuzei" 衆人向善, 天下无賊 (Everyone does good, a world without thieves), *Xinjing bao* 新京報 (New Beijing daily), 12/13/2004.

a surprise result."[12] Clearly the character Root has all the markings of such "reverse thinking." While Root is put on the pedestal of the Golden Standard of morality, he is also portrayed as otherworldly remote. He lives and works in isolated areas unaffected by China's march towards modernization; he is very familiar with the world of wild wolves but seems oblivious to the intricacies of human relationships. He is like an antiquated alien transplanted in the present-day moneyed world about which he knows nothing. That he does not believe there are thieves in this world becomes his trademark of stupidity, as his Chinese name (meaning "stupid root") conveys ostentatiously. At the crowded train station, he shouts with staggering sincerity: "Who among you is a thief? I have 60,000 yuan with me!" The silence of the crowd reinforces his conviction, like Ah Q's self-delusional "psychological victory" after a beating, except that the laugh from the audience may be less complicated. Such a seemingly incongruous juxtaposition of wisdom and stupidity in the representation of Root has prompted some Chinese critics to fault Feng Xiaogang for creating an unreal and thus unbelievable character,[13] but I tend to disagree. After all, in the Chinese tradition wisdom and stupidity are not necessarily incompatible, as the famous Daoist aphorism "da zhi ruo yu" (great wisdom approaches stupidity) suggests. The fact that Root appears both wise and stupid does not discount his authority as a moral guardian; on the contrary it gives him an aura of authenticity that enchants us, not to mention the added benefits of comic relief. The question, then, is not whether or not Root is realistically credible; the question is how the character of Root functions in the overall narrative of the film. Structurally speaking, the function of Root, the importance of his role in term of storytelling, regresses as the story progresses and ends up being what I would call a "narrative absence" as the film draws to a close.

By "the function of Root" I mean the moral virtues he embodies that drive the plot and motivate other characters' actions. It works like this: at the beginning the appearance of Root is a like a breath of fresh air that endears Wang Li and wakes up Wang Bo from his moral stupor; in the middle Wang Bo and Wang Li embark on their journeys of redemption and engage the master thief Uncle Bill in a series of contests of cunning and skill. These contests are all about Root and yet he has nothing to do with them; in the end, the thieves take the center stage and Root retreats into his own world, both literally and figuratively. Now Root's importance still radiates in the plot line but only as a narrative absence. The last screen presence of Root is that he is in a peaceful slumber in the corner of the sleep car. He has given blood to a passenger in need but suffered blood phobia as a result. While he sleeps away, Uncle Bill fishes up his bag of 60,000 yuan from the ventilation opening in the ceiling; Wang Bo spots Uncle Bill and they fight a spectacular battle; finally, Wang Bo returns the bag of money to its rightful owner in the same way it was taken, but Wang Bo is dying from his wounds, his blood dripping down and marking Root with brilliant red specks. This may be the most memorable scene of all Feng Xiaogang's

[12] Quoted in Tan Zheng 譚政, "Wo shi yige shimin daoyan" 我是一個市民導演 (I'm a people's director), in *Beijing dianying yishu* 北京電影藝術 (Beijing film arts), no. 2 (2000): 24.

[13] For example, see Sha Hui, Note 8 above, 20.

films. For a director known for the use of light humor and uncomplicated narrative, it is a remarkable achievement to have come up with such well-composed shots laden with visual imagery and metaphors, something akin to the camerawork of the fifth-generation directors. Many elements of the shots such as the dripping blood, the moving train, the bag of money, Wang Bo's badly wounded hand, and the Nokia phone with which Wang Bo sends his last text message to Wang Li are all inviting reading, but perhaps the most interesting metaphor of all is Root's sleep itself, which is not motivated but fits in seamlessly. Perhaps Feng Xiaogang wants to maintain the integrity of Root as a man of great wisdom and great stupidity who has the self-knowledge of neither, but by keeping him outside the narrative climax, Feng Xiaogang is in effect emphasizing the absence of Root as a condition for the future and thus diminishes the significance of Root that the film has been establishing up till this point.

And what the future would be without Root in it? Naturally, a return to the world full of thieves. This is indeed a very troubling proposition, but it is a proposition embedded in the grand theme of the film itself, that is, "a world without thieves" (*tianxia wuzei*) is in fact "a world full of thieves" (*tianxia wuzei buzai*). Most importantly, it is also embedded in Feng Xiaogang's self-awareness as a commercial filmmaker and his view of film and its social function. The following statement by Feng Xiaogang is particularly revealing:

> The reason why the audience watches movies is to buy intoxication. They pay and get to stay in a theater for an hour and half, and like after drinking a glass of beer, become a little dizzy, experiencing a little pleasure. My view is that this film [*A World Without Thieves*] is not a cure; it is a dose of anesthetic that helps stop the pain but does not solve any problem.[14]

The refusal to treat film as a "cure" is perhaps the most noteworthy mark of the differences between Feng Xiaogang and the fifth-generation directors. Yet, he acknowledges the "pain" that his audience suffers. Thus he creates socially engaging films to diagnose the symptoms of the "pain" and he uses parody and satire that ridicule various social ills. In the case of *A World Without Thieves*, he challenges a morally degenerated society by introducing the character Root to disrupt its operation, but Root is only a token of pure nostalgia, a specter of forgotten tradition who has no place to land in the present world of corrupted values and misplaced priorities. He is not a "cure"; Feng Xiaogang is not interested in him being one. Such a paradoxical take on Root as an irrelevant ideal of virtues, in my opinion, is Feng Xiaogang's ultimate play at morality.

[14] Quoted from "*Tianxia wuzei* shi yizhen rang ni yunhu de mayao" 天下无贼是一針讓儞暈乎的麻藥 (*A World Without Thieves* is a dose of dizziness-inducing anesthetic), *Xinjing bao* 新京報 (New Beijing daily), 12/6/2004.

GLOSSARY

Beijing	北京
da zhi ruo yu	大智若愚
Chen Kaige	陳凱歌
Feng Xiaogang	馮小剛
Haonan haonü	好男好女
Han Dong	韓冬
hesuipian	賀歲片
Hunan	湖南
qian guize	潛規則
Root [Sha Gen]	傻根
Su Kai	蘇凱
shouji	手机
Lin Ge Ge	林格格
tianxia wuzei	天下无賊
tianxia wuzei buzai	天下无賊不在
Tian Zhuangzhuang	田壯壯
Zhang Yimou	張藝謀
Yan Shouyi	嚴守一
Wang Baoqiang	王寶强
Yang Yan	楊艷
Yuan Dawei	阮大偉
Yo Yo	優優
Liu Xiaoyun	劉小芸
Liang Yazhou	梁亞洲
Li Xiaodan	李小丹
Ge You	葛優
Liu Dehua	劉德華
Liu Ruoying	劉若英
Taiwan	台灣
Wang Bo	王薄
Wang Li	王麗
yuan	元
Han	韓

FENG XIAOGANG'S FILMOGRAPHY

Yong shi wo ai 永失我愛 (Gone forever with my love), 1994.
Yi di jimao 一地鷄毛 (Chicken feather), 1995.
Jiafang yifang 甲方乙方 (The dream factory), 1997.
Bu jian bu san 不見不散 (Be there or be square), 1998.
Mei wan mei liao 没完没了 (Sorry baby), 1999.
Yi sheng tan xi 一聲嘆息 (A sigh), 2000.
Da Wan 大腕 (Big shot' s funeral), 2001.
Shouji 手机 (Cellphone), 2003.
Tianxia wu zei 天下无賊 (A world without thieves), 2004.
Ye yan 夜宴 (The banquet), 2006.
Jijie hao 集結號 (Assembly), 2007.
Fei cheng wu rao 非誠勿擾 (If you are the one), 2008
Guizu 貴族 (The nobles), 2009 (in production).

REFERENCES

Feng Xiaogang 馮小剛. 2006. "Feng Xiaogang zishu" 馮小剛自述 (Feng Xiaogang talks about himself), *Dangdai dianying* 當代電影 (Contemporary Films), no. 6: 44-45.

Gardener, John. 1977. On Moral Fiction. New York: Basic Books.

Hu Po 胡泊. 2004. "Zhengjiu shuo – Feng Xiaogang dianying de zhuti" 拯救說–馮小剛電影的主題 (Redemption: The theme of Feng Xiaogang's films), *Fujian yishu* 福建藝術 (Fujian arts), no. 2: 49-51.

McGrath, Jason. "Metacinema for the Masses: Three Films by Feng Xiaogang." In *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* (http://mclc.osu.edu/jou/abstracts/mcgrath.htm). Accessed 1/25/2009.

Sha Hui 沙蕙. 2005. "'*Tianxia wuzei*' yu '*zei han zhuo zei*'" 天下无賊與賊喊捉賊 (A World Without Thieves and "A thief crying 'stop thief'"). *Wenyi yanjiu* 文藝研究 (Studies of arts and literature), no. 5: 20-27.

Tan Zheng 譚政. 2000. "Wo shi yige shimin daoyan" 我是一個市民導演 (I'm a people's director). *Beijing dianying yishu* 北京電影藝術 (Beijing film arts), no. 2: 44-48

"*Tianxia wuzei shi* yizheng rang ni yunhu de mayao" 天下无賊是一針讓爾暈乎的麻藥 (A World Without Thieves is a dose of dizziness-inducing anesthetic). *Xinjing bao* 新京報 (New Beijing daily), 12/6/2004.

Wu Xiaoli 吳小麗 and Xu Shenmin 徐甦民. 2005. *Jiushi niandai Zhongguo dianying lun* 九十年代中國電影論 (A study of Chinese films in the 1990s). Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe 文化藝術出版社.

Yin Hong 尹鴻 and Tang Jianying 唐建英. 2006. "Feng Xiaogang dianying yu dianying shangye meixue" 馮小剛電影與電影商業美學 (Commercial aesthetics in Feng Xiaogang's films). *Dangdai dianying* 當代電影(Contemporary cinema), no. 6: 52-57.

"Zhongren xiangshan, tianxia wuzei" 衆人向善, 天下无賊 (Everyone does good, a world without thieves). In *Xinjing bao* 新京報 (New Beijing daily).