

## *Original Paper*

# The Representation of Children and Society in Chinese Fifth Generation Cinema: A Test of Semiotics in Film Interpretation

Yu Zhu<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Department of Media and Communications, the London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

\* Yu Zhu, The Department of Media and Communications, the London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

Received: July 27, 2024

Accepted: August 3, 2024

Online Published: August 11, 2024

doi:10.22158/csm.v7n2p108

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/csm.v7n2p108>

### **Abstract**

*In the exploration of the representation of children and the influence stemming from the dominant ideology in Chinese cinema, I attempt to conduct this research using “semiotics”. The method in question is pretty useful in mirroring the meanings of my chosen stills from the Fifth Generation cinema and is able to set up some linkages with the social environment. The mainstream semiology works in the aspect of single elements and the social semiotics is in operation in the arena of interactive meaning-making among components as a whole. The Syntagmatic comparison keeps track of any slight changes happened to the children, the props serve as the signifiers of interpersonal relationships and power relations, the metaphor between the Tiananmen Square and the class in power acts as a shared code to take into account the external environment. However, semiotics is too dependent on the interpretative practice, and will not be strong enough without the participation of existing theories and Foucaultian analysis to take into account the particular historical discourse and power relations.*

### **Keywords**

*representation of children, ideology, semiotics*

## **1. Introduction**

Children, in the traditional sense, have always been depicted as “essentially innocent and pure” (Hanson, 2000, p. 149). Their route of getting rid of these characteristics should not be determined by the basis of age, and, according to Hanson (2000), may derive from diverse sources, e.g., sexual relationship, proximity to violence, pain and cruelty, the encounter with obstacles, separation from nature and integration into modernity and so on.

In this research, I am going to explore the representation of children and their ways of filling the “child versus adult” gap in the domain of Chinese films concerning the Cultural Revolution, which, took place from the year 1966 to 1976 under the governance of an extremely centralised government. During the process, the bourgeois and the feudal were coercively suppressed, and only the Maoist were legitimate. While on the other hand, this historical background triggered the advent and development of the Fifth Generation directors, who grew up between the aforesaid time period and have always been among the most influential throughout Chinese cinematic history. However, previous studies on films regarding the Cultural Revolution and the abnormal political environment have a tendency of concentrating on broad issues, such as the representation of the event itself and its historical authenticity (Chen, 2007), collective memory and trauma, obvious or subtle power struggle, avant-garde techniques or perspectives of the filmmakers and so forth. I prefer to focus on the representation of children, their de-childhood process and the Maoist ideology embedded in them.

In his profound book, Hall states that representation operates in a system that uses “signs and symbols...to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings” (Hall, 1997, p. 1). Ideology, accordingly, “is those representations that reflect the interests of power” (Rose, 2016, p. 107). On the one hand, representation is “selective” (Hanson, 2000, p. 146), and ideology, in the Marxist explanation, is prone to make use of the mediated representations to legitimise the interests of the ruling class and the discursive inequality (Hall, 1997, p. 48). For instance, Gramsci coins the term “hegemony” to explain that the hegemonic “not only possess the power to coerce but actively organise” (Kazmi, 1999, p. 68) to win the subordinate’s content and make them involved in the dominant discourse. On the other hand, representation is also “selected” (Hanson, 2000, p. 146), consequently, in my following analysis, I will be capable of revealing the dominant ideology haunting Chinese cinema with the help of my selected representations.

Inspired by remarkable films concerning the Cultural Revolution manufactured by Chinese Fifth Generation directors, I plan to devise my research question as follows: how the representation of children and their choices of the paths towards adulthood in Cultural-Revolution-related-movies made by Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers are metaphors of the political environment and are the embodiment of the dominant Maoist ideology?

## **2. Literature Review and Rationale for Semiotics**

With regard to visual analysis, there are extensive schemes available like content analysis, semiotics, psychoanalysis, discourse analysis and so on. As for content analysis, it works by calculating, comparing and analysing the frequency of single elements existing in a given image. It is helpful in the case of quantitatively large numbers of objects (Rose, 2016, p. 102), but several disadvantages are conspicuous. Reflecting on Rose’s empirical practices (Rose, 2016), content analysts, for one thing, are

inclined to divide one picture into various parts, thus the contact between different parts and the compositional pictorial meanings are neglected. For another, this quantitative approach only pays attention to factors that are visibly illustrated, such as the clarified representations, but fails to take into consideration the latent, like the directors' filtering procedure and the underlying incentives.

Therefore, in this article, I opt for qualitative methods to interpret both overt and potential implications, specifically, the semiotics, i.e. the "mainstream semiology" and the "social semiotics", as differentiated by Rose (2016).

The "mainstream semiology" is built on the study of signs initiated by Saussure to cope with, principally, "the individual bits and pieces within images", in Van Leeuwen's words, the "lexis" of the visual materials (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 92). There are two profound contributions Saussure makes to the semiology (Berger, 2012): the differences between signifier and signified within one sign and the distinctions between the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic. The signifier is concerned with a sign's "sound-image" whereas the signified refers to the "concept"; the paradigmatic analysis, in the filmic sense (Monaco, 2013), points to the comparison between the ingredients shown in one shot with their unrealised counterparts (regarding the producers' choices of representations), while the syntagmatic analysis talks about the similarities and contrast among one shot and the shots before or after it. Later on, Peirce further subdivides the cinematic signs into three types (Monaco, 2013): icon (the signifier and the signified are linked because of likeness), index (they are related due to their casual relations) and symbol (they are connected owing to established cultural conventions). Then, to extend the literal meaning of the image to the external broader world, Barthes displays two stages of the meaning-making process: denotation and connotation, through which the representation takes place (Hall, 1997, p. 39). During the first phase, the signifier and the signified lead to one message, followed by the second course that the previously gained denotive message cooperates with the "wider themes" (Hall, 1997, p. 39) to give birth to what Barthes calls "myth". According to Rose's discussion, myth is "a form of ideology" (Rose, 2016, p. 131). She insists that, different from the ideology's naturalisation of class difference and hegemony, the semiotics is useful in mirroring "the prejudices beneath the smooth surface of the beautiful" (Rose, 2016, p. 108), i.e., uncovering the mechanism of the authority's ideological penetration, here, the ideological impact on filmic representations, which is pertinent to my research objective.

All the terms listed above are essential for reading movies. Compared with literature, films own stronger "denotative quality" and from the perspective of Monaco, the icon, index, symbol can all be roughly thought of as denotative. Nevertheless, the index bridges the denotation and connotation (Monaco, 2013), and is the carrier of the cinema's "unique metaphorical power" because the index can offer us representations as well as their associated ideas at the same time. In consequence, "mainstream semiology" is, again, of great value in the quest of the metaphorical associations between the children's

representation and the political environment.

Besides, to conduct research on social and political impact, it is not enough to keep our focus on simply the images. The social semiotics, unlike “mainstream semiology”, is considered as the “syntax” of visual texts (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 92). It centres on the “political understanding” with “a sociopolitical relevance” (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 186), and can reflect contents that are not easily recognised at first glance (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 138). I will account for its operation in detail in the subsequent section.

Therefore, it is indispensable to combine these two sets of semiotic analysis in pursuit of dominant influence in the visual dimension.

### 3. Methodology

In this part, I will provide a complete description of how I operate my visual semiotic analysis.

#### 3.1 Sampling Strategy and Access

The three stills I decide on come from *Farewell My Concubine* fabricated by Chen Kaige, one of the most renowned representatives of the Fifth Generation directors. The child in these figures is called Xiao Si, and the pictures record a succession of his attitudinal changes from deference to doubt to defiance.

In effect, plenty of movies made by the Fifth Generation in reference to the Cultural Revolution, for instance *To Live* and *The Blue Kite*, were prohibited from being shown on big screen as their revelation (authentic or not) and subtle criticism of the historical event have infringed the Communist’s interests. Yet, Chen Kaige admitted in an interview that his film was approved of being released to the public after being watched by Deng Xiaoping (the former chairman of PRC) who himself experienced the Cultural Revolution. Hence, I can have easy access to the film now without any ethical problems.

#### 3.2 Semiotic Tools

In accordance with the last section, analytical tools from both “mainstream semiology” and social semiotics will be employed.

For “mainstream semiology”, all the tools enumerated just now will be used to interpret the facial expression, gestures, props (an object that will exert some functions, Bordwell & Thompson, 2004, p. 183) etc., composing the “vocabulary” of the images.

For the “grammatical” portion, social semiotics operates based on “semiotic resources” to realise the development and modification in time (“montage”) and space (“*Mise-en-scène*”, Monaco, 2013). Jewitt and Oyama conclude three categories of “resources” to make sense of *Mise-en-scène* (e.g., “setting, costume, lighting, staging”, Bordwell & Thompson, 2004, p. 207) as well as editing art (“montage”) and generate corresponding meanings (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, pp. 141-153): firstly, representational meanings are those conveyed by the interrelated components of one picture, e.g. eye

contact or physical contact, the settings; secondly, the interactive meanings are formed between the visual characters and the audience, for example, the fact whether the actor's eyeline is rested on the viewers, the distance between the camera and the role, the shooting angle (from high or low position, from front or side); thirdly, the compositional meanings are achieved by treating "participants" as a whole, like the classification effect (the tendency of lumping things with similar traits together), the placement of distinct elements, the layout, the most salient ingredient by contrast with others.

Iedema proposes a clear way to carry out the social semiotic analysis, that is, to give rise to the above-mentioned three sorts of meanings on six pictorial levels—"frame, shot, scene, sequence, stage, genre" (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 188). In this essay, I may only attempt my interpretations on the first three levels.

#### **4. Analysis and Results**

As I mentioned above, Figure 1 displayed one scene when Xiao Si was still an innocent child. The boy was situated in the site of a funeral for his Peking Opera (the most representative Chinese traditional cultural heritage) teacher. The boy was wearing white linen, which was the typical colour and clothing for funerals in China. The monotonous colour and the close-up on Si's face made the boy's facial expression rather salient. In fact, the boy was kneeling on the ground with his hands holding a basin and a washboard on his head, which was the teacher's punishment that Si must keep down on his knees for seven days (he obeyed it even after the teacher's death). Besides, according to Jewitt and Oyama, shooting from right in front of the character will render the audience involved (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 147), and a close-up will guide the spectators to constitute an imaginary close relationship with the role as if they belong to the same group (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 147), which, all together, indicates that the people in front of the screen ought to show positive attitudes towards Si. Also, judging by Si's facial expression in this still, he looked directly at the audience, unblinkingly but mildly, initiating a "conversation" with the viewers, manifesting his deference and "demanding" their sympathy (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 145). Hence, in this picture, the boy remained pure and aligned with his second teacher Dieyi. (As a result of the witness of the scene shown in Figure 1, Dieyi decided to teach Si Peking Opera after the previous teacher.)



**Figure 1. Xiao Si was Kneeling on the Ground and Repeating his Teacher's Words. © Farewell My Concubine (Chinese drama film) Chen Kaige, 1993**

Figure 2 took place when Si was undergoing some transformations. On the whole, the dim lighting and the salient “red” (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 150) made the background setting extremely prominent. The setting consisted mainly of the Tiananmen Square, and a “metonymy” was employed here to signify the Communist Party and the Maoist ideology. Then turning to the crowd in the image, the “classification structure” was utilised to distinguish between two sub-groups. The group facing the viewers was represented by Dieyi (marked by me with a red pen), whereas Xiao Si (again, marked with the red pen) was on behalf of the group turning their back to us. What Si's group faced directly at was the Tiananmen Square, implying that the boy tended to answer the call of the hegemonic party. In addition, telling from their gestures, Dieyi sat with his hands tamely putting on his legs, conveying the message of uneasiness and powerlessness, while Si sat with his arms crossed before his breast firmly, presenting a defensive posture.



**Figure 2. Dieyi was Facing the Viewers while Xiao Si was Facing Directly at the Tiananmen Square. © Farewell My Concubine (Chinese drama film) Chen Kaige, 1993**

Syntagmatically, Figure 3 portrayed a similar scene as the first still, with Si kneeling on the ground, although instead of voluntarily accepting the punishment last time, he was forced to do so by Dieyi here. Additionally, Si was filmed from the side and stared at somewhere else sharply without intimate contact with the spectators. The innocence in his eyes was replaced with defiance, heralding his action of throwing away the basin and the washboard and the ruptured relationship between Si and Dieyi.



**Figure 3. Xiao Si was Accepting the Punishment again and Saying “You are Breaking the Law by Making me Kneel”. © Farewell My Concubine (Chinese drama film) Chen Kaige, 1993**

Overall, the three stills illustrated reciprocally the boy’s detachment from innocence and Dieyi’s values and involvement into the dominant ideologies.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Thus it can be clearly seen that the semiotics is of significant power in helping situate the explicit and implicit understandings of a certain image and make socio-political connections. Nevertheless, all the productive output is premised on the collaboration of “mainstream semiology” and social semiotics.

Saussure is undoubtedly original in the path-breaking General Linguistics discipline. Although cinematic texts can be viewed as a special pattern of language with “lexis” and “syntax” demonstrated earlier, it is problematic and misleading to include “narrowly linguistic concepts” (Monaco, 2013) when interpreting. Reasonably, Barthian denotation/connotation techniques ought to be involved. However, Hall evaluates that Barthes is too passionate about “the play of meaning and desire across texts” (Hall, 1997, p. 42). If we attach importance only to “images or sound” and utilise only the “mainstream semiology”, we shall grasp only the “resources of intuition and commonsense” (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 202). Consequently, to capture a more comprehensive reading of visual materials, it is of particular importance to combine the image-oriented “mainstream semiology” with social-and-political-relevant social semiotics.

Also, during my practice above, I discover some drawbacks of the semiotic analysis. To begin with, I am one of the spectators and belong to my own subcultural community with specific backgrounds,

which may not, more all less, enable my interpretations to be convincing to all the others. To address, this, I have tried to resort more to the shared cultural conventions (or, “commonsense” in the last paragraph) to make more people empathic. Such commonsense is named “code” in Hall’s theoretical frame (Hall, 1997, p. 21), which is the vehicle of Barthes’ representational system, such as the association between Tiananmen Square and the Communist in my study. Moreover, as proved by Monaco, one unique feature of filmic production and consumption is that “the artist’s choice in cinema is without limit” (so, it is meaningful to do paradigmatic analysis, Monaco, 2013) and as a result, “the range of possible interpretations is not unlimited” (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 141). Hence, apart from common codes, I will adhere to what Iedema calls the principle of “redundancy” (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 200), namely, to seek more evidence in support of my “selected” understandings.

Another two minor disadvantages of semiotics are: for one thing, “the terminology” is too complicated to comprehend (Rose, 2016, p. 145), different scholars may come up with differential conceptual structures or theoretical frameworks. For example, when linking signs and meanings to the wider world, Hall possesses the “codes”, Williamson coins the “referent system”, and Barthes owns the “mythology” (Rose, 2016, pp. 127-132). In dealing with this phenomenon, I prefer to stick to Barthes’ denotation/connotation realm with the assistance of Hall’s codes. For the other, the selection of material is purposely and point directly to the research question. Just as Rose finds out that, usually, the semiological researchers are not concerned about normative sampling approaches (Rose, 2016, p. 110). It is true that semiotics itself is far from enough, and drawing on other literature or theories is necessary (Van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001, p. 138).

In future study, I will pay greater attention to “montage”, the conversion of time which I did not mention much in this article, as this device will call for the “subjectivity” of the “cinematic apparatus” and enable the unconscious to be integrated into the narrative (Chen, 2007, p. 108). Furthermore, semiotics on its own will not be productive enough to handle my research question, thus more theories on unconscious mind and sexuality from the psychoanalysts will be appropriated. In addition, my blueprint shows an interest in power and institutions, I should also show concern for the production and regulation side, and consider carefully the knowledge construction as well as power struggle within certain historical discourse. Therefore, Foucault’s usage of “representation” in a broader sense in his discourse analysis will also be deployed (Hall, 1997, p. 42).

## References

- Berger, A. A. (2012). *Media analysis techniques* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2004). *Film art: An introduction* (7th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage Publications.
- Hanson, S. (2000). Chapter 8: Children in Film. In J. Mills, & R. W. Mills (Eds.), *Childhood studies: A reader in perspectives of childhood* (pp. 145-159). London: Routledge.
- Kazmi, F. (1999). Chapter 2: Understanding Conventional Films: In Search of an Analytical Framework. In *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema: Imaging a Universe, Subverting a Multiverse* (pp. 50-94). New Delhi: Sage Publications.
- Chen, M. M. J. (2007). *Representation of the cultural revolution in Chinese films by the fifth generation filmmakers: Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Tian Zhuangzhuang*. Edwin Mellen Press.
- Monaco, J. (2013). *How to read a film: The world of movies, media, and multimedia: Language, history, theory* [Kindle 4th edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com
- Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Van Leeuwen, T., & Jewitt, C. (2001). *The handbook of visual analysis*. Sage Publications.