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WEALTH AND JUSTICE

Contemporary Chinese middlebrow cinema

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Introduction

In the past decade, the theme of the middle class in Chinese cinema has attracted considerable attention from critics and scholars in China, focusing on the middle class either as the dominant narrative of contemporary Chinese films or as the main audiences of Chinese cinema (see Duan 2007; Yang 2011; Zhang 2011). However, despite this increasing interest in this newly emergent middle-class culture in Chinese cinema, the term ‘middlebrow’ (中眉 *zhongmei* or 平眉 *pingmei* in Chinese)¹ has been seldom discussed or used. I will argue that the caution that Chinese film scholars have shown in applying the concept of middlebrow to the Chinese context is partly related to the porosity between the concepts of middlebrow culture and middle-class culture, and partly related to the ambivalent position that the new middle-class taste has in current Chinese cinematic culture, as this taste has itself been fostered in part by the state.

However, before we think middlebrow across borders, it is important to revisit the use of the term in its original context. Since its origin in Britain and Ireland, ‘middlebrow’ has been persistently identified by literary critics, from F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis (1932) to Virginia Woolf (1942) and Dwight Macdonald (1960), as a pejorative label for intellectually inferior cultural production, which vulgarizes and devalues high culture. Since the 1990s, this early hostility on the part of literary critics has been identified as an expression of contemporary anxieties about cultural authority and fear of cultural change (see Baxendale and Pawling 1996; Rubin 2002; Brown and Grover 2012). As Erica Brown and Mary Grover also point out, ‘as a product of contested and precarious assertions of cultural authority, it (the middlebrow) is itself unstable’ and hard to define (2012, 2).

Moreover, the interpretation of so-called middlebrow tastes is often ambiguous and associated with a particular class or social group. As Lawrence Napper argues, in Woolf's well-known but unsent letter to the *New Statesman*, she 'displays in her contempt an interesting slippage between the aesthetics of middlebrow taste, and that section of the population who are deemed to possess it' (2000, 117). Although Woolf (1942, 119) does not spell out who this middlebrow population is, her definition of middlebrow as being 'betwixt and between' and 'neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power or prestige' implies the link between middlebrow tastes and wealth and social class, particularly the emerging middle class in English society in the twentieth century.

This link between taste and class is later reinforced in Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of taste. In his influential *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), he analyses how taste is socially constructed and practised to differentiate one's class from others. By analysing how the petite bourgeoisie attempts to distance itself from the working class, and the elite from both middle and working classes, through their cultural choices, Bourdieu highlights a symbolic hierarchy in the French cultural field as well as the relation between class and the formation of tastes. For Bourdieu, 'what makes middle-brow culture (*la culture moyenne*) is the middle-class relation to culture – mistaken identity, misplaced belief, allo-doxia' (1984, 327). Whether the English translation 'middlebrow culture' is the equivalent of '*la culture moyenne*' may still be debatable (Pollentier 2012, 38–41), but Bourdieu's emphasis on the hierarchy of cultural legitimacies echoes Woolf's definition of the middlebrow's in-between position, and his configuration of the middlebrow as produced by a relationship to class encourages a vision of middlebrow tastes as a struggle for legitimacy carried out exclusively by the aspirant middle class. However, at the same time, this relational approach also suggests that tastes are not universal and the division of 'high' and 'low' culture may be blurred and challenged when existing class relationships in a society are transformed by social mobility. The connections between social mobility, taste and culture have been noted and discussed in the context of film by scholars such as Napper (2000; 2009) and Sally Faulkner (2013), who explore how the emergent new middle class influenced film in European contexts.

This chapter will discuss how middlebrow as a western category can be reconceptualized in a Chinese context, as well as whether it may help us understand how Chinese film professionals address the new Chinese middle-class audience and what kind of discussions Chinese middlebrow cinema might open up. Due to limitations of space, this chapter will only focus on middlebrow cinema in mainland China, although it is undeniable that both Hong Kong and Taiwanese cinemas have exerted significant influence on its development, and it is sometimes hard to divide them due to the increased collaboration among film professionals in the three territories.

Film and middlebrow culture in China

Film as a mass entertainment

The earliest application of the term ‘middlebrow’ to the Chinese context is Liu Ts’un-yan’s discussion of Chinese fiction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.² Ts’un-yan discusses the problems of applying the term middlebrow to the analysis of Chinese fiction. He argues that it itself implies ‘a scale of judgment of both book and reader, evolved within the Western literary context’, and is problematic to apply to Chinese examples without adjustments, particularly given the fact that novel and fiction were not considered as a literary genre by traditional Chinese intellectuals before the late nineteenth century (1984, 2). He even suggests its application might devalue ‘Chinese models of excellence’, distorting the ‘very concept of excellence’ in its original setting; therefore, different gradations have to be applied when evaluating Chinese literature with this term (1984, 2). Ts’un-yan’s use of the term ‘middlebrow’ has been challenged by W.L. Idema (1986). Idema finds Ts’un-yan’s consideration of ‘Chinese middlebrow fiction as products of so-called middle-class culture’ problematic, as Chinese fictions produced at the turn of the century did not address or constitute a middle-class culture, but responded to ‘the most demanding literary circles of their day’ (1986, 114). For Idema, unless there is a ‘demonstrable emergence of a large, internally segmented reading public of which each segment is serviced by a more or less clearly demarcatable body of publications’, the term ‘middlebrow’ ought to be avoided.

The caution Idema advises is understandable because re-grading Chinese artistic and literary works according to an Anglophone scale is tricky. However, his insistence that ‘a large, internally segmented reading public’ served by a clearly defined body of publications must exist in China before the term is conferred might also risk stereotyping and homogenizing middlebrow tastes. Nonetheless, Ts’un-yan does make a valid point about the involvement of subjective evaluation of quality and historical contingency in defining the middlebrow in different cultures. This is particularly relevant to this chapter’s discussion of Chinese middlebrow cinema, because film, as initially an imported cultural medium in China, has been constantly redefined and deployed by different social and political powers over the course of China’s social and political revolutions and reforms in the past century. This history, without doubt, affects the ways in which culture, film and class have been intertwined and have affected each other in China, and needs to be taken into account when we discuss Chinese middlebrow films.

Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the state has maintained a tight grip on culture in mainland China in part because of its effective policy-making, and in part because of the strength of native cultural expectations about the nature and uses of cultural products such as film (Zhu and Nakajima 2010, 33). For a relatively long time Chinese film was the

state's mouthpiece for ideology and instrument for inculcation. As Yingjin Zhang observes, between 1949 and 1978, Chinese cinema was ideologically dominated by 'CCP [Chinese Communist Party]-codified class consciousness' (2004, 203). During this period, Chinese cinema underwent significant changes compared to the pre-socialist period to legitimize the CCP's political hegemony in China. For example, in 1953, China's Film Bureau held two meetings and identified 'socialist realism' as the highest standard in film production for Chinese film professionals. The manner and lifestyles of petit-bourgeois intellectuals and elites were considered dangerous to the Party's leadership and the ongoing socialist revolution. Films produced during this period focused on figures identified with the revolutionary masses, such as workers, peasants and soldiers, and promoted public welfare and collective interest over individual fulfilment (Zhang 2004, 203). For this relatively long period, 1949–78, Chinese cinema stigmatized and ridiculed, rather than inheriting or promoting, the country's traditional emphasis on fine manners, proper speech and knowledge of classic literature, which was once possessed by the elites. Although the situation has gradually changed since the 1980s, when China launched its economic reforms and tentatively opened up, allowing filmmakers to enjoy more freedom, the history of film as a form of mass entertainment and political inculcation in China has had an undeniable impact on both the public and film critics' perception and evaluation of the medium, consequently affecting the formation of middlebrow culture in Chinese cinema.

Similar problems have been addressed by scholars such as Yi Zheng (2014), who analyses the reappearance of taste and class culture in current Chinese society, particularly in print media, and points out that both writers and publishing houses participate in a process of constructing a post-socialist civility to support a project of building a harmonious and affluent society proposed by the Party-state. Zheng argues that class is 'seldom a descriptive category of structural social change in China' and its use is often 'contingent and fraught with conceptual contradictions and political tensions' (2014, 5). For her, the cultivation and practice of taste in post-socialist China is 'a state-sponsored discourse, feeding into the discourse of economic development and its offspring – the harmonious society' (Zheng 2014, 9). In this process, a prominent problem is the 'lack of awareness of and understanding of taste and the need for distinction' among a 'Chinese newly made or yet to be made middleclass', which comes about owing to 'a history of material scarcity and social-aesthetic crassness based on a false promise of equality' in socialist China (Zheng 2004, 103). Although this seeming 'lack of awareness and understanding of taste' might be more complicated than Zheng argues, and 'the Chinese newly made or yet to be made middleclass' is a rather wide and obscure social group that needs to be clarified, her argument about how social and political movements have changed China's long tradition of cultivating cultural and aesthetic distinction is useful for us to understand that film has always been closely associated with popular culture in China and that this has affected the nature and development of Chinese middlebrow cinema.

Middlebrowness in Chinese popular cinema

Despite Chinese cinema's focus on a mass audience, since the early 1980s, a group of internationally renowned, highbrow or art-house Chinese film directors, particularly the fifth-generation directors, led by Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang, has emerged. However, the Chinese film industry as a whole experienced a serious financial crisis when it underwent economic reform in this period, and had to resort to popular entertainment for films to survive. The reform abolished the state quota for production and the guaranteed purchase system established in the 1950s. Apart from some so-called 'leitmotif films' (主旋律电影 *Zhuxuanlü dianying*), which are particularly selected and subsidized by the government to commemorate major historical and political events and promote national pride or a certain ideology among the public, the majority of films produced in China now have to face the pressure of the market. On the one hand, this commercialization of the film industry opens up possibilities for producers to explore different genres and more diverse themes; on the other hand, this pressure also forces them to take into account the market. Thus far producers have favoured a mass-centred cinema, which consequently undermines the position of art-house films in Chinese cinema.

At the same time, despite a reduction in state subsidies, the government maintains its grip on the production and exhibition in mainland China through censorship. Films on controversial subjects often may be denied production licenses or be banned. This discourages private companies or independent producers from investing in films that might not please the authorities. As Rui Zhang (2008, 74) points out, since the end of the 1990s, more and more independent filmmakers, who used to produce underground artistic or socially critical films and target international film festivals, including Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye and Wang Xiaoshuai, began to collaborate with the state or commercial film studios and try to gain access to the domestic market and appeal to domestic audiences. However, it is important to note that the new masses targeted by post-socialist Chinese cinema are a predominantly urban population, particularly the emerging middle class, rather than the previous revolutionary masses mainly composed of peasants, soldiers and workers. In contrast with the many art-house films of the 1980s, which focused on exotic rural subject matter, the mainstream of the Chinese film industry has now gradually shifted its focus to the country's burgeoning urban culture. This is attributable to recent urbanization as well as government subsidies for building modern screening facilities in cities. According to statistics recently released by institutions such as the China Film Association, the State Administrator of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television and the Beijing Film Academy, the composition of Chinese film audiences has changed significantly: now young and middle-aged 'white collar' workers in urban areas are emerging as the principal cinema audience (Yang 2011, 7). It might be misleading to think these statistics represent a full picture of audiences, as the surveys generating these statistics were conducted mainly in large and medium-sized cities. However, the fact that all these surveys focus on urban areas

also shows that it is to the new urban middle class that current Chinese cinema primarily addresses itself.

Another underlying factor attributed to this new urban focus is the prevalent discourse on the new Chinese middle class in current Chinese society. Since the early 2000s, many scholars and public commentators have debated the definition of the 'middle class' in a Chinese context, its existence and (if such a social group does exist) its potential social and cultural roles.³ From as early as the beginning of the 1990s, this question has been frequently aired on Chinese media, although the actual term 'middle class' was rarely mentioned. Instead, a new word, *xiuxian* (休闲, leisure), was coined and widely used to describe a so-called 'middle-class' taste associated with modern urban life (replacing the previous, ideologically charged word, *zichan jieji* (资产阶级, bourgeois). At the same time this new word became a fashionable label to attach to various commercial products, from clothes to holiday resorts. This early emphasis on 'middle-class' taste and consumerism in Chinese mass culture and media, according to Jinhua Dai (1999, 219), is not the result of real cultural demands in Chinese society, but is a neoliberal construction to stimulate consumerism. Dai's argument has been echoed by Chinese film critics such as Huiyu Zhang (2011) and Liu Yang (2011). Zhang argues, for example, that although China is far from a middle-class society, narratives about the middle class have now become mainstream and shared by all social classes (2011, 20). She points out that mainstream films have now positioned themselves as part of middle-class culture, and shifted their focus from explicit criticism of society, or glorification of the Party and heroic representation of historical events, to wider themes emphasizing humanistic virtues such as self-sacrifice, hard work and loyalty (2011, 24). However, this new trend of middle-class tastes has also encountered criticism. Liu Yang (2011), for instance, analyses the image of the Chinese middle class in recently released commercial popular films such as *杜拉拉升职记 / Go Lala Go!* (2010, Xu) and *非诚勿扰 / If You Are The One I and II* (Feng 2008 and 2010) to argue that they are often emulations of middle-class lifestyle in developed western countries, and are used as tools to encourage the public's further consumption, and to cater to the urban nouveaux riches' need to identify and consolidate their social status (Yang 2011, 9). For her, these films, which are imbued with so-called middle-class aesthetics, will only undermine the production of high-quality artistic works or popular films that address problems in Chinese society, and they will eventually lose their market share (2011, 8–10). These criticisms, on the one hand, reveal Chinese film professionals' anxiety about the commercialization of the film industry, as well as the new social and economic role of film in Chinese society; on the other hand, they also reflect their ambivalent attitude towards an emerging middlebrow cinematic culture. Rather than adopt these broad-stroke negative criticisms of the middlebrow, I argue that the increasingly commercialized film industry has not only blurred the divisions between artistic and populist works, but also provides opportunities for its audience, be it upper, middle or working class, to transform and participate

in a cinematic culture that is more inclusive and dialectic. Thus the open term ‘middlebrow’, rather than the class-bound ‘middle-class tastes’, is preferable. In the following sections I will analyse two films, *If You Are The One* (Feng 2008) and *让子弹飞 / Let The Bullets Fly* (Wen 2010), to argue that Chinese middlebrow cinema simultaneously takes on a populist guise and explores a middle road between explicit social criticism and public entertainment. While satisfying some viewers’ curiosity about and aspiration for an upper-middle-class lifestyle, these middlebrow films also try to engage educated viewers through interrogating social problems, such as justice and cultural identity, caused by increasing social stratification and commercialization.

Wealth, taste and justice: revisiting Chinese middlebrow cinema

What can wealth bring?: Feng Xiaogang and his New Year film, If You Are The One (2008)

Despite Chinese film critics’ contempt for middlebrow tastes, films depicting middle-class urban life are often blockbusters in China. They are popular because they not only provide a venue for many viewers, particularly the lower middle class, to observe an imagined, desirable upper-middle-class lifestyle, but also strike a chord by exposing the problems encountered by the nouveaux riches despite their wealth. A good example of this contrast between film professionals and viewers’ responses is one of Xiaogang Feng’s New Year films, *If You Are The One* (2008).⁴ This romantic comedy made 325 million RMB (around 32.5 million GBP) and became the box-office champion that year. Its sequel, *If You Are The One II* (2010), was also a notable success, with a revenue of approximately 474 million RMB (47.4 million GBP). Given the limited space of this chapter, I will focus on the first film, *If You Are The One*, and discuss its depiction of an imagined middle-class lifestyle in China on the one hand, and, on the other, its satire of the nouveaux riches to entertain the mass audience.

Starring You Ge (from mainland China) and Qi Shu (from Taiwan), the film depicts a romantic story between a single, middle-aged Chinese man (Qin Fen, played by Ge) who returns to China after many years abroad, and a young and beautiful air stewardess who has been hurt in an extramarital affair (Liang Xiaoxiao, played by Shu). At the very beginning, the film ridicules the wealth of Chinese nouveaux riches by showing how Qin became a millionaire by selling an ‘innovative invention’ to a stupid, but rich, venture capitalist: a ‘Conflict Resolution Terminal’ that is a plastic tube to cover people’s hands when they are playing rock-paper-scissors to prevent cheating! In the following scenes, the film shows how the newly rich Qin puts an advertisement online to look for true love and has blind dates with many strange applicants before meeting Liang, including a former male friend who is now homosexual; a cemetery saleswoman who tries to sell him plots in a graveyard; a pregnant single mum; an erotophobic widow; and a stock

trader who sees choosing a partner as buying stocks. These dating scenes follow the usual humorous and satirical style of Feng's films. The dialogue between Qin and his dates is snappy and sarcastic, mocking the match-making that is prevalent in contemporary China, as well as evolving notions of marriage and romance in an increasingly materialistic society. Liang, who is still suffering from her previous relationship, meets with Qin under pressure from her parents. Neither Liang nor Qin think they will be a fit, but they end up having a drink together and confiding their painful experiences in relationships to each other, thinking that after this they will never meet each other again anyway. But they soon meet again by accident. Then, attracted by Liang, Qin pursues her. Liang seems to be moved by Qin's persistence but is undecided. She asks Qin to take her to Hokkaido, Japan, where she has romantic memories about her previous lover, and attempts suicide by jumping into the sea from a cliff. But Liang does not die and the film ends with her recovering in a wheelchair, accompanied by Qin, having decided to start a new life. This happy ending echoes the atmosphere of the Chinese New Year Festival when the film was screened, and the string of satirical jokes in the dialogue make this romantic comedy entertaining.

However, as many viewers and critics point out, this light-hearted urban comedy is also packed with commercials for brand-name commodities, from the laptop that Qin uses to place his advertisement to the drink that Qin and Liang have on their first date and the car that they drive. As Shuyu Kong observes, 'Feng's films on the one hand satirize urban China's uneasy rush toward materialism and capitalism, but on the other hand ironically turn themselves into a dazzling brand-name catalogue for contemporary Chinese consumers' (2009, 158). Therefore, many film critics (Sha 2005; Ni 2006) consider Feng's films, despite – or perhaps because of – their box-office success, to be lacking in artistic value and depth compared to art films made by independent filmmakers and Sixth-Generation directors. Their concerns over the encroachment of commoditization in Chinese cinema and criticism of Feng's pandering to the taste of mass audiences mirror the impact that China's economic boom has exerted on the film industry as well as critics' contempt for middlebrow tastes in general. Other critics, such as Rui Zhang (2008, 141–2), try to justify Feng's compromise between profit-making and artistic pursuit. She stresses, first, the pressures from investors and sponsors in an increasingly profit-driven film industry, and highlights, second, Feng's strategy of burying social criticism for a more sophisticated audience under absurd and hilarious plots and dialogue.

As the first mainland Chinese film director to adapt the popular Hong Kong New Year film for a mainland Chinese audience,⁵ Feng has been a very successful commercial film director. A recurring theme in many of his urban films is the humble living conditions of ordinary people and their striving for a better life in an increasingly materialist society, highlighting their resilience, virtue and admirable personality. Examples include Han Dong, a bus driver in *没完没了 / Sorry Baby!* (1999), You You, an unemployed camera man in *大腕 / A Big Shot's Funeral* (2001), and Wang Li and Wang Bo, a thief couple in *天下无贼 / A World*

Without Thieves (2005). Although in *If You Are The One* (2008) the privileged social stratum is still the target that Feng mocks and satirizes, his focus has clearly shifted from characters at the bottom of the social scale to the new middle class. In this film, Qin is a millionaire with years of overseas living experience, who does not need to worry about money or go to work every day; Liang is a young, pretty air stewardess, which in China commands a handsome salary and respectable social status. In the film, they meet in various places, including a tastefully furnished restaurant, an elegant tea house and a picturesque private members' club. Clearly these places are carefully selected to depict the refined lifestyle of the Chinese upper middle class. Qin and Liang's trip to scenic Hokkaido is not only the climax of the film, but also the culmination of this showcasing of a stylish middle-class life. Using many bird's-eye-view shots, the film traces Qin and Liang's journey in an SUV against the breathtaking beauty of Hokkaido. For Liang, this journey and her attempted suicide are a breakaway from her past; for Qin, this journey is a romantic start of his new relationship with Liang (see Figure 7.1). Although this tie-in for the Hokkaido local tourist industry has been scorned by viewers,⁶ Hokkaido's peaceful and exotic scenery does fit well with the romantic theme of the film, and echoes the recent trend of overseas tours among the newly affluent Chinese. With expanded urbanization and commercialization, leisure travel is no longer simply a way temporarily to escape from cities, but has now also become a consumer choice to display wealth and taste. Overseas leisure travel, in particular, becomes a conspicuous, aspirational form of consumption for many. According to a report by the Hokkaido local authority, the number of Chinese tourists staying near Lake Akan in Hokkaido, where the film was shot, jumped from 1,401 in 2008 to 10,221 in 2009 as an effect of this film (Hokkaido Bureau of Economy Trade and Industry 2011, 56). Clearly, despite some of the audience's contempt for the commercial side of the film, some of its elements speak to filmgoers' expectations and exert impact on the market (the Chinese overseas travel industry in this case).



FIGURE 7.1 *If You Are the One* (Feng 2008): Liang (Qi Shu) sits in the back of an SUV on her trip to Hokkaido with Qin (You Ge)

In this vein, *If You Are The One* has been successful in securing its sponsor and audience at the same time, although this success does not mean that audiences are taken in. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno note, 'The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them' (1973, 167). After all, the mass urban audience that Feng aims at is not necessarily people who have the ability to copy the upper-middle-class lifestyle depicted. For this type of audience, an enjoyable two-hour film can be a temporary relief from mundane life. Back to reality where they have to strive to make ends meet, many will also be as cynical as the above-mentioned film critics with regards to the so-called middle-class lifestyle. This is probably why, in this film, Feng tries to offer an easily digestible depiction, but, at the same time, tries to appeal to the mass audience through multiple humorous jibes at the rich. This apparent paradox in the film constitutes a good example of an emerging Chinese middlebrow cinema responding to the expanded lower middle class in contemporary China. If, as discussed above, the Chinese media has created a middle-class culture to support the nation's economic reform and the state's construction of a middle-class civility, this culture is now also shaping the Chinese film industry, which then generates new forms and content to adapt to the community that is thought to be consuming these products. The expansion of the Chinese lower middle class and their consumption choices have inevitably affected Chinese middlebrow culture, which has translated into a film industry that seeks to deliver a combination of commercial appeal and high production values.

Dislocating justice: Let The Bullets Fly (Wen 2010)

At first view, *Let The Bullets Fly* (2010) may seem an odd choice in this discussion of the middlebrow. Set in a small town in remote western China in the 1920s, the film tells the story of a group of bandits led by Pocky Zhang (Jiang Wen, also the director) and their conflict with Huang Silang, a local warlord and opium dealer (Chow Yun-Fat). Zhang and his gang derail a train and hijack Ma Bangde (Ge You), the new County Governor of Goose Town, and his wife (Carina Lau). To save himself, Ma tells Zhang that he is only the advisor of the Governor, and the real Governor, who purchased his post, died when the train crashed. Ma also persuades Zhang to disguise himself as the new Governor of Goose Town, with Ma as his private advisor, promising that he will help Zhang make a fortune in a short time through receiving bribes and squeezing local people. However, when Zhang and his gang arrive at Goose Town, they immediately find that the whole town is in fact under the control of Huang Silang, a ruthless crime warlord living in a fortified citadel. Despite being a bandit, Zhang is not really interested in bullying the poor. He begins to develop a social conscience and tries to establish order and justice in Goose Town, which undermines Huang's power and control. Zhang and Huang end up in a tug of war over the control of the town involving gunplay, thievery, disguise, double-spying and various outlandish stratagems, while the townspeople take a wait-and-see attitude, and prepare to switch allegiances to

the winning side. At the end, Zhang puts up a show of attacking Huang's citadel and makes the locals believe that Huang has been beheaded. The locals then follow Zhang and break into Huang's citadel and force Huang to commit suicide.

This is an entertaining action comedy, then, with abundant dark and coarse humour satirizing corruption, revolution and public indifference, as well as slapstick comedy. Its gunplay and chases are spectacular and full of energy. Its director, Jiang Wen, a popular actor turned art-house director, is well known for the dark humour and theatricality of his films, although they also have a reputation of not being accessible to the public. Compared to previous art films that he directed, *阳光灿烂的日子 / In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) and *鬼子来了 / Devils on the Doorstep* (2000), *Let The Bullets Fly* (2010) seems to be more accessible and, indeed, it became the highest-grossing domestic movie in Chinese history, with profits of around 664 million RMB (around 66.4 million GBP). All this seems a far cry from the new middle-class and middlebrow culture discussed above. However, what is interesting about this film is not the fact that it became a blockbuster, but the fact that it attracted so much considered attention from both the public and critics that it inspired a collective interpretation. As Shelley Kraicer (2011) notes, this film 'connected with audiences and critics in an unprecedented way, earning a kind of across-the-board critical and public acclaim' that one seldom sees in China. It is this contribution to considered public debate – which is remarkably politically critical, given continued censorship – that I identify as middlebrow.

While critics have tended to focus on the narratives and characters of *Let The Bullets Fly*, the public, whose views are expressed on fan sites and blogs,⁷ has been interested in exploring more sensitive areas, in particular the film's subtly satirical symbols and political allegories. For example, the scene of a train compartment pulled by horses, which appears at the beginning and end, is regarded as a metaphor for China as a modernizing country driven by outdated ideology, because the phrase 'horse-train', pronounced as 'ma-lie' in Chinese, is also the shorthand for Marxism-Leninism in Chinese. The masks that Zhang and the other bandits wear, which are decorated with patterns of Mah-jong from one dot to nine dots, 筒子 (*tongzi*, with a similar pronunciation to *tongzhi*, comrade), have also been interpreted as a symbol that indicates that Zhang's group is made up of the real representatives of the Chinese masses, just as Mah-jong is considered the quintessence of Chinese culture. The name of the town, 鹅城 (*e-cheng*, Goose Town), and the repeated appearance of the image of geese, are seen as an allegory of China dominated by the ideology of the Soviet Union period, because not only is the map of China similar to the shape of a bird, but the character 鹅 (*e*, goose) has the same pronunciation as 俄 (*e*, an abbreviation of 苏俄 [*su'e* Soviet Union]). The above interpretations have been widely circulated in the public domain, particularly online, and have stimulated, in turn, further creative readings of the film, from the script and the objects used in the *mise en scène* to the names of characters and specific scenes.⁸ Despite the film producer's insistence that the film is just for entertainment, and has no political agenda (Guo 2011), it seems that the director deliberately planted clues in the story for the audience to follow.

For example, the film repeatedly stresses the idea of ‘公平’ (justice), especially through the character Zhang. The first time is when Zhang has just entered Goose Town as the new governor, and decides to reinstate the drum in the county court for the public to report their grievances. Zhang claims that ‘I am going to give justice to everyone. The drum for grievances cannot just be a decoration. It should let everyone voice their grievances and then return justice to the public’.⁹ The second time is when he tries to distribute money taken from the rich to the locals and mobilize them. Seeing the locals kowtowing, Zhang fires a gunshot into the air and shouts, ‘Stop kneeling! The emperors are gone, no one is worth your kneeling! I’m not worth your kneeling! I came to Goose Town for three things only: justice, justice, justice!’ (see Figure 7.2).¹⁰ The third mention of justice is connected to the death of Liu Zi, who is Zhang’s foster son and also the youngest member of his gang. Hu Wan, one of Huang’s henchmen, accuses Xiao Liu of eating two bowls of rice noodles but only paying for one. To escalate the dispute, Hu shouts, ‘Just because you are the son of the governor, you ate an extra bowl of noodles without having paid for it. This is unfair. We want justice, justice!’.¹¹ Eventually the argument forces Liu Zi to resort to *hara-kiri* to prove his innocence before dropping dead. However, despite these repetitions, the film does not explore further the idea of ‘justice’ other than as revenge, but slyly propels viewers to seek and interpret the signs of ‘injustice’: from the six official titles that Ma buys to Huang and his henchmen’s bullying of the locals and the locals’ indifference and apathy in the noodle shop. These suggested scenes have been seized upon by viewers and widely discussed on fan sites, further stimulating analysis of the film. Jiang Fangzhou, a well-known Chinese writer and also the associate editor of *News Weekly*, writes in her Weibo account (China’s Twitter-like microblogging service): ‘The success of this film is attributable to the fact that Jiang made everyone feel flattered, thinking the film speaks for them: fans of Mao Zedong can see the shadow of Mao; fans of the US see the image of Washington; reformists see reform; revolutionists see revolution; populists see populism; “the rabble” find their saviour; and the SAPPRT¹² reads in it the



FIGURE 7.2 *Let the Bullets Fly* (Wen 2010): Zhang (Jiang Wen) announces: ‘I came to Goose Town for three things only: justice, justice, justice!’

message of the glorified Party' (2010).¹³ As Jiang suggests, the commercial success of this film, and the fact that it was not censored by China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, is largely because Wen skilfully blends slapstick and satire to accommodate multiple interpretations, while carefully toeing the Party's political line. The fact that a film mocking 'justice' is so successful across the country indicates that injustice remains an urgent question in contemporary China. Thus while *If You Are The One* is middlebrow in its portrayal and critique of middle-class consumption, swashbuckling popular comedy *Let The Bullets Fly* is uninterested in the middle-class consumption that the Party seeks to promote. Rather, it is middlebrow as it fuses accessible entertainment with the serious matter of exposing injustice. An analysis of the considerable online comments generated by the film reveal a literate and considered – and political – response to it on the part of viewers that audience studies have shown to be newly urban and middle class.

In 2011, well-known journalist Zhongxiao Guo published an article titled 'Let The Bullets Fly Sets Off a Carnival of Political Allegory' as the cover story of the Hong Kong-based magazine *Asia Weekly*. He suggested that although viewers' interpretations might distort the original intention of this film, and weaken the exploration of its value, they are also reflections of prevailing social concerns and expressions of surging public feelings. Although Guo does not make clear what kind of value may be undermined, his observation regarding viewers' excitement in deciphering the content of the film rather than its artistic form is timely. As he notes, *Let The Bullets Fly* serves as an outlet for viewers to articulate their views on the reality of contemporary China. Film viewing is no longer, if indeed it ever was, simply the passive consumption of products, but rather an activity that allows viewers to participate in refined cultural discourses. Film interpretation therefore becomes a social act for educated viewers to distinguish themselves from ordinary filmgoers who are merely seeking two hours of entertainment, although their interpretations are mainly based on content rather than form, due to their limited familiarity with the vocabulary of the field. Within the constraints imposed by censorship, it is also a tentatively political act.

This engagement of the educated middle-class viewer is subtly changing the Chinese film industry. In Susan Sontag's words, this kind of interpretation 'tames the work of art' and makes it more 'manageable, conformable' (1994, 8). When Wen was asked to comment on the box-office failure of his film *太阳照样升起 / The Sun Also Rises* (2007), he claimed that it 'was not made to be understood, but to move the audience' (quoted in Liu 2010). However, in an interview with *Times* magazine, he joked that *Let The Bullets Fly* 'would be hard not to understand this time' (quoted in Liu 2010). Jiang's statement shows that Chinese film professionals, including art-house cinema directors, are gradually shifting from public political cultivation and moral education to fostering and satisfying a broad-based popular, but intelligent, audience. The strong response from Chinese viewers to the political allegories in the film shows that Chinese middlebrow culture is not simply an imitation of the west, a complaint one often sees about the new Chinese middle classes' consumption of imported luxury products to mimic the lifestyle of

the middle class in the west. Instead, the aggravated economic disparities and new social-political tensions resulting from China's economic reforms have exerted a significant impact on the aspirant and affluent new middle class as well as the burgeoning middlebrow culture in China.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that China's longstanding emphasis on inclusiveness and political conformity in state-funded art has undermined the cultivation of distinction and aesthetics in Chinese cinema, and made film not only a mass entertainment, but also a tool of political inculcation and moral education. However, China's economic reform and urbanization in the past decades has forced its film industry to adjust its policy and focus on the urban audience, particularly the affluent new middle class. This new urban focus in fact echoes the new prevailing discourse about middle-class civility supported by the state and the cultural industry. However, it also poses problems and challenges to Chinese film professionals due to market pressures and the enlarging but also increasingly stratified middle class. On the one hand, the nouveaux riches have to face the pressure of justifying their social status as well as cultural identity in a society still dominated by a mass culture that emphasizes equality rather than distinction. On the other, the division between middlebrow and lowbrow is increasingly blurred due to the expansion of the lower middle class in China, whose members have high educational backgrounds. All this makes it difficult to talk about a middlebrow culture as separate from mass culture in China. Films such as *If You Are The One* and *Let The Bullets Fly* are good examples of how filmmakers try to appeal to the masses and engage the new educated middle-class audience at the same time. Although these two films have very different styles, both of them address problems and issues that preoccupied the middle class during China's social and economic transformations. In this sense, Chinese middlebrow cinema plays a mediating role in addressing the cultural anxiety of the new middle class, and at the same time provides a substitute for their pursuit of distinction in reality.

Notes

- 1 中眉 (*zhongmei*) is the literal translation of the word 'middlebrow' into Chinese (*zhong*: middle; *mei*: brow); while the term 平眉 (*pingmei*), although it retains the literal translation of 'brow', replaces the idea of 'middle' with 平 (*ping*: 'flat', 'equal', 'at the same level').
- 2 This was published in the introduction of a special issue of *Renditions* (17/18, 1982), then re-published as an edited book, *Chinese Middlebrow Fiction, From the Ch'ing and Early Republican Eras* in 1984.
- 3 For more information on this discussion, see Lu (2002), Li (2009), Zhou (2005) and Yan (2008).
- 4 Feng Xiaogang is a renowned commercial film director as well as a successful script writer and TV drama director in China. Apart from the film *If You Are The One* (2008) and its sequel (2010), he also directed films such as *A Sign* (2000), *Cell Phone* (2003), *A World Without Thieves* (2004), *The Banquet* (2006) and *Aftershock* (2010).

- 5 New Year film (*He sui pian*) refers to films, usually comedy films, designed to be released and exhibited specifically during the Chinese New Year Holiday. Feng's 甲方乙方 / *Party A, Party B* (1997) is the first New Year film in mainland China and was the box-office champion that year. It has now become a very popular genre in Chinese cinema.
- 6 This response from some Chinese viewers is not difficult to understand, given the long-lasting tensions and hostility between these two Asian neighbours resulting from the war between them 70 years ago and the prevailing tension over a set of disputed islands in the East China Sea.
- 7 For example, on www.mtime.com, one of the major Chinese fan sites, on which, at the time of writing (July 2014), there are 1,833 reviews and 13,209 comments on this film. Individuals' analyses of this film can also be found on various websites (e.g. www.douban.com and twww.tieba.baidu.com) and personal blogs, e.g. '姜文的王朝永远不会到来-《让子弹飞》的一些暗线、隐喻、野心和吹捧' (Jiang Wen's Dynasty Will Not Come: Hidden Clues, Metaphors, Ambition and Puffery in *Let The Bullets Fly*) by Xi Liu (user name) (<http://movie.douban.com/review/4534425/>); '此时此刻我们去浦东—《让子弹飞》的隐喻' (At this Moment, We Are Leaving for Pudong: Metaphors in *Let The Bullets Fly*) by Kidwell (user name) (<http://movie.douban.com/review/4545366/>); '《让子弹飞》中的十大历史隐喻' (The Ten Historical Metaphors in *Let The Bullets Fly*) by Jin Manlou (user name) (<http://blog.ifeng.com/article/9488478.html>); and '《让子弹飞》的经典解读' (The Classic Interpretation of *Let The Bullets Fly*) by aqssm (user name) (http://bbs.tiexue.net/post_4809999_1.html). Websites consulted 29 July 2014.
- 8 E.g. '猜《子弹》' (An Analysis of *Let The Bullets Fly*) by Du Junfei, http://blog.caijing.com.cn/expert_article-151525-15099.shtml. Consulted 29 July 2014.
- 9 '我要给所有人公平,有名无实的冤鼓,不能只是一个摆设,要让大家来鸣冤,要给大家主持公道。'
- 10 '不准跪!皇上都没了,没人值得你们跪!我也不值得你们跪!我来鹅城只办三件事。公平!公平!还是公平!'
- 11 '县长的儿子,吃了两碗粉却只给一碗的钱,这就是不公平,我们要公平,要公平!'
- 12 State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television of the People's Republic of China.
- 13 '姜的牛逼之处,在于这片毛粉见毛,美国粉见华盛顿,改良派见改良,革命派见革命,民粹们见民粹,屁民见救世主,广电们见没有某党就没有新中国,各派都喜闻乐见觉得替自己说了话。'

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