British Journal of Chinese Studies, Vol. 12.1, January 2022
ISSN 2048-0601

Translating Wang Xiaoshuai: From Third Front to Cultural Revolution

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Abstract

Since the turn of the century, there has been an upturn of cultural production about the Third Front (1964-80) within China, yet mainstream knowledge of this military-industrial project and former state secret remains limited, particularly outside of China. This article examines the English-language reception of Wang Xiaoshuai's "Third Front trilogy" of films, arguing that – despite the moniker – reviewers have tended to marginalise the Third Front and focus instead on the Cultural Revolution proper (1966-68), creating a slippage between these two distinct events. This "translation" of campaign time has occurred because of English-language reviewers' assumptions about the Mao era and how it should be depicted by Chinese artists, as well as a Chinese-English subtitling strategy in one film that anticipates and encourages these same assumptions about the Mao era. Moreover, despite generally adopting a critical tone towards the CCP, film reviewers have reproduced – and propagated – the judgement of the 1981 Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of the Party since the Founding of the PRC that the Cultural Revolution was "ten years of turmoil". Consequently, not only do these reviewers enfold the Third Front into the Cultural Revolution, they also homogenise the complexities of the Cultural Revolution. In doing so, film reviewers unwittingly provide the Party with useful assistance in globally disseminating and maintaining its version of PRC history, as well as hindering the emergence of alternative accounts of the Mao era.

Keywords: Wang Xiaoshuai, Cultural Revolution, film reception, discourse, translation, reception, Third Front

Since the turn of the century, there has been a significant upturn of interest in the Third Front (*sanxian* 三线）within China, with various academic articles, films, documentaries and museums devoted to this huge Maoist military-industrial project. However, public knowledge of the Third Front, as a former state secret which involved the mass relocation of key industries from big cities into remote areas, remains limited, particularly outside of China. This article focuses on Wang Xiaoshuai's "Third Front trilogy" of *Shanghai Dreams* (*Qinghong* 青红), *11 Flowers* (*Wo shiyi* 我十一), and *Red Amnesia* (*Chuangruzhe* 闯入者), to explore how long-standing assumptions about the historical development of the PRC have led to the marginalisation of the Third Front in the English-language reception of these films. It asks three questions: what assumptions about Mao-era China do English-language critics reveal in their reviews of these films, how have these assumptions been shaped, and what are the consequences of these assumptions? With a particular emphasis on *11 Flowers*, I argue that film reviewers have viewed Wang's Third Front films through the lens of the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, despite generally adopting a critical stance towards the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), these film reviewers' understanding of the Cultural Revolution

reflects – and propagates – the reductive judgement of the 1981 *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of the Party since the Founding of the PRC* that the Cultural Revolution was ten years of turmoil. As a consequence, not only do film reviewers enfold the Third Front into the Cultural Revolution, they also homogenise the complexities of the Cultural Revolution. In doing so, despite their antagonistic stance towards the CCP, film reviewers unwittingly provide the Party with useful assistance in globally disseminating and maintaining its version of PRC history.

In the following paragraphs, I provide contextual information on the Third Front, Wang Xiaoshuai and the English-language reviews of his trilogy, as well as highlighting the importance of discourse and translation in shaping the reception of these films. In the second section, I introduce the conflation of the Third Front and Cultural Revolution that begins in reviews of *Shanghai Dreams*. In the third section, I examine how the translation of *11 Flowers*' subtitles into English encourages reviewers to dwell on the Cultural Revolution rather than the Third Front. In the fourth section, I argue that reviewers of *11 Flowers*, having been guided towards the *topic* of the Cultural Revolution by the subtitles, are additionally guided by the CCP's 1981 *Resolution* and globally-circulated "scar literature" in their judgements of what *type* of Cultural Revolution should be depicted by Chinese filmmakers. In the final section, I examine how the Third Front is completely eclipsed by the Cultural Revolution in reviews of *Red Amnesia* and reflect on the difficulties of publicising stories about the Mao era that do not align with existing dominant discourses.

The Third Front resulted from Mao Zedong's concerns during the early 1960s about the nation's vulnerability to aerial strikes, especially nuclear, as tensions escalated with both the United States and the Soviet Union. With industry concentrated on the eastern seaboard, Mao believed that a few well-placed strikes could potentially severely undermine China's capacity to mount a military response. In 1964, Mao rejected a draft of the Third Five-Year Plan (1965-70) and called for specific revisions, including the division of the country into First, Second and Third Fronts (see Naughton, 1988). The latter, in marked contrast to the post-Great Leap austerity policies of the previous years, was to be a massive self-sufficient military-industrial complex created almost from scratch amid some of China's most inhospitable terrain. Nearly 40% of the national capital construction budget was subsequently allocated to the Third Front between 1964 and 1980. The central government demanded that key Third Front factories – rather than being located within existing cities – should be adjacent to mountains, dispersed, and hidden (*kaoshan, fensan, yinbi* 靠山、分散、隐蔽), and in certain cases, located in caves (*jin dong* 进洞). With a lack of existing industrial infrastructure and knowledge in many inland provinces, an estimated four million urban workers were relocated, along with family members, from major cities to the Third Front, while another 11 million residents served as temporary construction workers (see Meyskens, 2020: 237–44).

Since the turn of the century, a burgeoning Chinese-language academic corpus (see Zhang Yong, 2018) on the Third Front has come to exist alongside a growing number of artistic works. The director Wang Xiaoshuai has emerged as a trailblazer in the latter field, as a former "child of the Third Front" (*sanxian zidi* 三线子弟). During my interview with Wang in summer 2018, he noted the previous lack of creative works on the Third Front before the release of his film *Shanghai Dreams*. He further argued that this film's success at the 2005 Cannes Film Festival had generated significant interest towards the Third Front within China. [1] He has also cited a sense of personal responsibility for raising awareness of the Third Front (Shi Zhiwen,

[1] Personal interview, Wang Xiaoshuai, 2018.

2012: 65). During the 1960s, Wang's mother was relocated from a Shanghai factory – along with many other workers – to a new Third Front factory to the northeast of Guiyang city. With Wang just four months old at the time, his father quit his job as a teacher in the Shanghai Theatre Academy and the family moved together to Guizhou.[2] Wang's later departure from Guizhou as a teenager seems to have heightened rather than diminished his sense of connection with the Third Front (Wang Xiaoshuai & Li Ren, 2005: 50-51).

Given this personal connection, Wang is painstaking in his filmic depiction of everyday life in the Third Front, rather than simply using its "rusticated factories" (Naughton, 1988: 383) as aesthetically-pleasing backdrops. And given his standing on the international film circuit, Wang has been able to disseminate his representations of the Third Front to a more global audience than most other creators. However, English-language critics have generally missed the centrality of the Third Front to Wang's trilogy, and instead have treated his films – particularly *11 Flowers* and *Red Amnesia* – as mainly concerned with the turmoil and violence of the Cultural Revolution. Existing academic studies of Wang's Third Front trilogy, meanwhile, have focused on the films themselves rather than their reception. These studies have variously explored the inter-family conflict and longing for homeland in *Shanghai Dreams* (Letteri, 2010), the employment of a child's perspective in *11 Flowers* (He, 2018; Meng Jing, 2020: chap. 3), and the spectre of the Cultural Revolution in *Red Amnesia* (Wang Yanjie, 2017).

In order to study the English-language reception of Wang Xiaoshuai's trilogy, I searched for reviews and synopses of all three films. The 114 texts I found have mainly been penned by professional film writers for newspapers (e.g. *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*), entertainment magazines (e.g. *Time Out*, *Slant*, *Variety*), film festivals and online entertainment sites (e.g. *Cinematical*), with amateur reviewers (e.g. on *Imbd* and *Letterboxd*) in the minority. The vast majority of these texts are not written by China experts, and it is this quality that makes analysis of them illuminating, since it offers a snapshot of non-expert, English-language discourse on PRC history and cinema. How the PRC, its history and its cultural production are translated and reconstructed in non-domestic mainstream news and entertainment sites is an important issue; such media are more accessible not only than most academic journals but also Wang's own films, and so warrant at least the same level of scrutiny and critique.[3]

The majority of the analysed texts appear in publications that are based in either the US or the UK, with a remaining handful in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Hong Kong. Apart from national differences and the distinction between professional and amateur writers, there are also differences in publication scope, with some covering Wang's films alongside more mainstream, English-language films and others evincing a commitment to "indie" or "international" filmmaking. However, while these forms of difference have certainly influenced writing styles, they do not appear to have exerted significant influence on the overlooking of the Third Front and amplification of the Cultural Revolution by reviewers. Since I followed an inductive method when coding these texts, their focus on the Cultural Revolution has also heavily informed the direction of my own article. A handful of Mainland China-produced English-language articles about Wang's films are quite different in their approach and are not included in the sample of 114 texts. Although I briefly examine this

[2] Personal interview, Wang Xiaoshuai, 2018.

[3] By comparison, Daniel Vukovich's work (2012, chap. 6) on the reception of *In the Heat of the Sun* and other cinematic depictions of the Mao period shares commonalities with this article, but mainly focuses on the judgements of academics with extensive knowledge of China.

handful of texts in the final section, the reception of Wang's trilogy in Mainland China itself is largely beyond the scope of this article.

After analysing the reviews, I revisited the films and scrutinized their accompanying promotional materials, searching for clues that might have pointed reviewers away from the Third Front and towards the Cultural Revolution. I came to the conclusion that "translation proper", that is, the "interpretation of signs by means of some other language" (Jakobson, 1959: 233), played an important role in guiding reviewers of *11 Flowers* away from the Third Front and towards the Cultural Revolution. This is an important finding as it validates the claims of translation theorists that studying "cultural translation", that is, the transfer of meaning from one cultural context to another, is insufficient if it does not include consideration of translation proper.[4] However, in this particular case study, translation proper is ultimately subservient to existing discourse, by which I mean a conceptualisation of the Mao period which is so socially embedded that its essential logic frequently goes unquestioned. The translation of these films does not create a new discourse about the Mao era, but rather facilitates the reproduction of popular pre-existing assumptions, particularly the simplistic characterization of the Cultural Revolution as ten years of political chaos and violence. Whereas some studies have highlighted the transformation of discourse through translation, this discourse on the Cultural Revolution is dominant in both source and target languages, albeit with different accompanying emphases, and thus particularly pervasive. [5]

Reviewing Shanghai Dreams: Conflations of Third Front and Cultural Revolution

Set in Guizhou during the early 1980s, *Shanghai Dreams*, the first of Wang Xiaoshuai's trilogy, focuses on the conflict between a relocated first-generation Third Front worker Wu Zemin – who plots with his colleagues to return home to Shanghai – and his daughter Wu Qinghong, for whom Guizhou is the only home she has ever known. This home is a Third Front work unit in Guiyang's Wudang district, the site of the filmmaker's own factory upbringing. As Qinghong navigates the hilly path between school and home within the work unit, she is followed by the camera and her father Zemin, the latter obsessively determined to ensure that she does not do anything to jeopardize his longed-for return to Shanghai. He particularly wants to ensure that she does not tie herself to Guizhou by engaging in any romantic encounters with Fan Xiaogen, a local teenage boy who works in the factory. Zemin's disciplinarian efforts backfire with awful consequences when Qinghong sneaks away one night to end her relationship with Xiaogen, who – in a resentful rage – rapes her. The final scene shows Qinghong and her family leaving the Third Front work unit in a truck, while a broadcast announces the impending execution of Xiaogen.

In their consideration of *Shanghai Dreams*, 16 out of 37 English-language reviews mention the "Third Front" or "Third Line". This is a low number since the film is entirely set within a Third Front work unit save for a single scene, although it is still proportionately far more than for reviews of *11 Flowers* and *Red Amnesia*. Those few reviewers that go into detail on the Third Front describe it as a response to the threat of war with the Soviet Union; they do

[4] See Buden and Nowotny (2009) on the purported merits of "cultural translation". For some critical responses to this proposal, see Chesterman (2010), Pratt (2010), and Pym (2010). For a complete denunciation of "cultural translation", see Trivedi (2007).

[5] For studies of the transformation of discourse as it moves between Chinese and English, see for example Sang (1999) on the translation of European sexological ideas about homosexuality into Chinese during the Republican Era, and Pan Li (2015) on the translation of English news sources about China's human rights record by the PRC publication *Reference News*.

not mention that it was also a response to the threat of war with the United States. The relative visibility of the Third Front in reviews of *Shanghai Dreams*, compared to reviews of *11 Flowers* and *Red Amnesia*, may well be due to the inclusion in the opening credits of a long introductory textual description of the Third Front. It is a stark introduction. White text on black background is accompanied first by silence and then by a broadcast of radio calisthenics, before eventually giving way to a bleak shot of an empty dormitory corridor and then a shot of Qinghong exercising at school.

This introductory text provides the historical context of the Third Front, as a relocation of urban workers during the mid-1960s, not just for viewers of *Shanghai Dreams* but for viewers of Wang's entire trilogy. The second movie, *11 Flowers*, released six years later, opens with a much shorter introductory text whose English translation contains no reference to the Third Front, while the third movie, *Red Amnesia*, has no opening written text at all. In addition to this introductory text, there are other elements of *Shanghai Dreams* that establish clear links with the other two films, indicating that Wang intended these films to be appreciated together, as a triad of perspectives on the Third Front, despite the lack of chronological progression and recurring characters.[6] While a number of PRC academics have commented on these links (for instance Wu Yan, 2016: 75, 77; Wang Xiaoshuai & Liu Xiaolei, 2012: 49–51), English-language reviewers have not. Regardless of the director's intentions, the release of these films over the course of a decade and the rapid turnover of online critics have meant that English-language reviewers have almost never commented on continuities between the films, other than a claimed continuous focus on the Cultural Revolution.

Since *Shanghai Dreams* is set in the early 1980s, it is slightly surprising that the Cultural Revolution is mentioned in 13 out of 37 reviews and synopses. Some brief comment on the Cultural Revolution is perhaps inevitable, given the dominance of a CCP-led narrative which presents the Cultural Revolution as the chaos that explains and justifies the transition to the Reform era (see Schoenhals, 2002). However, a number of reviews additionally claim that the relocation of Qinghong's family to Guiyang occurred during, and even *because of*, the Cultural Revolution. State-led migration and the subsequent attempts of migrants to return home is a central theme in *Shanghai Dreams* and even the trilogy as a whole. However, assertions that Third Front migration occurred "thanks to the Cultural Revolution" (Mattin, 2006) or "as part of the Cultural Revolution" (Brooks, 2006) also indicate a tendency among reviewers – which is prominent in the reception of *11 Flowers* – to amplify the Cultural Revolution to the point that it eclipses the Third Front. Since the Third Front campaign began in 1964, its workers not only began to relocate before the Cultural Revolution but would also have continued to relocate irrespective of the Cultural Revolution's existence. With Qinghong aged 19 in *Shanghai Dreams* (set in the early 1980s), and her father Zemin saying in one scene that he moved from Shanghai to Guiyang when she was a new-born baby, Wang Xiaoshuai presents the family as belonging to the first batches of Third Front migrants, who moved before the disruption of the Cultural Revolution proper (1966-68). Although the blunt force of the film's textual introduction is such that a number of reviewers recognise its Third Front theme, some reviewers still preferred to focus on the Cultural Revolution. Moreover, the latter group become the clear majority for *11 Flowers* and *Red Amnesia*, as preconceptions about the Mao era, together with issues of translation proper, reconfigure Wang's sometimes oblique stories of the Third Front as stories of the Cultural Revolution at its most tumultuous.

[6] For example, there are clear parallels in name, character, and story between Qinghong in *Shanghai Dreams* and Juehong in *11 Flowers.*

Subtitling 11 Flowers: The Cultural Revolution Eclipses the Third Front

Despite winning the Jury Prize at the Cannes Film Festival, *Shanghai Dreams* did not generally receive positive assessments from English-language reviewers, who complained about the slow pace and lack of clear narrative. Such complaints were far less common in the more positive reviews of *11 Flowers*, Wang Xiaoshuai's second Third Front film, which is again set in Guizhou. This time around, English-language reviewers found a clear narrative in the film. However, it was not that of the Third Front, but rather of the Cultural Revolution.

Set in 1975 and 1976, *11 Flowers* does at least take place during the long version of the Cultural Revolution. The Chinese title, literally "I am 11", refers to the age of the child protagonist Wang Han, who lives in a Third Front work unit with his parents. A chance encounter sees Wang Han's life become intertwined with that of Jueqiang, a teenager who is on the run after murdering a factory cadre in revenge for the rape of his sister, Juehong. Everything in the film either takes place within the Third Front work unit or the adjacent countryside, with the exception of a single scene in a local prison.

In the reception of *11 Flowers,* the Third Front is only mentioned in seven out of 48 reviews (and in 13 paragraphs within these texts). In contrast, the Cultural Revolution is mentioned in 43 of these 48 reviews (and in 75 paragraphs). I argue below that the type of Cultural Revolution envisaged by reviewers has little to do with what is presented in the film. However, their focus on the Cultural Revolution rather than the Third Front is actively encouraged by the ways in which the Chinese-English subtitlers address an issue of "translation proper". Below is the crucial contextualising opening text of *11 Flowers*:

> Chinese subtitles: "中国西南/ 三线建设某兵工厂/ 1975 年"
> English subtitle: "1975, Southwest China/ One year before the end of the Cultural Revolution"
> My more direct English translation: "Southwest China, a Third Front military factory, 1975"

The opening English subtitle provides a fairly straightforward translation of map space (southwest China) and year (1975). However, the socio-spatial location ("a certain military factory of the Third Front") has been removed entirely and replaced by a clarification that 1975 was "one year before the end of the Cultural Revolution". The more general location of "Southwest China" is also de-emphasized, having been moved from the front of the subtitle to be sandwiched between "1975" and the added reference to the Cultural Revolution.

This subtitle is crucial because there is little further historical context until the very end of the film. *11 Flowers* somewhat aligns with Cui Shuqin's assessment of "new-generation filmmaking", namely that films by so-called sixth-generation directors are often not so much directly concerned with wider socio-political events as with everyday family life (Cui Shuqin, 2006: 101). Rather than recounting the political events of the late Cultural Revolution, Wang Xiaoshuai focuses on the life of 11-year-old protagonist Wang Han, including his relations with his family, his friends and the fugitive Jueqiang, whose crime is not political. Moreover, the term "Third Front [construction)" (*sanxian jianshe* 三线建设) is specialist terminology somewhat unsuited to the register of everyday non-work life and so is absent from the film's dialogue. This absence leaves the social-political context open to interpretation by reviewers, who also lack in-depth knowledge of the Mao era. It also heightens the importance of the opening subtitle translation, as encouraging non-Chinese-reading reviewers to make

themselves comfortable amid a well-worn discourse of the Mao period as the Cultural Revolution, and of the Cultural Revolution as ten years of turmoil.

The team of Chinese-English subtitling translators have made omissions and additions as part of a strategy that adapts the source text to not only the lexis and grammar but also the dominant discourses of the target language. The producer of *11 Flowers*, Isabelle Glachant, has described the subtitling of the film as a process of "adaptation" rather than translation, with the idea being "to help a foreign audience to better understand the background or not to bother them with too much information that would seem obscure or too local". This process included omission of reference to the Third Front and insertion of the Cultural Revolution: "The Third Front movement is known by very few foreign audiences. The Cultural Revolution is easier to understand and gives faster an idea of the situation and time to a foreign audience" (Isabelle Glachant, 2019, personal communication).

In fact, this process of "adaptation" is the most common contemporary strategy of translating into the English language, with its emphasis on the "domestication" of the source text for a target audience. The translation theorist Lawrence Venuti (1995) has critically described the ways in which this strategy works to conceal a source text's cultural and linguistic differences, and also to reduce the visibility of the translator, to the extent that the ideal translation is one that does not read like a translation at all. Drawing on the early-19th century thought of Fredrich Schleiermacher, Venuti has instead advocated a foreignizing strategy, whereby the translator refuses to smooth over difference for the sake of fluency, and thus disrupts the dominant discourses of the target language. The following quotation from Schleiermacher summarises the differences between foreignizing and domesticating strategies of translation: "Either the translator leaves the writer in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him [foreignization]; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him [domestication]" (Schleiermacher, [1813] 2012: 49).

Whereas Venuti's critique was primarily aimed at the domestication of literary texts, Abé Mark Nornes has aimed a similar critique at the translation of film dialogue, arguing that "subtitlers have developed a method of translation that conspires to hide its work - along with its ideological assumptions - from its own reader-spectators….It is a practice of translation that smooths over its textual violence and domesticates all otherness while it pretends to bring the audience to an experience of the foreign". For Nornes, such mainstream contemporary subtitling is "corrupt" (Nornes, 2004: 449). In the context of Chinese film, Akiyama Tamako has engaged with the theories of Nornes while reflecting on her own Japanese subtitling of Wang Bin's documentary *Fengming, a Chinese Memoir*. Akiyama writes about her translation of the film's very first line of dialogue as an attempt to avoid "corrupt subtitling" as well as her astonishment at how her translation subsequently informed reviewers' understanding of the film (Akiyama, 2018: 253-4).

With *11 Flowers* too, the opening subtitles appears to exert considerable influence on reviewers; the translation both anticipates and encourages a discourse that understands the Mao period mainly in terms of the Cultural Revolution. My point here is not to condemn the translators of *11 Flowers* for deliberately distorting the film's main theme, but rather to demonstrate how difficult it is to translate in a way that simultaneously maintains textual coherence, generates audience interest, *and* avoids enfolding the source text into dominant discourses that are already known to the target audience. In terms of textual coherence, Akiyama notes the restrictions of time and space faced by subtitlers; the bottom of the screen and viewer cognition can only accommodate so much text, and the translator has to assume

that the text will not be re-read (Akiyama, 2018: 251–53, 256; see also Kuo, 2018). The comprehensive textual introduction to the Third Front in the opening credits of *Shanghai Dreams* partially surmounts these restrictions by having monolingual subtitles, multiple pages and zero aesthetic distractions. *11 Flowers*, in contrast, has bilingual subtitles and a more dynamic audio-visual accompaniment to its introductory text. Following reviewer comments about the slowness and drabness of *Shanghai Dreams*, the briefer, more stylish textual introductory to *11 Flowers* reduces the possibility of a bored audience. At the same time, this reduction of subtitling space means that subtitlers cannot fit in contextualising clauses explaining the reference to the Third Front, while a direct translation without context would entail a loss of coherence. Even the option of slowly drip-feeding contextual information into later subtitles is limited by the lack of direct reference to the Third Front throughout the film's dialogue.

Anthony Pym (1996) has argued that Venuti's preferred foreignizing strategy may doom a translated work to a place on the margins. Mark Polizzotti (2018: 60) has been similarly critical, arguing that "in a cultural climate already dismissive of foreign outlooks and literatures, intentionally making them even harder to access seems a classic case of shooting oneself in the foot with a howitzer". From this perspective, it makes commercial sense to omit reference to the Third Front in the opening English title of *11 Flowers* and amplify the Cultural Revolution, and thus avoid the further marginalization of a film that was never going to appeal to a large audience in the first place. But it is harder to agree with Polizzotti's accompanying claim that the "concerns, viewpoints, settings, and context" of a source text will end up "shining almost inevitably through the target version as if through a translucent cloth" (Polizzotti, 2018: 59). In the case of *11 Flowers*, adapting the subtitles to the target audience's perceived knowledge renders the setting of the Third Front invisible to many reviewers. This translation strategy hinders the production of a new English-language discourse on the hitherto little-known Third Front, in contrast to the emerging Chinese-language discourse on the Third Front that Wang has contributed to. It also encourages reviewers to run with more familiar discourses of the Cultural Revolution that have little to do with the content of the filmmaker's trilogy.

Reviewing 11 Flowers: Cultural Revolution as "ten years of turmoil"

The translation of the opening subtitle of *11 Flowers* is crucial in steering English-language reviewers away from the Third Front and towards the *topic* of the Cultural Revolution. However, there are also more pervasive influences that guide reviewers in their understandings of what *type* of Cultural Revolution should be depicted. Ironically, given their often negative commentary on the CCP, many reviewers reinforce a key message of the Party that the Cultural Revolution was ten years of continual chaos and political violence, despite the film itself containing little content to encourage such an interpretation.

Reviewers examine the Cultural Revolution alongside the intertwined themes of the protagonist Wang Han's coming-of-age, political violence, and censorship. Belinda Qian He (2018) has already written extensively on the child's perspective in the film. In contrast, I am concerned with reviewers' assertions that Wang Han is too young to fully comprehend the socio-political events around him, that this is why the political violence and chaos of the Cultural Revolution is not properly omnipresent in the film, and that the filmmaker's decision to use a child's perspective is influenced by considerations of censorship. Reviewers state that Wang Han "can only understand pieces of the dramatic events taking place around him" (Jones, 2013), and that he and his friends "possess little understanding of the social upheaval surrounding them" (Korman, 2013). The social upheaval to which these reviewers refer is not

the upheaval of migrating from big industrial cities to mountain valleys as part of the Third Front. Instead, it is the upheaval and violence of the Cultural Revolution, which – according to many reviewers – is all around Wang Han but not quite perceived on account of his pre-teen innocence.

Consequently, for a number of reviewers, if the child's perspective does not indicate that a scene is about the political violence of the Cultural Revolution, then the child is probably wrong. In one scene, Wang Han and his friends observe a badly-beaten factory youth, Ah Fu, receiving emergency medical aid from his friends. One of Wang's friends has heard that Ah Fu got into a dispute over a girl with a guy from outside the factory. In a subsequent scene, Ah Fu and his friends are seen gathering in tactical positions at the work unit entrance, in preparation for an attack from a gang from another work unit. One reviewer disputes the perception of the film's children that this is a fight over a girl, arguing that it is certainly a fight between rival political factions (McKenzie, 2013).[7] However, even if exacerbated by the political and social tensions of the time, gang fights between the adolescents of different work units were a regular feature of not only the Cultural Revolution but also the early Reform era. Indeed, this kind of inter-factory violence can also be seen in the 1980s setting of *Shanghai Dreams*, when a clandestine disco in Qinghong's factory is interrupted by the smashing of windows by a gang from another Third Front factory. Urban gangs of the Cultural Revolution were also frequently involved in the pursuit of sexual and romantic relationships, alongside fighting, drinking and petty crime (Honig, 2003: 169-70). And as Keith Forster's (1991) work on Zhejiang has demonstrated, there certainly was revived violent conflict between factions during the mid-1970s, but these were often cynical, depleted reconstructions of the more idealistic factions that had existed during the Cultural Revolution proper (1966-68). These remnants of factional conflict existed alongside rising common crime and a climate of discontent (Wu Yiching, 2014: 204–6), including mass protests of sent-down personnel (see Dong Guoqiang & Walder, 2012), and wall-poster critiques of suppressive state policies implemented in the wake of the Cultural Revolution proper (see Chan, Rosen & Unger, 1985).

However, many reviewers, with their references to Red Guards, appear to expect depictions that would be more appropriate to a film set during the Cultural Revolution proper (1966-68) rather than during the twilight years of 1975-76, as in the following extract:

> Sometimes, Wang employs the viewpoint of another character: Jueqiang (Wang Ziyi), a wounded fugitive who's hiding in the woods. He steals Han's shirt and uses it to staunch the bleeding from his side. The gesture has both practical and symbolic implications. How can the boy tell his mother he lost the new shirt? And how can innocence be restored to a bloodied China? The movie doesn't dwell on the latter question, although the murder is followed by outbursts of teen-gang violence and Red Guard attacks on "conservatives" (Jenkins, 2013).

The image of the bloodied fugitive is first introduced, then politicised ("how can innocence be restored to a bloodied China?"), and then connected to clearly political violence ("the Red Guard attacks on 'conservatives'") via further violence ("outburst of gang violence").

[7] At least one trailer for *11 Flowers* encourages this interpretation by fusing footage of the inter-factory fight with dialogue about Red Guard factional fighting.

The reviewer's reference to "Red Guard attacks on 'conservatives'" is particularly noteworthy, since the Red Guards were finished as a major political force after the summer of 1968 (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006: 250–1). The subtitles again play a role here in guiding reviewers toward a particular vision of Mao-era China. Whereas the Chinese refers to fighting "between" two factions, that is the "royalists" (*Baohuang pai* 保皇派, translated as the "conservatives") and the 411 ("April 11th" 四一一派) faction, the English subtitles transform this conflict into an attack of "the Red Guards *against* the conservatives" (emphasis added). For multiple English-language reviewers, this conjures up visions of well-known Red Guard atrocities against intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution proper. One outlier, an amateur reviewer with a leftist perspective, complains about the film getting "dewy eyed about the plight of oppressed conservatives" (Post1000Tension, 2018).

In fact, in Guizhou, the "conservative" Red Guard faction had worked with Li Zaihan, the leader of the provincial revolutionary committee, to suppress the less well-equipped April 11th faction. These factions also came to include far more than just Red Guards, with the involvement of industrial and military allies, including Wang Xiaoshuai's factory as a place of refuge for the hard-pressed April 11th faction (Deng Zhenxin, 2010: chap. 17). A particularly violent attack on the April 11th faction in July 1969 led to the central leadership's intervention and Li Zaihan's downfall (Deng Zhenxin, 2010: chap. 18); he was stripped of his posts in 1971 and died in 1975 (Jian, Song & Zhou, 2009: 147). Any revived conflict between remnants of the two factions that might have occurred in 1975-76, presumably during the leftist assault on Deng Xiaoping in elite politics, would have been a limited re-run of the 1967-69 conflict and is thus deservedly confined to the narrative background in *11 Flowers*. Given the setting of the film in a remote military factory, the director also locates this violence in the geographical background, in the city of Guiyang where Wang Han's father works, rather than in the factory itself.

However, the Cultural Revolution that the reviewers expect to see on film is not the Cultural Revolution of 1975-76, but rather the Cultural Revolution of 1966-68. The point here is not that film reviewers should be expected to have detailed knowledge about the differences between China in 1966-78 and in 1975-76, but that the Red Guard-dominated imagery of the early Cultural Revolution has come to function as a synecdoche for an entire ten-year period. As a consequence, a film set between 1966 and 1976 that lacks this imagery is open to claims of inauthenticity or interpretations to justify this presumed lack.

In contrast, for some academics who have focused on the social conflicts of 1966-68, such as Anita Chan (1992) and Jonathan Unger (2007), events after 1968, and certainly after the Ninth Party Congress of April 1969, should not even be described as part of the Cultural Revolution. These scholars focus on the Cultural Revolution as a grassroots social movement and thus strongly object to the conflation of this movement (1966-68) with its subsequent brutal suppression by a militarized state. This two- or three-year periodization of the Cultural Revolution is certainly disputed, but it is not controversial to state that 1966-68 was the main chaotic period of Red Guard violence and factional fighting before the even more violent army-led reassertion of state authority and mass purges of the "cleansing of the class ranks" campaign in 1968-69 (on different periodisations, see Zhang and Wright, 2018: chap. 11 onwards).

The 1981 *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of the Party since the Founding of the PRC* (henceforth 1981 *Resolution*) avoids all mention of Red Guards. Despite dividing the Cultural Revolution into three sub-periods, the overall message of the 1981

Resolution is that the Cultural Revolution was a decade of continuous turmoil during which the passive masses were manipulated by a small minority of counter-revolutionaries. The verdict that the Cultural Revolution constituted ten years of calamity, first publicly declared by central leadership in September 1979 (Ye Jianying, 1979; see Forster, 1986: 8–9), has, in the words of Wu Yiching "reduce[d] the extraordinary complexity of the Cultural Revolution to the simplicity almost exclusively of barbarism, violence, and human suffering" (Wu Yiching, 2014: 4). This verdict over-emphasizes the political struggles of the CCP elite, while ignoring the ways in which everyday life differed over the various phases of the long Cultural Revolution (Law & Whyte III, 2003: 20). Moreover, underplaying the temporal complexity of the Cultural Revolution lays the foundations for the Red Guards, as the globally circulated symbols of this Mao-era turmoil despite their omission from the *1981 Resolution*, to become an expected prominent feature of a film set during this ten-year period.

For Yang Guobin, the *1981 Resolution* "laid out the golden rule for writing histories of the Cultural Revolution: Let it be known that the Cultural Revolution was a ten-year disaster and leave it at that - above all, do not be nosy about the details". This rule was reinforced by the 1984 campaign to "totally negate" the Cultural Revolution, with the central message that "The Cultural Revolution was bad - forget about it unless you want to ask for trouble" (Yang Guobin, 2005: 14). In the post-Tiananmen years, Lowell Dittmer (2002: 5) notes a "determined official silence" in the face of a popular revival of interest in the Cultural Revolution. Despite Xi Jinping's 2013 assertion that the eras preceding and following Deng Xiaoping's reforms have both been essential to the construction of Chinese socialism (see Berry, Thornton & Sun, 2016), as well as online, filmic and literary departures from the CCP narrative, the Cultural Revolution remains largely ignored in CCP discourse. [8] An online search, for example, indicates that "Cultural Revolution" (*wenhua da geming* 文化大革命) has appeared in the headlines of just three Chinese-language *People's Daily* articles since 1986, with a further 12 headlines carrying the shortened "CR" (*wenge* 文革). In comparison, the table tennis player Ma Wenge (马文革) has received more headlines.[9]

Although it is highly unlikely that the reviewers of Wang Xiaoshuai's film trilogy have directly read the 1981 *Resolution*, the shorthand verdict of "ten years of turmoil" has resonated far beyond the borders of China (see Dirlik & Meisner, 1989). Reviewers have also most likely been influenced by a globally-circulated strand of "scar literature", as represented by the memoirs of Jung Chang and Nien Cheng, which serve as "standard references when the Mao era and Cultural Revolution are under consideration" (Gao Mobo, 2008: 14). This diasporic scar literature has partially countered the post-1978 CCP verdict by continuing to dwell on the Cultural Revolution and by humanizing suffering through accounts of everyday trauma, including at the hands of Red Guards. In doing so, this literature carries forward some of the themes of domestic popular culture in the years immediately after 1976, including that of "scar film", whose popularity came to an abrupt end in 1981 once Deng Xiaoping had consolidated power and non-CCP interpretations of the Cultural Revolution were no longer useful (see Berry, 2004). However, these memoirs also validate the CCP's characterisation of the Cultural Revolution as a ten-year calamity, and as a clash between clearly demarcated forces of good and evil. As Craig Calhoun and Jeffrey Wasserstrom have noted, post-1978 discourse on the Cultural Revolution has been dominated by "the perspective of the wounded and the 'rectifiers'

[8] For example, see Weigelin-Schwiedrzik & Cui Jinke (2016) on Maoist rebel blogs, and Meng Jing (2015) on the 2012 CCTV drama *Sent Down Youth*.

[9] Search performed via "OriProbe Information Services China Daily – Renmin Ribao (1946-present)" database, available at https://www.oriprobe.com/peoplesdaily.shtml, April 2021.

of its wrongs, such as Deng Xiaoping" (Calhoun & Wasserstrom, 1999: 34). Reviewers of Wang Xiaoshuai's films knowingly align themselves against the CCP's ongoing desire to restrict discussion of the Cultural Revolution. However, they unknowingly propagate the CCP's own verdict on the Cultural Revolution (ten years of chaos), rather than alternative accounts that it might fear (as a period whose temporal and spatial complexities cannot be reduced to a single discourse of good versus evil).

11 Flowers does not portray a Cultural Revolution of good versus evil. It does not dwell on political violence but rather on the sometimes mundane everyday life of a Third Front work unit, as well as the sufferings that Third Front migration brought to individuals. For some reviewers, the distance of political violence is a troubling aspect of the film, as for example in this review in the US bi-weekly *TV Guide*:

> If *11 Flowers* has a flaw, it lies only in the nature of [Juehong's] crimes. Although we never see the rape or homicide on camera, those actions cloud the picture's political undertones to a needless degree; such events could happen anywhere, of course, and are hardly unique to Cultural Revolution Era China; they feel too universal for this story (Southern, n.d.).

This complaint seems to carry the expectation that the fictional depiction of everyday life in 1970s China must be subservient to politics. Such an expectation may sound familiar to scholars of Chinese studies: Mao's pronouncements at the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art firmly placed politics in command of art for the duration of the Mao period (and beyond). Having shifted the focus of *11 Flowers* from Third Front to Cultural Revolution, reviewers expect to see "the familiar characteristics of the Cultural Revolution", that is, "mass violence, chaos, political persecution [and] betrayal" (Li Li, 2016: 82). They align with the CCP both in their belief that fiction should transmit political truth and in their understanding of the political truth that the Cultural Revolution was ten years of chaos.

Tong King Lee (2015) has written of how the English translations of PRC literary works are frequently advertised for their value as ethnographic documents created by dissidents who accurately represent a "real" China that is hidden by the political authorities. Wendy Larson has similarly commented on the unreflective reception of Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine* as if "this is indeed Chinese history and thus, China" (Larson, 1997: 332). Extending these arguments, once a slice of artistic-ethnographic reality has been established in discourse, it can be difficult for artists to escape that discourse without being accused of misrepresentation. Thus, for Li Li, the absence of mass violence, chaos and other markers of the Cultural Revolution in Chen Kaige's *King of the Children* contributed to its initial poor reception in English-speaking countries (2016: 75–83).

In contrast to Chen Kaige's film, the usage of a child's perspective in *11 Flowers* enables most reviewers to forgive Wang Xiaoshuai for not documenting the Cultural Revolution according to their expectations. Usage of the child's perspective provides a justification for the film's failure to stress the political chaos and violence of the Cultural Revolution, since reviewers believe that the child is unable to perceive these upheavals. This commentary on the child's lack of political awareness sometimes interweaves with remarks about a second form of political persecution, which is the censorship of contemporary Chinese filmmakers. Multiple reviewers (e.g. Barber 2012; Jenkins 2013; Jones 2013) point to how Wang and other filmmakers have been artistically thwarted by the state. Reviewers generally refrain from explicitly stating that Wang has used a child's perspective in order to depict the

Cultural Revolution without the intensity of political chaos and violence that an authentic adult narrative would require. This is, however, implied with references to his creation of a "political film without politics" (Jones 2013), or the need for filmmakers to handle narratives of the Cultural Revolution "in a way that doesn't upset the authorities" (Barber 2012). Reviewers thus work two political themes into their writing: the state repression of contemporary filmmakers; and the chaos of the Cultural Revolution which these filmmakers so bravely depict. In his critique of political scientists, Michael Schoenhals has written of how "The 'Cultural Revolution' has become part of the rhetorical erector set – a box of conceptual nuts, screws and braces – out of which authors build their explanations of the here and now" (Schoenhals, 2002: 159). It also functions as an essential conceptual apparatus for English-language film reviewers when building their explanations of how and why contemporary filmmakers such as Wang Xiaoshuai choose to depict the Mao era.

Conclusion: Translating "Third Front Trilogy" as "Cultural Revolution Trilogy"

If the Third Front is conflated with the Cultural Revolution in the reception of *Shanghai Dreams*, and then increasingly eclipsed by the Cultural Revolution proper (1966-68) in the reception of *11 Flowers*, this eclipse is almost total in reviews of *Red Amnesia*. This 2014 film was the third and final instalment of Wang Xiaoshuai's self-titled "Third Front trilogy". It focuses on the character of Old Deng, as her actions in and memories of the Third Front in the 1970s increasingly intrude upon her life in contemporary Beijing. After hearing of the death of her former colleague Old Zhao – with whom she struggled to earn a transfer away from the Third Front to Beijing during the early Reform era – Old Deng appears to be afflicted by the hallucinations of a failing mind, with flashbacks to Third Front buildings, silent phone-calls to her home, and the visit of what she takes as the apparition of Old Zhao. It is later revealed that she is afflicted by more than hallucinations; the apparition is actually Old Zhao's grandson, who has come from Guizhou to Beijing to exact revenge upon Old Deng for her underhand tactics in securing the transfer of her family from the Third Front at the expense of the Zhaos.

The Third Front is mentioned by just two out of 29 English-language reviews, not including those produced in Mainland China. In contrast, the Cultural Revolution is mentioned in 18 of these 29 texts. As its title suggests, *Red Amnesia* is a film about partial forgetting, but exactly what has been forgotten by Old Deng is not fully understood by reviewers. The two mentions of the Third Front – on the global cinema specialist website *Filmatique* and *The South China Morning Post* – come from Wang Xiaoshuai himself, with both of these texts introducing the film through interviews with the director. Yet somehow, both these texts and others also refer to *Red Amnesia* as part of Wang's "Cultural Revolution trilogy" (Grisham, 2016; Lee, 2015). *Filmatique* asks Wang Xiaoshuai: "Can you comment on the significance of Red Amnesia as the bookend to your Cultural Revolution trilogy, and how it relates to the other films?". Wang responds by describing it as part of his "Third Front Trilogy" (he also refers to it as his "Life Trilogy") (Grisham, 2016). Despite this answer, *Filmatique's* accompanying description of the film continues to introduce *Red Amnesia* as the "bookend of his Cultural Revolution trilogy", while also claiming that the film's poor showing in China evidences "the censorship of art house cinema" (Filmatique, 2016).

Reviewers' overlooking of the Third Front's presence within the film itself is perhaps more understandable. The streets and apartment buildings of contemporary Beijing dominate the first three-quarters of the film, while the dilapidated red-brick buildings of the Third Front slowly force their way back into the life of Old Deng, mentally through dream sequences and materially through Old Zhao's grandson hurling a red brick through her window. It is only in

the final half-hour of the film that Old Deng physically returns to Guizhou and her former factory. In contrast to *Shanghai Dreams* and *11 Flowers*, Wang Xiaoshuai saves his introduction to the Third Front until the second hour of the film, and inserts it not as written text but as dialogue, with Old Deng's adult sons mentioning the campaign by name as they discuss her recent odd behaviour. As with *11 Flowers*, this reference to the Third Front has not been directly translated into English. Even if it had been translated into English, the lateness of the reference, and its fleeting presence within dialogue rather than as a lingering opening title, reduces the potential effect on reviewer reception. If the director foregrounds the Third Front in *Shanghai Dreams* and *11 Flowers*, he turns its legacy into a menacing background presence for the first three-quarters of *Red Amnesia*, before it explodes into the foreground for the film's finale in Guizhou.

What is notable about the film's reception therefore is not so much the absence of the Third Front from reviewer discourse but rather the sustained dominance of the Cultural Revolution in this discourse. While the Third Front lurks in the shadows of Old Deng's life in contemporary Beijing, the Cultural Revolution lurks in even deeper shadows, as an accessory to Old Deng's wronging of Old Zhao. The viewer learns from Old Deng's sons that she and Old Zhao were violent activists during the Cultural Revolution, and that Old Deng reported Old Zhao's past misdeeds (but not her own) when struggling to earn the sole transfer away from the Third Front. However, this struggle to move back to Beijing occurs during – and is heavily shaped by – the beginning of the Reform era. It was during the Reform era, and not the Cultural Revolution, that new economic policies caused the decline of many Third Front factories, whose locations had been driven by considerations of military defence rather than efficiencies of access to natural resources and markets. Moreover, Old Deng's desperation to escape the Third Front was a product not simply of the state-led migrations of the Mao era, but also the new developmental logic of the Reform era. This new logic significantly reduced the social status of Third Front workers, as well as refocusing the economy away from the interior towards the coast. The film's focus is thus the ongoing impact of these past upheavals on the elderly, including not only the Cultural Revolution and the Third Front but also the early Reform era.

Red Amnesia also received a handful of English-language reviews in Mainland Chinese state media. The sample size is too small to draw conclusions, but reviewers appear to do their best to avoid mentioning the Cultural Revolution at all, instead referring to the Third Front (Wei Xi, 2014) or "a troubled period of China's history" (*China Daily*, 2014), preferring to focus on the film's appearance at the Venice Film Festival. There is an irony here, that a film can generate discourse abroad about the Cultural Revolution and artistic censorship while simultaneously reinforcing patriotic discourse within Mainland China about the international success of Chinese filmmakers.

There is a further irony in that I have needed to shift almost completely away from the Third Front in order to describe the ways in which a director's self-styled "Third Front trilogy" has been received by English-language reviewers. Wang Xiaoshuai, I feel, would be disappointed, given his aforementioned desire to raise awareness of the Third Front and its workers. It is striking that a campaign as massive as the Third Front can be enfolded into the Cultural Revolution in mainstream English-language discourse, and this raises questions about what happens to other marginalised stories of the Mao period as they make their way across languages. It is also striking that reviewers' assumptions about the Cultural Revolution at least partially align with the CCP's own official verdict. Although anxious to resist the CCP's second rule about the Cultural Revolution (don't talk about it), reviewers seem unaware of their

reproduction of the first rule (it was "ten years of chaos"). In *11 Flowers*, translation proper helps push the reviewers towards the Cultural Revolution. However, it is a translingual discourse of Cultural Revolution as ten years of brutality and chaos that primarily pushes reviewers to dwell on the Cultural Revolution proper (1966-68), rather than the later period in which the film is set. Further research can hopefully ascertain whether this reception of Wang's films is an isolated peculiarity or part of a wider tendency in mainstream English-language media to collapse all differences within the Mao era into a blanket condemnation of the Cultural Revolution while glossing over alternative, dissident accounts of PRC history. Further research can also examine the reception of films and other creative works about the Third Front in China itself, where tales of heroic workers struggling against nature and foreign imperialism would be more useful to the CCP's construction of state history than tales from the Cultural Revolution of internal division and class struggle.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Margaret Hillenbrand for inviting me to present an earlier draft of this paper at the University of Oxford China Centre, as well as audience members for their valuable feedback. Further thanks to Harriet Evans, Séagh Kehoe, Gerda Wielander and two anonymous reviewers for their feedback on the written paper.

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Author's note: Official Chinese-English translations are in parentheses. Where official translations are not available, my own translations are given in square brackets.

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