Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Master of Arts

of

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BA (Jilin University, 2004)

“Does Time Heal?: Cinematic Reconstruction of Historical Trauma in Twenty-first Century China”

Department of Pacific and Asian Studies

Friday, February 9, 2018
10:00 A.M.
Clearihue Building
Room B021

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. Richard King, Department of Pacific and Asian Studies, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Katsuhiko Endo, Department of Pacific and Asian Studies, UVic (Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Wendy Larson, East Asian Languages & Literature, University of Oregon

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Martin Wall, Department of Education Psychology & Leadership Studies, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

While the whole world is talking about China’s rise in wealth and power, most focus has been placed on understanding China’s present policies and future orientations. However, very little attention is devoted to examining how historical consciousness affects present China. People take for granted that the past, particularly the landmark traumas of the Communist decades, is a far-reaching historical discontinuity, and China’s profound changes in every aspect of society have rendered the past increasingly irrelevant to the present. However, this thesis argues that this assumption is wrong.

This thesis explores the ways that Chinese filmmakers rearticulate the historical traumas which continue to affect Chinese society in the post-WTO era. I will identify three historical traumas that feature prominently in the interplay between past and present. The first, revolution and modernization, occupies a hegemonic status in socialist history. The second historical trauma is the tradition and modernization entrenched in Chinese modern historiography. The third is the 1980s and post-1989 modernization that has found a voice in the period of reform and opening-up. I refer to and analyze a selection of films made by Chinese Fifth Generation filmmakers in the new century—Coming Home (Guilai, dir. Zhang Yimou, 2014), Together (He ni zai yiqi, dir. Chen Kaige, 2002), and The Founding of a Republic (Jianguo daye, dir. Han Sanping and Huang Jianxin, 2009)—to understand these historical traumas. To situate traumatic history in a broader Asian context, I will also offer comparative study of memory of World War II in postwar Japan by undertaking a close reading of Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence (dir. Nagisa Oshima, 1983). Employing a combination of methods, including textual analysis of films and institutional analysis of film industries, I will demonstrate that cinema finds innovative ways to engage the significant parts of national history and to generate remembrance and interpretation.

Rather than reducing the Fifth Generation’s filmmaking in the new millennium to simplified government-appeased or commercialized tendencies, this thesis emphasizes an understanding of their recollection of history, memory and trauma in a broader sociopolitical, economic, and cultural context. It shows how various factors, including the government’s cultural policy, economic transformation, and individual and generational sentiments, have influenced and shaped the historical discourses at specific historical moments. While affirming the significant role these films have played in keeping collective memories alive in public sphere, this thesis also calls attention to their limitations, such as the problematic nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution, as well as the escapist imagination of cultural heritage and traditional values.