Art for Politics’ Sake: The Reasons and Progress of the Criticism Campaign Against The

Life of Wu Xun

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Wu Xun was an illiterate man plagued by poverty and shunned by society. Schools rejected him due to his low social status, forcing him to become a servant to a wealthy family. His mistreatment made him realize that the poor needed and deserved education just as much as everyone else. Thus, he set out on a journey to build free schools for the poor, unafraid of humiliation and unwavering in his pursuit. His triumph is the basis of the Chinese film *The Life of Wu Xun* (1950), directed by Sun Yu. When the film was released, Chinese responses were mostly positive, praising the film for its moral lessons. Today, however, the film is best remembered for being the target of a mass criticism campaign in 1951. This essay will analyze how this campaign unfolded and why it took place. I will argue that Mao initiated the campaign with two mutually reinforcing goals: the explicit aim was to reform thought, while the implicit aim was to consolidate power over the film industry and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Moreover, the criticism campaign demonstrates the belief in film as education, hence the need to denounce a film that spreads ideologically “wrong” messages.

1. Initial Responses

The earliest opinions of *The Life of Wu Xun* were predominantly in favor of the film. Commentators deemed Wu Xun to be the epitome of the “spirit of serving the people”, a role model that the Chinese people should aspire towards (Dai 4; Shizhao Li 4). It was not just viewers who saw the ideal Chinese citizen in Wu Xun. The film’s director Sun Yu wrote that one of the film’s main functions was to “glorify a selfless spirit of serving” and that Wu Xun “serves the people wholeheartedly” (“Biandao” 4). When these responses invoke the phrase “serve the people”, there are political connotations. The phrase comes from a speech that Mao delivered in September 1944, in which he designated the CCP as a group in which “we serve the people” (“Serve the People” 227). By alluding to Mao’s speech, early comments on the film implied that
the film was essentially pro-Mao. Early reviewers also frequently adopted the rhetoric of “learning from the film.” One reviewer declared that Wu Xun’s spirit was “worthy of every citizen of the new China to learn from” (Shizhao Li 4). Another writer, a primary school teacher, stated the intention to “transform myself into an excellent educator who genuinely serves the people” (Bu 4). These responses proved that cinema had the power to educate the people, to champion ideologies and spark change. But the power to educate also meant the power to miseducate. The threat of the film teaching the “wrong” thing and the need to clarify what constituted a “correct” message set the backdrop for the criticism campaign.

However, not everyone was entirely pleased with the film. Some voiced concerns with the fact that Wu Xun was ultimately a slave to feudalism, content to live under a suppressive regime. One reviewer noted that in the film, “The working people did not overthrow the roots of his [the feudal leader’s] governance” and thus Wu Xun should not be imitated (Tao 4). Sun Yu conceded that since Wu Xun’s method of resistance was “individualistic”, Wu Xun failed to oppose the system that he was purportedly fighting (“Biandao” 4). Such hints of ideological disapproval were present from the very beginning, but these hints remained hints, overshadowed by the mostly laudatory tone of early reviews. Although Sun Yu recognized the problems with Wu Xun’s method of resistance, he justified it by saying that it was the best Wu Xun could do given the historical circumstances (“Biandao” 4). Despite some issues with the film, early reviewers maintained an overall positive stance. It would take the criticism campaign to make the negative views the prevailing position.

The first sign of a major shift in opinion came on March 25, 1951, with the publication of Qing Yi’s article “Wu Xun is Not Our Good Tradition”. The “good tradition” refers to the strength and resistance of the Chinese people, a theme that Qing Yi found lacking in the film (4).
In fact, Qing Yi considered the film to embody the opposite of this tradition due to its veneration of a man “discouraged to the extreme, without a shred of rebellious sentiment” (4). The similarities with the aforementioned criticisms of the film are striking. This article essentially highlights the same issue as those articles that primarily praised the film: Wu Xun fails to revolt against feudalism. Once again, we see that prior to the criticism campaign, people were already aware of the film’s alleged ideological errors. What Qing Yi did and the criticism campaign would do was shift the discourse from a primarily positive to a wholly negative view of the film.

Interestingly, regardless of whether an article praised or criticized the film, the focus was on Wu Xun as a person. Artistic judgments of the film were minimal. One critic, for example, questioned whether the dream sequences were too long or whether certain supporting characters were necessary (Tao 4), but assessments of this sort were the exception, not the norm. Underlying the emphasis on the person was the notion of film as education. It was irrelevant to critique the formal aspects of the film since that was not what the film was teaching. Instead, people were learning from Wu Xun’s spirit and hence the debates revolved around that. Qing Yi attacked Wu Xun, not the film, for “distorting the struggle of the Chinese people” (4). Those who rejected Qing’s viewpoint underlined Wu Xun’s indomitable and self-sacrificing spirit, yet again emphasizing Wu Xun as a person (Cheng 4; Lu 6). Most criticisms and defenses of the film were directed at Wu Xun, not the film’s aesthetic qualities, because it was the film’s message that mattered most to society. Given that most viewers considered this message to be ideologically sound, the foundation of the criticism campaign was firmly established.

2. The Criticism Campaign

On May 20, 1951, the CCP’s official newspaper People’s Daily published an editorial entitled “Pay Serious Attention to the Discussion of the Film The Life of Wu Xun”. In the
editorial, the unnamed author reprimanded Wu Xun for not overthrowing and even perpetuating feudalism (“Yingdang” 1). What worried the author the most, however, was the extent to which people were praising the film, which attested to “the high degree of ideological confusion in our country’s cultural sector” (“Yingdang” 1). The author ended by demanding a thorough discussion of the film to “clarify the ideological confusion on this issue” (“Yingdang” 1).

Although People’s Daily did not credit Mao as the author of this editorial until 1967 (Mao, “Yingdang” 1), the speed and scale of the ensuing change in opinions suggest that this was no secret. By the end of 1951, People’s Daily published 115 articles in response to Mao’s editorial. More importantly, indications of Mao’s disapproval can actually be found prior to the editorial. On May 8, the Ministry of Culture published a report on national artistic work in 1950, in which The Life of Wu Xun was labelled an “ideologically wrong film” (Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu Wenhuabu 3). To continue that condemnatory stance, People’s Daily reprinted a censorious review of the film on May 17 (Jia 3). These CCP organs served as mouthpieces for Mao, who was the party chairman at the time, signaling the party’s stance and, by extension, Mao’s stance on the film. By reaffirming that standpoint and intensifying the call for people to rethink their position, Mao’s editorial marked the starting point of the criticism campaign.

It is worth pausing on the question of why Mao did not step in earlier. According to the editorial, Mao’s chief concern was the “ideological confusion” reflected in the overwhelming amount of praise for the film (“Yingdang” 1). By urging viewers to condemn the film, Mao hoped that people would realize their ideological faults and, as a result, change their ideologies. Therefore, Mao’s explicit goal with the criticism campaign was to reform thought. It may be tempting to see hidden motivations for power, but at this point ideological reform was the main focus. If Mao’s sole concern was power consolidation, then any delay in criticizing the film
would seem unreasonable for it would only leave the artistic sector unchecked. Instead, by letting discussion sort out the ideological mess, Mao indirectly asserted that his primary objective, at least at first, was to create ideological clarity. The Ministry of Culture’s report on national artistic work provides further justification for the emphasis of ideology over power. Among the goals set for the film industry, the ministry outlined the need to strengthen ideological leadership over film production in both state-owned and private studios (Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu Wenhuabu 3). Although this vision would soon shift, ideological unity was initially a more crucial objective than nationalizing, and thus exerting control over, film studios, a sentiment that Mao shared when he issued his editorial. The criticism campaign was born out of Mao’s genuine concern with the ideological state of the nation, hence his explicit aim to “clarify the ideological confusion” (“Yingdang” 1).

Most of the criticisms published after Mao’s editorial concurred with the crux of Mao’s opinions: Wu Xun was a proponent of feudalism and an enemy to revolution. One critic pointed out the hypocrisy of Wu Xun for exploiting the poor and taking their land (Huang 3); another chastised Wu Xun for being a servant to feudalism and not advocating the path to revolution (C. Li 5). Sun Yu published a self-criticism recanting his earlier views, asserting instead that his film “blurs revolutionary thought and is a film that harms the people” (“Wo dui” 3). Moreover, Sun Yu invoked Mao’s essay “On Practice” by writing that the “objective practice” of the film proved its anti-revolutionary effects on society (“Wo dui” 3). By appealing to Maoist texts other than the editorial, Sun Yu clearly aligned himself with Maoism to, at least supposedly, demonstrate his improved ideological thinking. Indeed, drawing from other Maoist texts was a common strategy. Another critic cited Mao’s “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art”, criticizing himself for disregarding the importance of placing “the political criterion first and the
artistic criterion second” (C. Li 5). These reviews exemplify the process of thought reform: critics publicly denounced Wu Xun’s and, by extension, the film’s ideological faults, helping them understand and ultimately adopt the “correct” ideology. Through these criticisms, Mao’s explicit aim of ideological clarity was gradually attained.

Of course, instilling Maoist thought in society was merely the explicit aim. It is equally important to recognize how ideological uniformity became a tool for power consolidation. The People’s Republic of China was founded on October 1, 1949 (Mao, “Zhonghua” 1). In a new nation with a new political system still haunted by the specter of civil war, the urge to affirm the CCP’s power was strong. The campaign against The Life of Wu Xun was a part of that wider process of power consolidation. In this case, consolidation took the form of enforcing ideological uniformity across numerous groups. Other than having individuals, such as Sun Yu, who originally praised the film recant, CCP members and film critics were also pushed to offer their criticisms. On the same day that Mao published his editorial, People’s Daily featured an article demanding that CCP members criticize the film (“Gongchandang” 3). In the subsequent months, writers such as Guo Moruo and educators such as Huang Yanpei, both members of the CCP, published criticisms of the film that reiterated Mao’s accusations (Guo 3; Huang 3). Likewise, a film critic advocated for Chinese film critics to “fight to enact Chairman Mao’s literary and artistic thought” (Shu Li 3). But individuals were not the only ones embroiled in the campaign. Organizations were just as responsible. Kunlun, the private film studio behind The Life of Wu Xun, announced on May 24 that it would stop distributing the film and form an internal committee to review the studio’s work (“Gedi” 1). Newspapers and magazines that had published articles praising the film now issued criticisms of the film and stated their intentions to join the fight to reform ideology (Dazhong Dianying Bianweihui 3; “Guangming” 1). Ideological
conformity became the path towards power consolidation, bringing a multitude of groups and people under the banner of communism, in turn placing them within the grasp of the CCP. Therefore, the implicit aim of power consolidation worked in tandem with the explicit aim of ideological reform to generate pervasive denouncements of the film.

Although positive reviews of the film were rare during this period, some did make their way to the public eye. For example, a reader of People’s Daily submitted a letter disagreeing with the condemnations of the film, arguing instead that the film effectively exposed the suppressive nature of feudalism (Xiao 2). The letter sparked a series of responses, all of which unanimously chastised the author of that letter. Six articles were published in People’s Daily in the days that followed, calling the author out for “intending to destroy ideological struggle” and for his “one-sided, incorrect” interpretation of the film (Liu 2; Wang 2). The disapproving responses were aligned with the criticism campaign, but what is most striking is the fact that positive reviews were published at all. A clue for understanding why comes from the editor’s note published alongside the reader’s letter, in which the editor expressed the desire for readers to discuss these viewpoints (Xiao 2). The editor’s aim mirrors Mao’s explicit aim with the criticism campaign, namely to enlighten and reform thought. Discussions and criticisms were ways of reshaping thought until the nation reached ideological unity. Crucially, the editor’s note reminds us not to see ideological reform as an excuse for power consolidation. If power consolidation were the only objective, then positive reviews would undermine the very notion of having strong party control over all people. Rather, Mao genuinely wanted to alter thought in ways that would adhere to Maoism. Ideological reform was then the reason that power consolidation was possible. Once people ideologically supported Mao, Mao could exert power
over them. In other words, the explicit and implicit aims of the criticism campaign were mutually supportive; one could not exist without the other.

3. Beyond the Film

As the criticism campaign gained momentum, it began impacting aspects of society beyond the film itself. Film studios and cultural cadres, who were CCP officials working in the cultural sector, were caught within the expansion of party control. On September 1, 1951, the film studios Kunlun and Changjiang merged to form a joint studio under government control (“Jiaqiang” 4). Although The Life of Wu Xun was not reported as a reason for nationalization, the act fell so directly within the criticism campaign’s time period that there must have been intentions to regulate Kunlun’s content after the studio produced the film. The Shanghai Minister of Culture Xia Yan called the merging of the studios a step towards “correct ideological leadership” (“Changjiang” 4), confirming how nationalization related to establishing the CCP’s power. Furthermore, Kunlun and Changjiang were portrayed as role models for their nationalization efforts and indicated to private studios “the correct path for future development” (“Jiaqiang” 4). It marked a clear shift from the Ministry of Culture’s earlier report on national artistic work, which supported output from both state-owned and private studios (Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu Wenhuabu 3), to the new singular focus on nationalization. The CCP’s altered stance on nationalization shows how the criticism campaign heightened the need for party control. Under the atmosphere of criticism, there was no longer room for deviance. Just as positive reviews had to be rebuked, film studios had to come under government control.

Cultural cadres were also important targets on the path towards power consolidation. In the eyes of the CCP, the fact that The Life of Wu Xun was made suggested the ideological contamination within its cadres and their incompetence in reviewing film content (“Zhonggong”
464). Consequently, the Chinese Propaganda Department launched a rectification movement of cultural cadres, with one of the goals being to “correct culture and the arts’ deviation from the party’s leadership” (“Zhonggong” 465). Of course, Maoism defined the line between deviance and conformity. Xia Yan declared that one of the key failures of cultural and artistic work in Shanghai was the inability to pursue Mao’s vision (3). Similarly, in a meeting for the rectification of the Beijing literary and arts sector held on November 24, 1951, CCP member Zhou Yang stressed how the “loosening or abandoning of Mao’s leadership of cultural and artistic thought” led to the ideological flaws within the field (3). Mao was depicted as the individual that all cultural cadres should aspire towards. By having cadres change their ideologies, their loyalty to Mao and the CCP was guaranteed. In this way, the rectification movement helped the CCP buttress its ideological and political leadership, advancing the process of power consolidation that the film’s criticism campaign had started.

Once again, power consolidation was not the only objective. Although the rectification of cultural cadres had more to do with asserting party leadership than reforming ideologies, the two goals were always inseparably at work. Besides “correct[ing] culture and the arts’ deviation from the party’s leadership”, the Chinese Propaganda Department rectified cultural cadres through “an organized struggle against bourgeois and petit bourgeois thought” (“Zhonggong” 466). Unlike the first goal, which linked rectification to the CCP’s power, the second goal had a much clearer relation to ideological issues. Eradicating “bourgeois and petit bourgeois thought” in favor of Maoism accomplished the same goal as the criticisms of The Life of Wu Xun, namely to ingrain a new ideology among the Chinese people. Yet in instigating thought reform, Mao also grew stronger in power through suppressing ideological deviance, allowing the rectification movement to continue the dual aims of the criticism campaign. If one needs further proof that thought
reform and power consolidation were mutually underpinning forces, then one need only turn to the Chinese Propaganda Department, “We have decided to conduct a rectification movement within cultural cadres to *clarify the various ideological errors* in the literary and arts sector, and to seriously *establish the party’s effective leadership* over the sector’s work” (“Zhonggong” 462, emphasis added).

4. Conclusion

In the span of a year, *The Life of Wu Xun* went from being the paragon of “serving the people” to the target of severe condemnation. On the one hand, Mao was concerned with the overwhelming amount of praise that the film had been receiving, thus he initiated a criticism campaign to reform ideology in support of Maoism. On the other hand, the campaign, along with the nationalization of film studios and the rectification of culture cadres, consolidated the CCP’s power. These two objectives reinforced one another and play equally indispensable roles in elucidating why the criticism campaign occurred. Finally, it is worth recalling the underlying concern of film as education. If *The Life of Wu Xun* did not have the power to propound certain ideologies, then the criticism campaign would not have existed at all. The film endured decades of suppression precisely because Mao recognized the educational potential of cinema.

In September 1985, Hu Qiaomu, a CCP member who participated in the cultural cadres’ rectification movement, admitted that the criticisms of the film were “incredibly one-sided, extreme, and aggressive” (Bi 1). From then on, the film gradually returned to the public eye and its reputation was restored. But if the criticism campaign has taught us anything, it is that the CCP’s decisions about art are always politically motivated. Why the CCP reversed its position on the film is a meaningful question, but that is a story for another time.
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