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Constructing the Mythic Father Image: An Ideological Analysis of the Film Zhou Enlai

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Abstract: ***This paper argues that the film Zhou Enlai constructs a mythic father image through ideological operations. Adopting an ideological analysis approach, it seeks to deconstruct how this image is established and to substantiate this argument through close study of the film text. The analysis examines the key ideographs deployed in each scene while attending to the narrative activity and sequential development of each segment, thereby avoiding a static, segment-by-segment reading. By tracing how ideographs and scene-level narrative movement jointly produce and reinforce the father image, the paper demonstrates that this image is not merely a biographical representation but an ideological construct. The study thus contributes to understanding how cinematic texts shape political and affective authority through ideological signification.***

Keywords: Zhou Enlai film, Ideological analysis, Mythic father image, Film text.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that *Zhou Enlai* succeeds in establishing a mythical father Figure through the operation of ideology. The aim of this paper is to deconstruct how this image is established in the film *Zhou Enlai* through an ideological approach to research, and to find evidence to argue this point through the study of the film text. The paper will examine the intentional key role of each scene, and in doing so will also pay attention to the activity of the individual passages in relation to each other, avoiding the static nature of the individual segments.

2. IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM AND CINEMA

Cinema, as the fruit of vast industrial production, has strong ideological properties of its own, as it needs ideological properties in exchange for huge capitalist investments to sustain its own production, while cinema in a communal economy converts economic interests into political interests.[1] In fact, the concept of ideology is complex, but most scholars cite the term ideology as representing the system of understanding, value system, and theory gradually established by a certain class or ethnic group based on its own interests in a long period of social practice under certain historical conditions.[2] The term ideology criticism in this article is to decode and demystify the ideology behind a certain thing, so as to uncover its hidden power structure and interest relations. Cinema as a cultural product is a complicated, refracted, centrifugal reflection of society and history, and Benjamin also argues that literary works inhabit and function in the social and historical system in the process of production.[3] Needless to say. This understanding laid the intellectual foundations for the emergence of ideological criticism. Subsequently, Cahiers du Cinema published a review in 1969,[4] *Film-Ideology-Criticism*, in a gesture of breaking and standing, attacking Bazin's claim of replicating reality in his film ontology and pointing out that "Every film is political." 1970 saw the publication of 'Ideology and the State Machine' by Althusser[5] and '*John Ford's 'Young Lincoln*",[6] respectively, the former becoming the film theoretical banner of ideology, and the latter becoming a classic essay. In the development of ideology, the symptomatic reading it proposes allows one to glimpse the political, economic, and cultural messages behind the films, and through ideological criticism, to examine in depth how technical means, narrative techniques, production processes, distribution, and publicity, and viewing mechanisms shape ideology in film production. Ideological criticism is therefore a good way to explore film.

[1] C du Cinema, 1972, 'John Ford's Young Mr Lincoln: A Collective Text by the Editors of Cahiers Du Cinema', *Screen*, 13.3: 5–44 10.1093/screen/13.3.5>
[2] Jde Chen, 'Ideological Criticism and Its Value to Film Studies', *Journal of Nanjing Normal University (Social Science Edition),* 04(2020), 140-148.
[3] Andrew E Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and Art* (London: Continuum,2006).
[4] Comolli, Jean-Luc, and Narboni Paul, *Cinema, ideology, criticism*, 2004.
[5] Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)(1970)', *Cultural theory: an Anthology, 2010,* 204-22.
[6] C du Cinema, 1972, 'John Ford's Young Mr Lincoln: A Collective Text by the Editors of Cahiers Du Cinema', *Screen*, 13.3: 5–44 10.1093/screen/13.3.5>

However, at the same time, ideological criticism sometimes focuses too much on a close reading of the text and neglects the artistry of the text as a whole; secondly, ideology is not suitable for interpreting all film works - although every film is ideological, there are strong and weak ideologies in different films, and too much interpretation of some films with an ideology if It would be a mistake to go down the wrong path.

3. ZHOU ENLAI AS A MODEL OF IDEOLOGICAL CRITICISM

Zhou Enlai, a film dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China (a genre unique to China[7]) and produced by Guangxi Film Studio[8] (an official Chinese production house), is inherently strongly ideological, and it is, therefore, appropriate to examine the film using ideological criticism. Firstly, in terms of the text itself, *Zhou Enlai* takes a linear narrative approach, presenting the events of the different eras one by one in chronological order (interspersed with some reminiscences, but more as an ideological function). On the other hand, as a tribute film and a biopic of the historical genre, most of its scenes and stories are also portrayed using a mimetic approach to reality as a whole. These two aspects make the film a classic film, as mentioned in Cahiers du Cinema in *John Ford's "Young Lincoln"*, and therefore "*completely embedded within an" institution "*that contains and unifies various ideas".[9] This means that, for political reasons such as tribute and commemoration, the system that produced the film used a variety of ideological means to limit the audience's reception to a non-interpretive level of viewing. This gives room for ideological criticism to play, and through repeated viewings of the film, the emptiness in the ideological structure constructed by the film will be explained, and what the film cannot express or what the film hides will be discovered.

4. METHODOLOGY

The editors of Cahiers du Cinema in *John Ford's "Young Lincoln"* refer to two approaches to reading the text, the first approach treats the film as an object of reading, while the second focuses on the key meaningful role in each scene.[10] In this paper, the second of these approaches will be chosen for the reading of the film. The reason for this is that the first approach treats the film as a whole, which makes it difficult to avoid generalizing its main idea a priori in the reading process, thus nesting the work into a predetermined fixed pattern and ignoring the key denotative functions in each fragment, ultimately leading to an analysis of the text that produces erroneous results; whereas the second approach fully examines the decisive metaphorical functions in the individual fragments, which ultimately point to a common theme through a focused analysis of these metaphorical functions. However, it is also important to point out that the second approach tends to ignore the relevance of the individual fragments in the process of cutting up the text and concentrates too much on a static fragment. Therefore, the method of interpretation in this paper will be to use the conclusions drawn while examining the specific meaning of discrete fragments, in turn, to second-guess the meaning of individual fragments in order to avoid the isolated results derived from individual scenes.

As noted above, the conclusion of this study of the various parts of *Zhou Enlai* is that the film portrays Zhou Enlai as a mythical Figure like a 'father'. This portrayal of myth is first because the film leads the viewer to examine the history, thus' resurrecting 'it as if it were still happening, making it a myth that existed in the past, present, and future. Secondly, the naturalistic re-writing of the film in chronological segments, as mentioned by the editorial board of Cahiers du Cinema, imposes a reading of the future perfect tense.[11] Finally, the scenes in the film set up a fictional space, while the choices of the protagonist seem to influence the generation of the next space, thus producing a kind of mythic naturalization. These three approaches to the shaping of myth are key to the analysis of the individual scenes in this paper, and it is with this conclusion that the writing will tie together the readings of the individual sequences and analyze how ideology operates in this film by deconstruction how this mythic character is shaped.

5. MEMORIES

[7] NANSHAN Xu , LIU FU, and JUNYAN CUI, *Dian Ying Yi Shu Ci Dian*(Beijing:Zhong Guo Dian Ying Chu Ban She,2005).
[8] Wikipedia contributors, 'Guangxi film studio', *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 15 October 2022 <https://zh.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%E5%B9%BF%E8%A5%BF%E7%94%B5%E5%BD%B1%E5%88%B6%E7%89%87%E5%8E%82&oldid=74101795> [accessed 15 October 2022]
[9] C du Cinema, 1972, 'John Ford's Young Mr Lincoln: A Collective Text by the Editors of Cahiers Du Cinema', *Screen*, 13.3: 5–44 10.1093/screen/13.3.5>.
[10] Ibid, .
[11] Ibid, .

After the opening credits, the street scenes of the Cultural Revolution appear on the screen, followed by slogans reading "Rebellion is justified, revolution is not a crime" and the shouts of the youths (Figure 1), a large group of Red Guard youths[12] appears in the procession (Figure 2) and Zhou Enlai sits in the car, constantly looking around (his gaze is stitched to the viewer's As the slogan "Down with He Long" appears, the scene switches to the car and the car drives off into the mountains (Zhou Enlai disappears from the shot, with only the narrator appearing and asking how to place He Long[13]) (Figure 4), while Zhou Enlai discusses with He Long how to keep the latter safe. As Zhou Enlai and He Long part, Zhou Enlai delivers an important line: "In the autumn, I'll come and get you!" (Figure 5). This is followed by a critique meeting with Chen Yi[14], at which point Zhou Enlai uses non-violence until violence (which is extremely important) (Figure 6). What follows is a series of extremely important, interlinked scenes: firstly, Zhou Enlai deals with the struggle between the two factions of Anshan[15] and demands a resumption of production, which is eventually compromised under Zhou Enlai's charisma (Figure 7); secondly, there is a scene of Zhou Enlai walking in the garden with his wife, during which he talks to her about his nephew's arrival in his hometown of Huai'an (Figure 8); and then we come to learn of the death of Zhou Enlai's adopted daughter (it is clear from Zhou Enlai's performance that she died wrongfully accused by the revolutionaries and was immediately cremated because the rebels did not want to leave evidence), Zhou Enlai was in a rare state of shock (Figure 9); afterwards, Zhou Enlai was sitting on a bus at night when a group of small children chased his vehicle and shouted popular slogans during the Cultural Revolution; Zhou Enlai looked backwards at these children and showed the final scene in this sequence is set at the scene of the earthquake in Xingtai; Zhou Enlai walks from the plane to the crowd and offers comfort and concern (Figure 11).

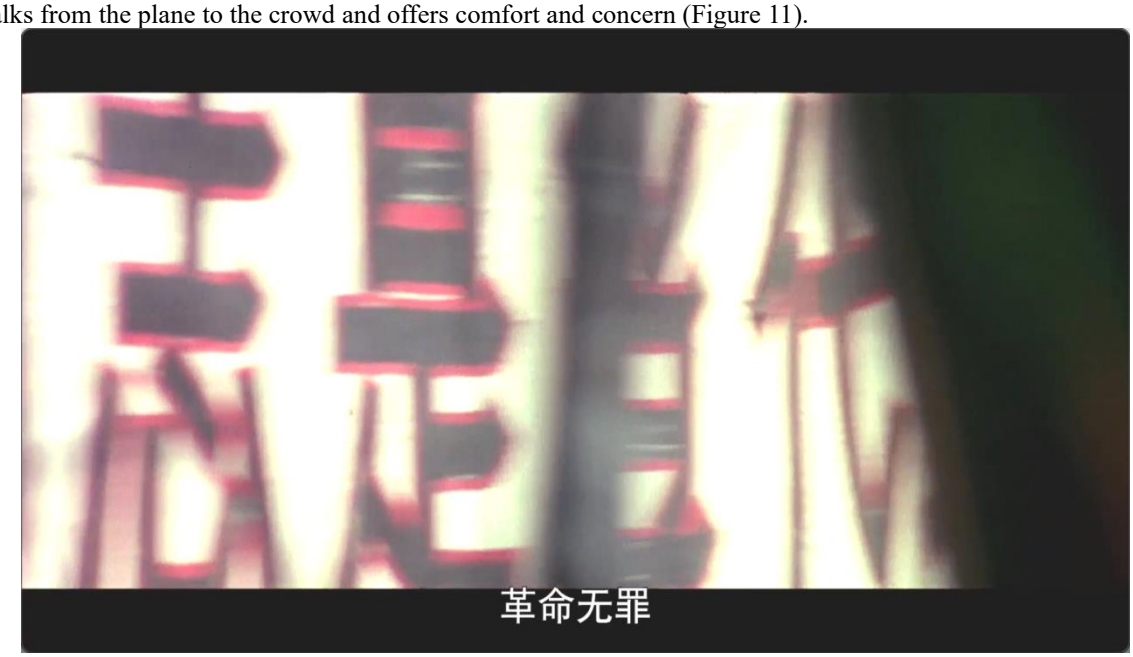


Figure 1

[12] Wikipedia contributors, 'Red Guards', *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,* 10 December 2022, 00:08 UTC, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Red_Guards&oldid=1126556742> [accessed 11 January 2023]
[13] Wikipedia contributors, 'He Long', *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 8 December 2022, 11:31 UTC, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=He_Long&oldid=1126263163> [accessed 11 January 2023]
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Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

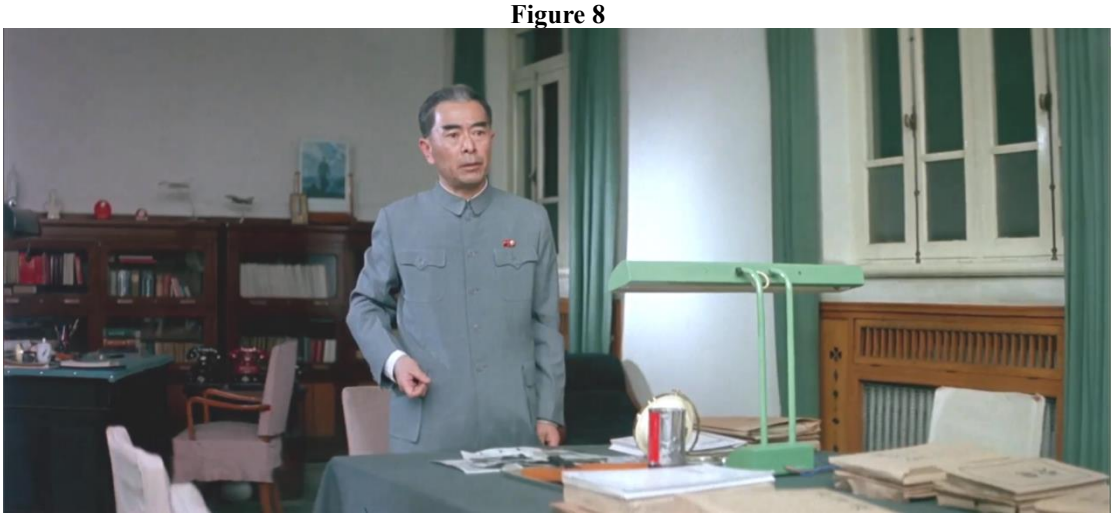


Figure 9

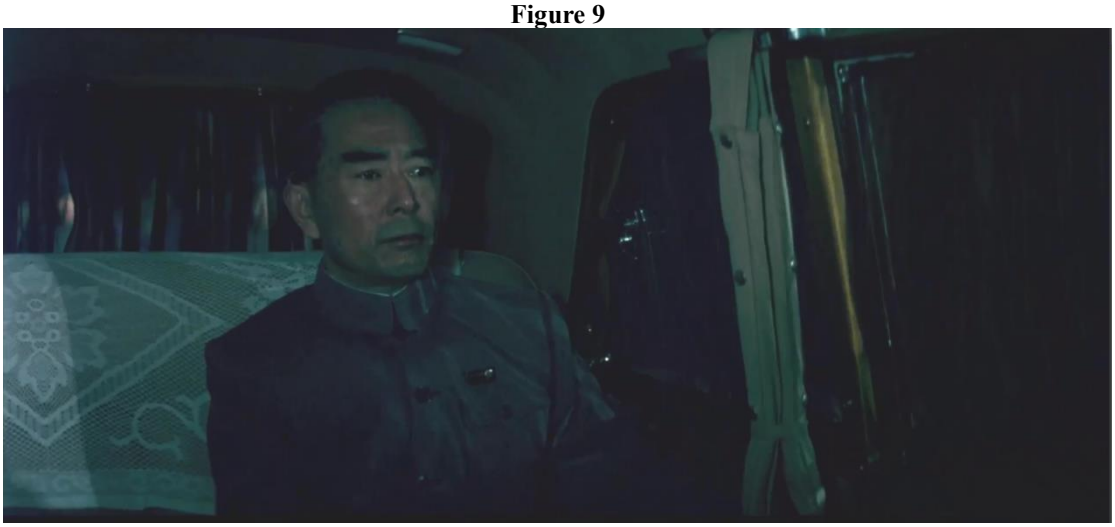


Figure 10



Figure 11

First, there is the shaping of the mythic space. The opening scene of the Cultural Revolution is a direct transition from the opening credits, starting with a panning shot (like a dreamer in a hazy state when he is just awake), followed by revolutionary songs and the slogan of the Cultural Revolution, "The rebellion is justified, the revolution is innocent" (the sense of the sound that humans hear when they are just awake)(Figure 12-14). The camera continues to circle and identifies a central point of view - the gaze of Zhou Enlai (who is constantly surveying his surroundings)(Figure 15). A dream of history thus emerges, with the director using a series of panning and switches between close-ups of Zhou Enlai to stitch the viewer's perspective to that of Zhou Enlai, who becomes a substitute for the viewer's view of the world. Zhou Enlai then disappears from the shot, the constant movement of the car giving the viewer the illusion of forward motion, while the narration of Zhou Enlai and his interlocutor tells this history like a story. It is hard not to think that the director uses some of these expressions to bring the audience into the history of the Cultural Revolution and to lead them to examine it for themselves, to become individuals in it. And the sense of forward movement brought about by the advancing car proves that history is still happening, with the audience acting as witnesses. This provides the basis for the creation of the myth, and as the audience reads the myth, it is also retraced in the chronological order of events, and the story becomes something in the process of formation, to be completed in the future.

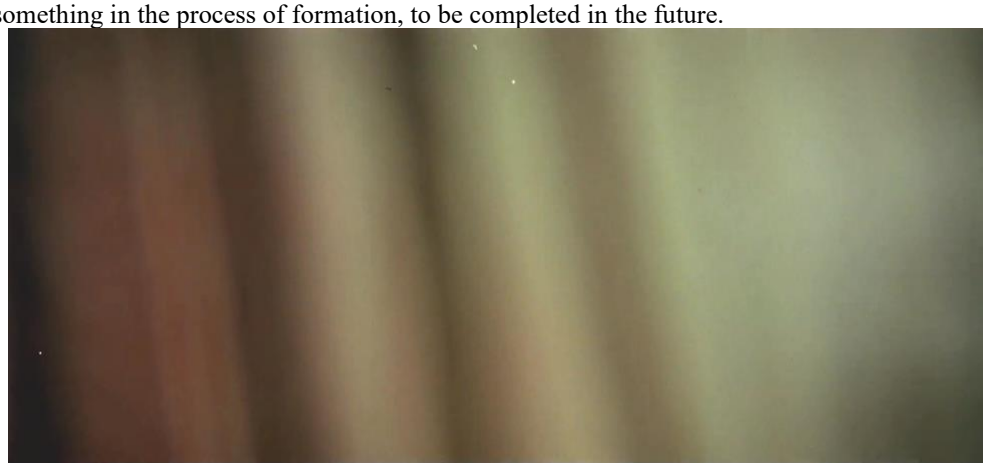




Figure 12-14



Figure 15

Secondly, Zhou Enlai is identified in this sequence as a sublime moral incarnation rather than a spokesman for politics, whereas China has a long history of patriarchy based on morality, and in this film Zhou Enlai is portrayed not only as a moral incarnation but also as a mythical Figure of the ideal father. Firstly, the suggestion of Zhou Enlai's father Figure is ever present: all the images of others that appear when he first gazes out into the world are set as youths(Figure 16); and he is shown as an elder when talking to He Long (he comforts him in an elderly tone and advises him as an elder for his safety); and after Chen Yi's review, the Red Guards rush the stage and try to commit violence. This was the first time that Zhou Enlai stopped violence with non-violence. This was the moment when his de-power reached its peak. He took the stance of an elder and questioned the Red Guard juniors. "Why are you breaking your promises and forcing violence!" (Figure 17)The image of Zhou Enlai being portrayed as the embodiment of morality and the ideal father, and using morality to defeat violence, is reaffirmed in the subsequent conversation with Chen Yi: in the double shot of Zhou Enlai and Chen Yi, he is always in the centre of the frame, while Chen Yi is constantly moving around him from side to side(Figure 18). Another confirmation came in a

subsequent conversation with both factions of Anshan. In the midst of a continual argument between the two parties, he states that he will go to Anshanshan himself. This threatening statement, which is not violent, reveals the authority of the father and leads to a compromise between the two factions. As if the director is deliberately arguing the above inference, the image of Zhou Enlai's father and moral incarnation is thoroughly confirmed in the three successive scenes that follow. In Zhou Enlai's recollections the audience is told that his adopted daughter has been wrongfully killed, and at this moment he displays his fatherly anger(Figure 19). Then, as in any Hollywood film, there is a break on the eve of a 'great crisis' when Zhou Enlai meets a group of children on a bus late at night. They chase the car and shout slogans from the Cultural Revolution, especially after "Smash the feudalism, no more classes, it's great", and Zhou looks at the group of children who have lost hope (education is seen as the future of the country) with a look of utter sadness(Figure 20-22). But really brilliant ideological manipulation comes in the next stage, namely how Zhou Enlai, as a father, deals with this grief. At the scene of the Xingtai earthquake, Zhou Enlai goes deep into the parents of the affected farmers, offers his affectionate condolences to all, and makes a speech. This speech is not addressed to the audience in the film; in fact these listeners are substitutes for the cinema audience, who is transported to the film's time and space and are thoroughly convinced by Zhou Enlai's great father Figure (Figure 23). In this moment, Zhou Enlai is the father of all.



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18

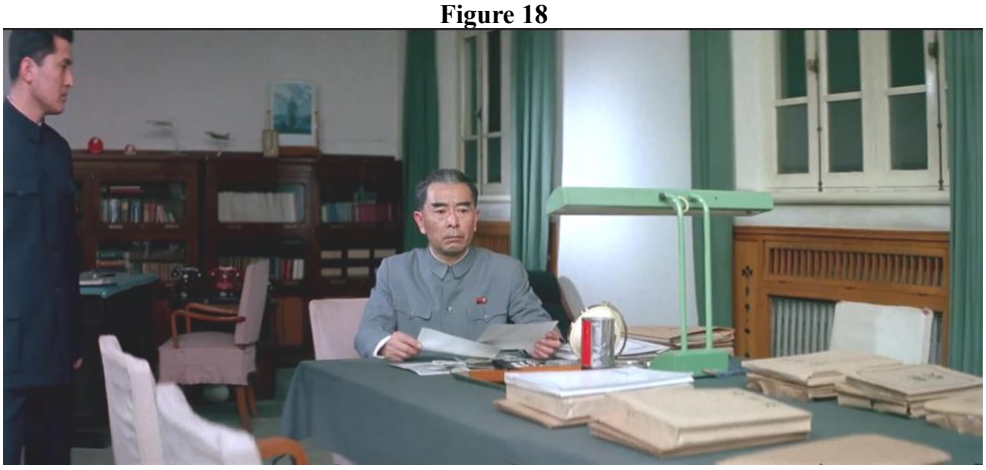


Figure 19

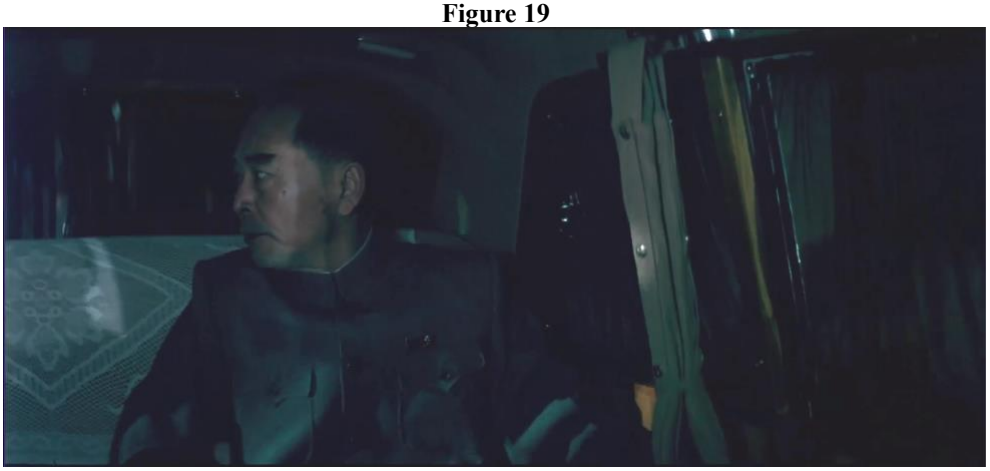




Figure 20-22

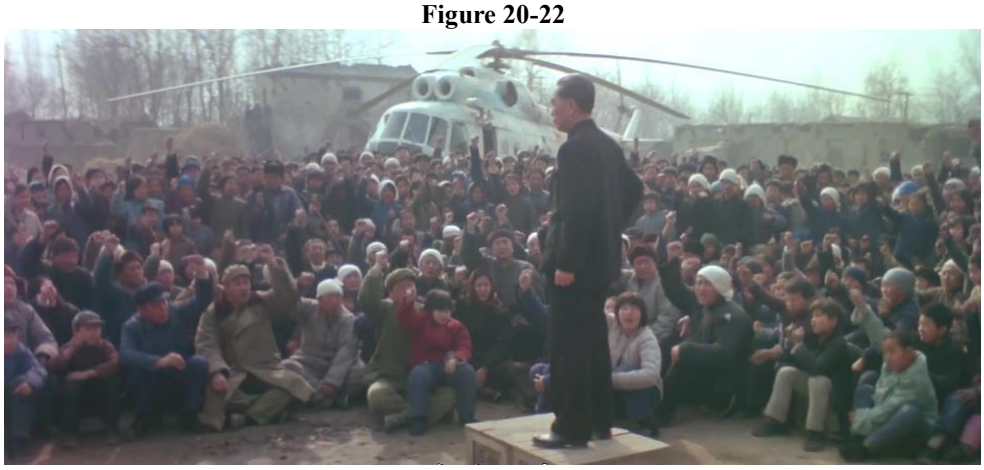


Figure 23

In this series of sequences, Zhou Enlai's political power is overpowered by moral power, and on the basis of morality, the three images of family, land, and children are corresponding to one another. And in the Chinese conception, these three are the basis of all things, and Zhou Enlai gives these most important things as a parent. Thus becoming a true leader.

6. LIN BIAO'S ESCAPE

The second crucial sequence in the film focuses on the political struggle between Lin Biao and Mao, thus creating a binary system. In the film, Mao perceives Lin Biao's political conspiracy and sets out to inspect the south on a special train. At the same time, Lin Biao's extreme henchmen are plotting to blow up the special train in order to seek political rights. It is noteworthy that Zhou Enlai was absent from this sequence for a considerable period of time. He appears to be independent of this dualistic system, but as he deals with this incident, his image as a unifier is portrayed.

Firstly, the director sets up an effective system of hoodwinking in this tricky binary, and only Zhou Enlai is seen through the deception and deals with it in a magical way. In the presentation of the diplomatic struggle between Mao and Lin, the director uses a double narrative: on the one hand, Mao takes a special train to inspect the south. In his speech, he repeatedly mentions "no conspiracies" (as if he could see through them)（Figure 24). But on the other hand, Lin Biao's group is closely testing to ensure that the plan to blow up Mao's special train is foolproof（Figure 25). One moment, the camera is set in Mao's special train, showing Mao speaking to him in a panoramic view. The next shot, however, is a panoramic view of the train leaving the cave, and the sound of the blast. "Mao's train is blown up". As the camera pulls away, the viewer realizes that this is used as a model. This device of using contrast to heighten tension is not uncommon, and here the director succeeds in heightening the tension of the film, and in the two contrasts the audience is pulled into a pre-determined question of which of them will win (although this question has already been answered, as mentioned above, by helping the audience examine the history, assuming it is happening.). From there, a real problem is hidden by the director in the tense confrontation over how this political struggle should be resolved (because everyone knows that even if either side wins, the losing side will see a purge, as all struggles do). Zhou Enlai, at this very moment, appears and brings his magic (rather than logical radical approach) solution.



Figure 24

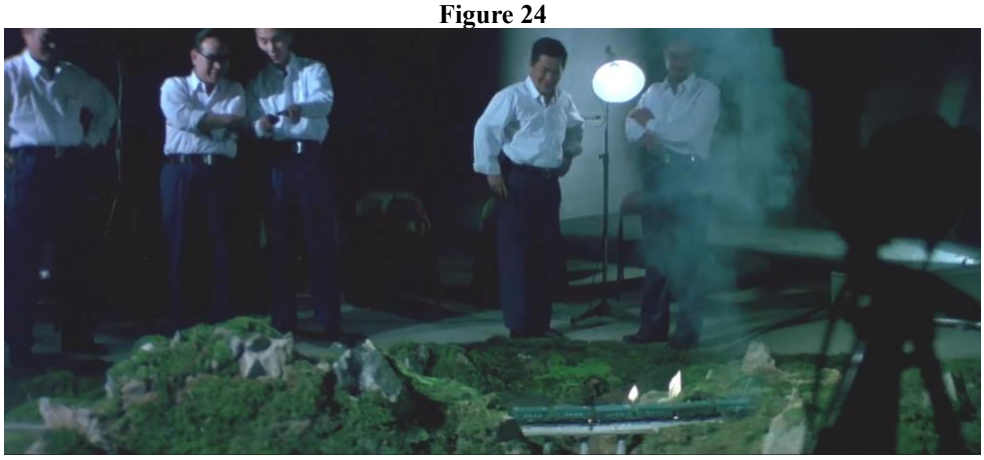


Figure 25

Secondly, in Zhou Enlai's handling of the situation, he maneuvers as the absolute leader (for he is the embodiment of morality) between the two factions (as only he can) and calls constantly to the fleeing Lin Biao's connecting plane: "Whether they land at the eastern suburban airport or the western suburban airport, I, Zhou Enlai, will be there to meet them"（Figure 26）. In the close-ups, Zhou Enlai does not show any politicized emotion, but rather reveals his concern for his rebellious child and his eagerness to see him return home, and he is again confirmed as the idealized father. Unfortunately, Lin Biao still chose to flee, and a highly dramatic scene ensued: Zhou Enlai rushed to Mao's residence to report the matter to him, while Mao said, "It's going to rain and his mother is going to marry, so let him be."[16]（Figure 27) In fact, this was a reprimand for Lin Biao's pedestrians, but also a pardon for the rest of the party. Zhou Enlai received this pardon, and so the culprit Lin Biao died in a plane crash, a

[16] A Chinese proverb that means I can't help it, let it go——Editor's Note.

sequence that was completed in the burning flames of the plane(Figure 28).In the end, Zhou Enlai banished the rebellious child and with his moral magic protected the country from crashing into the flames of political struggle.



Figure 26



Figure 27

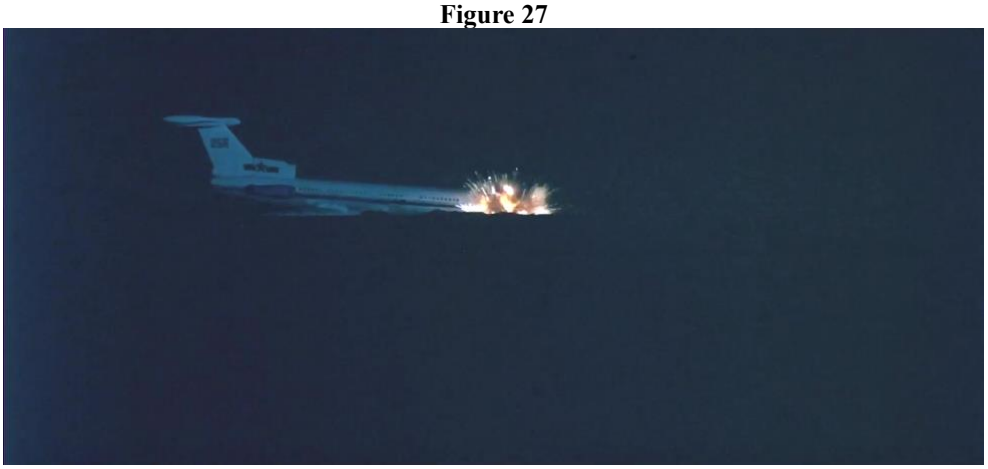


Figure 28

7. DEATH AND ETERNITY

The final major sequence of the film goes to kill Zhou Enlai, who is hospitalized after finishing his four terms in the NPC due to illness. In this sequence, Zhou Enlai's moral greatness is confirmed several times. On the other hand, in Zhou Enlai's journey toward death, his status as a great father would become a myth.

Firstly, many of Zhou Enlai's choices (although for us as viewers, all the choices in this film as a historical film are fixed. But for the characters in the film, the choices that Zhou Enlai makes are extremely important. On the one hand, it creates a great deal of suspense; on the other hand, it becomes an essential element of the audience's

involvement and makes Zhou Enlai a representative of the truth. (As in Spinoza's principle that "truth indicates itself", this is the "self-determination of an already determined character".[17]) This turns out to be true. Take, for example, Zhou Enlai's promise to He Long at the beginning of the film: "Autumn, I'll come for you in autumn!" In other words, Zhou Enlai, as the embodiment of sublime morality, overcomes all the calamities brought about by politics and conquers it to become the ideology itself.

Secondly, Zhou Enlai's father Figure is identified by all. In a series of sequences in this clip, Zhou Enlai's wife brings news of his relatives (including some unrelated but deeply affectionate people, and it is this concern of strangers that again reinforces Zhou Enlai's moral exaltation, as all are convinced by his morality). After exchanging pleasantries, Deng Yingchao (Zhou Enlai's wife) told him that Master Zhu had sent a letter and wished to visit Zhou Enlai and help him cut his hair. But Zhou Enlai's reply. "He will be sad to see me now that I am so ill, doesn't let him come." (Figure 30) This statement demonstrates a double significance - firstly, Master Zhu, who was merely Zhou Enlai's barber, had the opportunity to be able to visit him during his illness (which again reinforced Zhou Enlai's morality); secondly, the answer Zhou Enlai gave was a common one for all parents when they were ill, and he treated such a He took such a "stranger" to be his child as well. Of course, this stranger is also a member of the people, so Zhou Enlai is treating all the people as his children. The director then goes on to set up several different people to express their concern for Zhou Enlai, among them his niece and a comrade in the canteen (Figure 31). These examples still convey the same meaning as the first one and are therefore not discussed here (interestingly. Zhou Enlai also expresses his concern for Taiwan and treats it as a child. The ideology here is then too obvious and rather exposes the ideology itself.). In short, in this clip, Zhou Enlai is remembered by a distinct class of people who have come to think of him as a father.



Figure 30

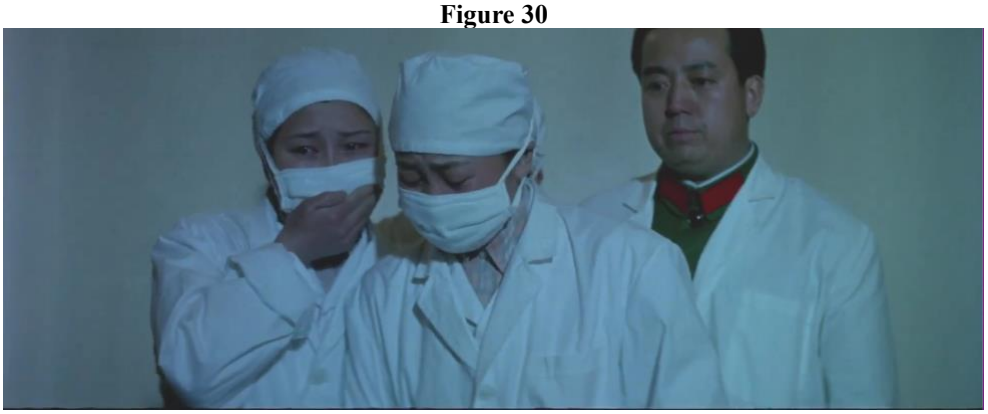


Figure 31

17



Figure 32

Finally, the image of Zhou Enlai's father is sublimated into myth with his death. In this scene, the shot of Zhou Enlai after his death is preserved by the director using an elevated shot. The close-up shot shows him with gleaming eyes and a serious, statue-like expression (Figure 33). One could say that his mythology is as shown in the sculptural form at this moment. And all the staff in the distance are weeping into the camera, their gazes directed at the viewer, a moment when the viewer's point of view is no longer stitched into the point of view of the characters in the play, but exposed directly to the screen, looking up at Zhou Enlai alongside the characters on the screen (Figure 34). This technique was also in the footage of Zhou Enlai's funeral (Figure 35). Thus a complete ideological myth is created. In the scenes near the end of the film, several empty shots are arranged in sequence (these are the places where Zhou Enlai worked) and deserted, but the myth of Zhou Enlai seems to live forever, everywhere.



Figure 33



Figure 34

Figure 35

8. CONCLUSION

In summary, the film *Zhou Enlai* uses ideological devices such as morality, fatherhood, and the telling of myths to create the image of a divine Zhou Enlai. By analysing these techniques and the role of key meanings in the individual sequences, it is possible to ultimately link the meanings of the individual sequences and conclude that Zhou Enlai is portrayed as an ideological myth.

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