The Unable Individual

The Actantial Analyses of Three Chinese Films and
Discussion on Their Representations of the Individual’s Position in
Contemporary Chinese Society

Jenni Peisa
Master’s Thesis
University of Helsinki
Faculty of Arts
Institute for Asian and African Studies
Department of East-Asian Studies
Professor Juha Janhunen
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1. INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will focus on three contemporary Chinese films, *Incense* (Xianghuo, 2003), *Beijing Bicycle* (Shiqi sui de danche, 2001), and *South of the Clouds* (Yun de nanfang, 2004). My interest was originally drawn to these films by the personal observation that quite a few Chinese films from the turn of the 21st century, including these ones, seemed to tell very similar stories. They typically portrayed a male individual setting out to pursue a seemingly moderate goal. In the process of pursuing this goal, the lead character, however, always ran into one obstacle after another, in some cases even being forced to compromise his values to overcome them. In the end, most often, not only had the lead character not achieved his goal, but it had apparently also become impossible for him to achieve it in the perceivable future. The lead character’s inability to achieve his goal was usually also accentuated by him having to try to succeed on his own. In these films the role of the other characters seemed to be either to be willing but unable to help the lead character, or just to obstruct and/or take advantage of him. The drama in these films did not generally revolve around the intimate interpersonal relationships between characters, or around the lead character’s inner reactions, but around the lead character’s very concrete adversities. The overall impression was generally a picture of one man struggling to make it alone, in a society that is not on his side.

I found this remarkably pessimistic picture these films represented of the individual’s position in society to be very interesting and definitely something that demands further study. A study into this subject, however, requires closer examination of the films, and in this thesis there is only space for a limited number of such analyses. Thus, I have selected the three films, *Incense*, *Beijing Bicycle*, and *South of the Clouds* from among the other possible films, such as *Cala, My Dog!* (Kala shi tiao gou, 2003), *Uniform* (Zhifu, 2003), and *Rainclouds Over Wushan* (Wushan yun yu 1996). I find the three selected films to be the most representative of the phenomenon, but to also vary to some degree. In this thesis I will, then, examine how the individual, his relationships with others, and his possibilities in society are portrayed in these three films. These questions also form the research problem for this thesis. The results from these three films can obviously not, as such, be generalised.

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1 Which I have already previously analysed in my bachelor thesis ”An Actantial Analysis of the Contemporary Chinese Film *Incense*”. 
to apply to the other possible films. However, they will pave the way and suggest some directions for possible further studies into the subject. Also, I consider a study of the three films to be significant as it is, each one of the films also constituting a significant representation in its own right.

To study the individual’s position in these films I have chosen to use A.J. Greimas’s structuralist semiotic theory regarding the actantial structure of discourses. It is quite well known as a tool in the analyses of discourses. Basically, according to Greimas’s theory, all discourses, including films, share common structures, one of which is the actantial structure. This structure includes the actants: sender and receiver, subject and object, and helper and opponent, which are positions that can be represented by various and multiple characters and instances in the actual discourse. To describe the positions simply, the sender communicates to the receiver, who generally coincides with the subject, the object the subject is to pursue, and the helper and the opponent help and oppose the subject in his pursuit of the object. By analysing the films by applying this structure to them I expect to discover the underlying dynamics of these films. Finding out which characters and instances actually represent these positions in the films will presumably give answers to the questions about the individual’s position in society. An important aim is also to find out if there are commonalities in the actantial dynamics of all of the three films, in other words: is it, indeed, possible to define a common typology of the films.

Though I have just described Greimas’s theory regarding the actantial structure in very simple terms, it is actually much more complicated and also forms only one part of Greimas’s very complex theoretical construction. The actantial structure has, however, very often been separated from its original theoretical context and presented as a very simple “actantial model” that can be applied to, pretty much, anything. As, in my opinion, this simplified model, most often, leaves out too much of Greimas’s theory, I will attempt to incorporate into my approach more of the essential components related to the actantial structure, while still concentrating only on this part of Greimas’s theory. One of the aims of this thesis, then, is also to see if it is possible to separate this part of Greimas’s theory as its own relevant entity with more of the components and details still attached, and if it is

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2 See e.g. Åberg 2000: 128-130.
possible to apply it in this form to discourses in a sensible way. What I believe to facilitate the application in the analyses of the films, is that the films I have decided to test, so to say, this theory on, are all relatively simple.

As described, the main aim of this thesis is still, nevertheless, to see how the individual, his relationships with others, and his possibilities in society are portrayed in the three films. An aspect that highlights the relevance of these questions is that the films can be considered as representations of contemporary Chinese society and its state. One must, however, remember that the films are precisely and only that: re-presentations. The “real” or actual China can not be considered to present itself in these films, but it is, instead, re-presented and interpreted by the filmmakers. Because of the films’ relation to the socially aware realistic tradition in Chinese filmmaking, there is, however, reason to believe that these films are intended to, if not completely realistically portray contemporary Chinese society, than to comment on its state. This gives rise to one more question: why have just these kinds of representations of the society emerged at just this time?

My interest in this question relates to the fact that this thesis is part of the research project The Chinese Individual: Negotiations of Rights and Responsibilities, conducted by researchers from China and the Nordic countries, headed by the University of Oslo. The main objective of the research project is to study and gain an understanding of the changes taking place in the position of and in the concepts related to the individual in contemporary China. My thesis, then, relates to the project as a textual analysis of three contemporary cinematic texts in which negotiations of the individual and its position seem to be at the forefront. One of the central theoretical approaches of the research project has been to see the changes taking place in China as relating to the process of “individualisation”, usually considered in the form theorised by Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. In this thesis, after having completed the analysis of how the individual’s position is portrayed in the three films, I will also look to this theory to see if it could possibly be used to explain some of the findings. On the other hand, I will obviously also

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3 Which include all the different persons that take part in the process of making the films.
4 Which will be discussed in in the following chapter.
want to see if the findings, in fact, seem to support or question the adequacy of this theory and the related suppositions of the research project.

In this thesis I will proceed by first presenting some of the central and relevant features of the Chinese cinema tradition. Seeing these films in the context of their tradition can increase the understanding of certain characteristics in the films, and also give some insight into how these films could and possibly should be interpreted. After this I will present the theoretical framework of the thesis. The main focus will be on Greimas’s theory and questions relating to its application, but the basic concepts of individualisation will also be described in brief. Subsequently I will perform the actual actantial analyses of the three films, which will form the major part of this thesis. Finally I will collect the common results of the analyses and discuss them primarily in the light of the individualisation thesis.

The main research material in the thesis consists of the three films. Incense (Xianghuo, 2003) is the graduation work of director Ning Hao from Beijing Film Academy. It has been shown, for example, at Hong Kong International Film Festival in 2004, but has not been widely distributed. The language used in the film is Mandarin Chinese, and the film has been viewed with English subtitles on DVD format. Beijing Bicycle (Shiqi sui de danche, 2001) is directed by Wang Xiaoshuai and has been produced as a co-production of Chinese, Taiwanese, and French companies. The film has received theatrical and DVD distribution in several countries, including Finland. The language of the film is Mandarin Chinese, and the film has been viewed on DVD format with English and Chinese subtitles. South of the Clouds (Yun de nangfang, 2004) is directed by Zhu Wen and produced by a Chinese production company. It has mainly been distributed at international film festivals. The language of the film is primarily Mandarin Chinese, with some short parts of the dialogue in local Yunnanese dialects. The film has been viewed on VHS format with English subtitles.

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2. FEATURES IN CHINESE CINEMA TRADITION

Film originally came to China over a hundred years ago, around the same time as it rapidly spread throughout the world at the end of the 19th century. Though obviously these hundred and more years have seen styles and trends come and go, and conditions for filmmaking change sometimes dramatically, there are still common threads that form the tradition(s) of Chinese cinema. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar (2006: 75-82) have argued that the hegemonic mode in Chinese cinema throughout has been realism, which from early on, however, has most often been merged with melodramatic styles. The centrality of realism originated from its association with the concepts of modernity and national salvation in the first half of the 20th century, and was maintained for ideological reasons. Unlike in the West, in China romanticism was also seen as a revolutionary force that offered liberation from the Confucian tradition. As these aspects combined the resultant mixed mode of “melodramatic realism” offered a long lasting model for presenting questions of right and wrong and of the need for transformation in the different prevailing social contexts. In this chapter we see this main tradition as the relevant context for the films in our analysis, and will concentrate on features related to it.

Though it is possible to speak of the lineage of a general mode of melodramatic realism in Chinese cinema, the mode itself can not be simply defined as a list of common features. The styles and conventions are diverse, and accordingly the different realisms are always qualified by various prefixes that refer to their particular characteristics. (Ibid. 75.) They have, for example, been differentiated into the “social realism” of the 1930’s, the “critical realism” of the 1940’s, and the “socialist realism” of the 1950’s and -60’s (Zhang 2004: 105). As a uniting feature Berry and Farquhar (2006: 76-107) have, however, linked the different types of realisms to the representation of the “family-home” (jia) as the site where the complex changes taking place in society and nation are played out. Whether the family-home has been divided as a symbol for the divided nation, as in the films of the

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6 Mode refers to a level above genre, for example, if horror films compose a genre, then fantasy is the above mode they belong to (Berry 2008).

7 As another mode in Chinese cinema Berry and Farquhar define the operatic mode that stems from the long Chinese opera tradition and includes, among others, the revolutionary opera films of the Cultural Revolution, and the many martial arts films (2006: 47-74).

8 It is also often especially the women of the family that are central in representing these changes. See e.g. Cui 2003 and Tang 2003.
1930’s and -40’s, or disintegrated and emptied out, questioning the revolutionary myth, as for example in some of the Fifth generation\(^9\) films of the 1980’s, it has still retained its centrality. The emphasis on the representation of the collective, rather than of a single individual, could also be a prominent cultural feature in Chinese cinema more generally, as Berry has preliminarily suggested that this practise is supported by camera positioning in Chinese films.\(^10\) In any case the serious attitude towards cinema as a medium intrinsically concerned with social questions, has been prominent and has also remained so in the development of Chinese cinema (Tang 2003: 647-649).

These features are also related to the melodramatic quality of the mode. For example, family is considered to generally have an important position in what is defined as melodrama (Dissanayake 1993a: 4). Some of the constitutive characteristics of the originally Western concept of melodrama are the schematisation of good and evil, emotionality, excessive expression, characterisation of the individual as victim, and portraying the relationship between the individual and society as a matter of justice. Though these features and the related conceptualisations can not be simply projected onto the Chinese context, there are still many undeniable parallels in Chinese cinema. (Browne 1994: 40-43.) China had had its own tradition with some melodramatic qualities long before the coming of cinema, so the question is not merely of absorbed foreign influences (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 79). For example, heavy sentimentalism had been part of the Chinese narrative tradition along with the pedagogic and moralistic emphasis before they ever surfaced in the films of the 1930’s that also linked personal struggles with social questions (Pang 2002: 200-203). Because of certain melodramatic features specifically in the films of the 1930’s and -40’s, and of the early 1980’s, these films have often been

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\(^{9}\) The “generations” are a categorisation of Chinese filmmakers used in China. The First Generation are the first people who made films in China at the turn of the century. The Second Generation are the filmmakers of the 1930’s and -40’s and the Third Generation are the filmmakers of the beginning of the People’s Republic. The Fourth Generation was educated before the Cultural Revolution, but began making films only after it was over. The most famous is the Fifth Generation that was the first class to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy after the Cultural revolution in 1982. The Sixth Generation are the independent and underground filmmakers of the 1990’s. This division has lost some of its relevance, since most of the filmmakers today can not easily be divided into groups based on their backgrounds or styles.

\(^{10}\) His studies proved that positive connotations were attached to containing a group or a couple in the same shot, whereas separate individual’s positions were only portrayed at moments of failure and collapse of harmony. (1991a: 37-39.)
analysed as melodrama. However, melodrama as such is not actually part of the Chinese genre system (Browne 1994: 40). Also, none of the Asian languages actually even have a proper synonym for the word melodrama (Dissanayake 1993a: 3-4). It is thus probably more sensible to speak of these melodramatic features as qualities of the realist mode, as Berry and Farquhar have suggested.

Because of its strong positive connotations the term realism also retained its central position in the communist rhetoric after the formation of the People’s Republic in 1949. It was named the official aesthetic, as its mission the consolidation of the new social order. What was first “socialist realism” based on a Soviet model, became “socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism” in 1958. In both, social progress based on class struggle was idealised, and characters stereotyped as class heroes and villains. (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 90-91.) Notable is that these films rarely dealt with contemporary issues which were not supposed to be viewed critically, but concentrated on portraying the evils of the time before communism (Pickowicz 1993: 313-315). Of the time of the Cultural Revolution suffice it to say that primarily only carefully constructed propagandistic “model operas” in the “operatic mode” were made. We consider the style and content of the decidedly socialist cinema after 1949 to be so removed from the realisms that had preceded and were to follow in the Reform Era that this period will not be presented further in the following overview.  

2.1 Early Cinema and the Golden Ages

The first film exhibition in China took place in Shanghai 1896, when “Western shadowplays” were shown in a local entertainment complex as attractions. Chinese film production started in 1909 with short films, and in the following years varying types of

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12 Talking about melodrama in the context of the 1930’s Pang (2002: 202) has also noted that “[t]he term melodrama, or any concept similar to it, in fact never appeared in the writings of the filmmakers or of the film critics in the 1930s”.

13 See footnote 7.

14 This is not to imply that cinema in the People’s Republic, before the Reform Era, should be written off as mere propaganda. For more information about this period see e.g. “Chinese Cinema: Culture and Politics Since 1949” (Clark 1987).
short films, including partly improvised plays, ancient plays, newsreels, and education films, to name a few, were made. Feature length films were first made in the beginning of the 1920’s, when also the most influential studio of the time, Mingxing, emerged in Shanghai, where the whole film industry came to be stationed. Mingxing adopted a more serious attitude towards cinema, and wanted to promote reform through “social films”. However, the realities of the time, i.e. the audience’s tastes and also the Nationalist Government’s stances, forced them to make films that were not too profound and did not offer social problems any radical solutions. Although this pedagogic enlightening approach to film became popular at some studios, the majority of all the films made in the 1920’s were entertainment films such as costume dramas, comedies, martial arts films, and films about the super natural. (Zhang 2004: 13-57.)

During this time the Chinese intellectual world was very active, and the May Fourth Movement in 1919 and the related New Culture Movement had already been set in motion. Although all the groups associated with these movements aspired to strengthen Chinese culture, differing views of the way this was to be done competed. During the late 1920’s the left prevailed with most support, and groups such as the Chinese League of Left-wing Writers and the Chinese Left-wing Dramatist Association were established in the early 1930’s. At the same time the film industry, however, had been very little affected by all this. (Pang 2002: 19-21.) In the 1920’s almost all of the people working in film had come from a theatre background and had had no connections to the New Culture Movement (Zhang 2004: 54). At that time film had also still been considered as worthless entertainment, and very few intellectuals had been interested in it. All of this changed, though, first with the Lianhua studio, and later the Mingxing studio recruiting leftist writers, and with the spreading of leftist film criticism to most newspapers. Soon almost the whole film industry was taken over by leftist filmmakers\textsuperscript{15}, whose social realism became immensely popular with the Chinese audience, still succeeding in evading censorship from the nationalist government for the most part. (Pang 2002: 31-52.)

Realism, in the so called Golden Age of the 1930’s, should thus be seen in the context of the left-wing writing tradition. Originally the Western concept of realism which propagated

\textsuperscript{15} The relationship between the communists and these and later movements are complex. For more information about the connections specifically in cinema see e.g. Pang 2002: 37-69.
objectiveness had empowered the intellectuals to question traditional China. They had, however, moulded the concept to suit their purposes by appropriating it with their own political concerns. Realism was thus more of a political or philosophical notion than a set of stylistic conventions. (Ibid. 198-199.) Regarding style, there was a debate between the proponents of a more entertaining and artistic “soft-cinema” and the filmmakers of the leftist “hard-cinema”, but all in all the films of this time were mostly melodramatic (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 83). The left-wing filmmakers success, in fact, resulted from their ability to combine their ideological social realism with the narrative tradition that emphasised sentimentalism and pedagogy, which they managed to do by presenting social struggle in the form of the individual’s personal struggle (Pang 2002: 201-202).17

These films, such as for example The Goddess (Shennü, 1934), often depicted the stories of working-class people and for example prostitutes, as in The Goddess, and their miserable and tragic lives. Class exploitation and bourgeois lifestyles were brought to the front in the form of moral battles between good and evil. Stories that represented fights against bandits and warlords also implied the threat of imperialist invasion and the urgency of national salvation. The films encouraged fighting instead of compromising and they usually had an optimistic or utopian ending. (Zhang 2004: 79.) In the films of the 1930’s even war was still seen as a hope for China’s future. As the stories of individual and family destinies in these films were representative of the problems of the society as a whole, the characters were mostly type figures that could not escape the political realities presented in these films. The main device of the films was the emotional identification with the characters, which privileges the emotional coherence of the films, instead of necessarily the congruence with the “real” world. For example, narrative structures that might be seen to diminish realism, such as the story spanning a long time, even decades, and the past being told through flashbacks, were used to create a strong emotional connection to the characters. Otherwise all images shown and sounds heard in these films were usually diegetic, which is usually considered to support the realistic feel. (Pang 2002: 203-222.)

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16 Pang uses the term socialist-realism, but is clearly referring to what has been called social realism in this thesis.

17 Paul Pickowicz (1993: 301-302) has actually claimed that the leftist filmmakers that aspired to transpose the ideals of the May Fourth tradition to cinema failed because they became “captives of melodrama” which necessarily simplifies the message of the film and is hostile to realism.

18 I.e. are part of the fictional world.
The beginning of the war with Japan in 1937, strongly affected the film industry in China. Shanghai was partially occupied, and many filmmakers left, either for different places inland, where filmmaking mostly consisted of shooting documentaries, or for Hong Kong, where they could make nationalistic Mandarin films. Some filmmakers also stayed on the “orphan island” of the unoccupied concessions in Shanghai, where a boom of cheap commercial films kept them employed, and adaptations of contemporary fiction and drama were only in the minority. After the Japanese occupied the rest of Shanghai in 1941, the business of making films became more difficult, but still continued. After the war was over in 1945, old filmmakers started to return to Shanghai, and the second “Golden Age” began. What is called the second Golden Age of Chinese cinema, is often also seen as a continuum of the original Golden Age of the 1930’s that was just interrupted by the war. Needles to say that, since most of the filmmakers were also the same people as in the 1930’s, many of the qualities of the films remained the same. Although cheap entertainment films were still made, two studios, Lianhua which became Kunlun, and Wenhua, became prominent in making quality films with contemporary subjects again. (Zhang 2004: 83-104.)

According to film historian Ding Yaping, what carried over from the pre-war films were the themes of exposing class conflict and bourgeois lifestyles, dramatising the misery of the working class, and endorsing collectivity instead of individuality. The family was the microcosm of the society undergoing radical transformation, women embodied conflicting values, and the intellectuals’ perspectives were still favoured. What was new was the urgent sense of political intervention, the emphasis put on realistic, as opposed to idealistic, representation, and the willingness to reach out to the masses.¹⁹ For the audiences in Shanghai the post-war time was a time of disillusionment and despair, the urban malaise that prevailed being connected to the dislocations of war. These new post-war epics, like The Spring River Flows East (Yijiang chunshui xiang dong liu, 1947), tried to depict this psychological reality of the time and to answer how victory in the war could still feel like defeat. As the films were great hits, they apparently succeeded in this. (Pickowicz 2000: 365-368.)

These tragic stories of the wartime sufferings and destinies of families were indeed more realistic and critical than their pre-war counterparts in that they did not offer happy endings. The families that had been torn apart were not united after the war. The war was seen as a time when even good people could become bad people, and after the war the corruption was anything but over. In these films the characterisation is still quite simplistic and melodramatic. The divisions between good and evil, strong and weak, and selfless and selfish were connected to class divisions, the urban bourgeoisie having the worst image. The question the films presented was, why did the ones who sacrificed the most benefit the least, and the ones who sacrificed the least benefit the most. These characterisations were also quite static, though at times the weak men that started out as good, became corrupted by the wartime society. Men in general were represented as the weaker sex somehow also responsible for the state the society was in, female characters having a much stronger role. (Ibid. 365-396.)

2.2 The Reform Era and Beyond

The Cultural Revolution officially ended in 1976, and as a step in the new considerably more liberal direction, economic reforms were initiated at the end of 1978. At the time the film industry in China was still very much unorganised. There had not really been much film industry during the Cultural Revolution, so just getting started took some time. As the industry was reviving itself, also questions of what the future cinema should be like arose. The people who first started making films were older Fourth and even Third Generation filmmakers. Right at the beginning of this era, after the fall of the Gang of Four, films based on the literary genre of “literature of scars” were made. These films told the “real” stories of the Cultural Revolution, depicting the bitter destinies of normal people that had been wronged. The most radical ones were soon banned though. (Kwok & Quiquemelle 1987: 195-196.)

In this vein the well known director Xie Jin also began directing stories of individuals and families that had suffered during the past years of communist rule but in the end got retribution for the injustices they had been through. These highly emotional dramas, for example *Hibiscus Town* (Furong zhen, 1986), were well received by the audiences and also
accepted by the authorities, as they showed that in the end the party always corrects its mistakes. (Zhang 2004: 229-230.) These films were appealing because they offered catharsis for the audience that was dealing with a moral crisis. In the 1930’s and -40’s films had similarly tackled the moral crisis of the time by portraying wronged innocence in the struggle between good and evil.\(^{20}\) Because of these features both of these cinemas are often depicted as melodrama. (Pickowicz 1993: 313-323.)\(^{21}\) As film theory and filmmaking developed and opened up more, Xie Jin was attacked for his film style that became to be known as the “Xie Jin Model”. The model was said to include a pattern where the good are wronged, values are discovered, morality is changed by persuasion and ultimately the good triumphs over evil. This and the obedient role of women in his films were criticised for holding back the development of Chinese culture. (Zhu 1990: 144-146.)

In the theoretical circles around Chinese cinema in the early 1980’s there was a long and heated discussion on the “new concept of cinema”, brought on by the theories of the well known realist André Bazin. Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer’s theories about the ontological connection of cinema to the real made realism a hit concept of the time. Realism was used to criticise the overly literal and overly theatrical nature of Chinese contemporary cinema, as well as to promote many other causes. (Semsel, Xia, and Hou 1990a: 55-57.) Because of the confusion around this term, it was later even used to defend Xie Jin’s films presenting his virtue being how realistically his characters represent their time (Wu 1990: 179-80). Filmmakers were also an important part of this discussion and the new concept was put into action with various realistic methods such as long take and naturalistic lighting as guidelines. The concept still remained quite open though, more as a mentality of representing things truthfully. (Semsel, Xia, and Hou 1990a: 55-57.)

The Fifth Generation also started making films at the beginning of the 1980’s. They too had familiarised themselves with Bazin and Kracauer’s theories at the Beijing Film Academy and also used many of the realistic techniques. However, overall their style was more avant-garde, as their allegorical films dealt with national and cultural traditions. (Zhang 2004: 235-238.) Their style could actually be seen as “poetic realism” that is more

\(^{20}\) In these two cinemas the instances that represent the good and the evil are, however, opposite. Whereas in the 1930’s and -40’s socialist revolution was expected to expel evil, in these films of the 1980’s the agents of the Communist Party are actually the evil ones. (Pickowicz 1993: 321.)

\(^{21}\) See pages 8-9 in this thesis.
ambiguous and symbolical and often depicts promise and failure with a fatalistic and melancholic mood. Wanting to break from the melodramatic, a new aesthetics was launched in these films which along with realistic elements incorporated more unusual aesthetic approaches. (Berry and Farquhar 2006: 78-107.) During the 1980’s the economic reforms gradually advanced and also changed the nature of the film industry. Many of the Fifth Generation filmmakers also felt this at the state owned studios that were now steered towards self-sufficiency and commercialisation, and had to reconsider their positions. (Zhang 2004: 238-240.)

For the cinema, the beginning of the 1990’s was, on the one hand a time of ever intensifying commercialism, and on the other hand a politically sensitive time. The government still supported the making of nationalistic propaganda films, but otherwise filmmakers worked within a market driven film industry. Fifth Generation filmmakers primarily continued with exotic historical films that had become successful for them especially abroad. Also other commercial and entertainment films were made, now some with new qualities such as a new urban flavour or a satirical touch. Films that somehow questioned the ruling ideology had a difficult time, as censorship was stricter in the aftermath of the Tian’anmen Incident in 1989. (Ibid. 281-289.)

In the 1990’s the films most concerned with realism, could perhaps be said to have been the so called Sixth Generation films, which were also the films most in opposition with the official ideology. The Sixth Generation is a term that has been used of at least three different groups, most commonly though of the independent self or European financed directors who made their films outside of the state censorship system. The Sixth Generation’s films, in the beginning of the 1990’s, were usually made with very little money which affected the stylistic qualities of the films. Their style was naturalistic in that the films were usually shot on location and used amateur actors and cheap equipment. The filmmakers’ goal was to study the “real” China, the people and happenings around them, as

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22 In 1994 a group of filmmakers were forbidden from making films and making films outside of the state system was outlawed. See e.g. Rayns 1994. These persons are usually considered as members of the Sixth Generation.

23 It has also been applied to young directors who graduated in the late 1980’s or early ’90’s, and the documentary filmmakers that were associated with the nomadic art group in Beijing (Dai 2002: 74-75.)

24 Here we refer to the Sixth Generation films specifically of the beginning of the 1990’s, since after this their styles may have changed considerably.
they truly were, and they often turned to depicting the (at least mentally) outcasts of the society. The unattached objectivity with which they witnessed and portrayed their subjects with their cameras became their trademark. (Dai 2002: 71-97.)

The films, like *The Days* (*Dongchun de rizi*, 1993), showed the anxiety and difficulty of surviving in the new society, where poverty, unemployment, divorce and other such phenomena, denied the young males of these films the possibility of a tolerable life (Guo 2005: 328). Instead of telling moral stories, these films usually just followed and depicted the young male’s everyday life, concentrating on the sense of the moment. Often, the plots were only structured on the vague chronology of the different problems in the characters’ lives. The lead characters were always male, and it has been claimed that the supporting female characters were marginalised as mere bystanders or objects in the narcissistic world of male angst. (Donald 2000: 105-109.)

With the passing of time the Sixth Generation has merged with other independent filmmakers to form a more general group of independent filmmakers. What has remained a common feature is depicting marginal and ordinary people, who would not otherwise be seen or heard in Chinese cinema, at an equal level without patronising agendas. Though the approach is often explained by the filmmakers as their desire to portray reality or the real China, Yingjin Zhang (2006: 23-41) has argued that the question is actually more of subjectivity than objectivity or realism. What is most often depicted in the films is what the filmmakers perceive as truth or reality, which can also include very personal points of view. Zhang has also noted that independent filmmakers rarely use the term realism in connection with their works, which is probably because of the term’s strong associations to all the different traditions the term has been attached to.

The three films in our analysis, *Incense* (*Xianghuo* 2003), *Beijing Bicycle* (*Shiqi sui de danche* 2001), and *South of the Clouds* (*Yun de nanfang* 2004) can be situated in this tradition of independent filmmaking. *Beijing Bicycle* director Wang Xiaoshuai is one of the original Sixth Generation filmmakers, but both the director of *Incense*, Ning Hao, and the director of *South of the Clouds*, Zhu Wen, have started making films more recently. The

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25 For the different terms and positions attached to this group see “Preface” in "From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China" (Pickowicz and Zhang 2006a).
subject matters, themes and styles of all of the films, however, tie them closely to the tradition. Stylistically all the films employ realistic methods like long takes, minimal camera movement, slow pace editing, on the location shooting, naturalistic lighting and so forth. Ning Hao (2004a) and Zhu Wen (2004) have both also commented on the realistic quality of their films in interviews. For Ning Hao realism was simply the style that best suited that particular story. For Zhu Wen, instead, realism is something more serious; in his opinion film should always represent real life.
3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of this thesis. The major part of the thesis will consist of the actantial analyses of three Chinese films, using A.J. Greimas’s semiotic theory regarding the actantial structure of discourses. This part of his theory is often described autonomously, basically as a model, containing six interdependent actants that can be used as a tool for the analysis of various types of discourses. For example, Louis Hébert (2006) summarises the function of the "model" as follows: "The actantial model is a device that can theoretically be used to analyse any real or thematized action, but particularly those depicted in literary texts or images. In the actantial model, an action may be broken down into six components, called actants. Actantial analysis consists of assigning each element of the action being described to the various actantial classes.” In Greimas’s original theory, however, the structure is actually a part of a much larger theoretical construct, and it itself also includes features that are more complicated than could at first look seem. Because of this, one has to look at the whole theory first, to be able to better grasp all that is involved in the actantial structure. With this purpose in mind, the first subchapter attempts to offer a general overview of A.J. Greimas and his theory, and of the context the theory originated and developed in.

The second subchapter focuses specifically on the part of the theory that will be used in the analysis, i.e. on aspects related to the actantial structure. Both the development and details of these aspects will be described. Though the theory is a whole, in the end, this part of it does seem to lend itself to be used separately quite reasonably. The third subchapter, however, discusses exactly how this theory can and will be applied to the analysis of the films, and what kinds of questions it raises. In our later analysis the theory will actually work more as a method for approaching and organising the material than as a theory explaining it. Consequently after having completed the analyses of the films, we will collect their results and try to shed some light on them. In this attempt we will look to, among other things, certain concepts of the process of individualisation. In the last subchapter of this chapter we will present the core ideas of this theory, and explicate how it relates to our analysis. Since the relevant parts of the theory will be taken up again in the discussion, they will not be laid out in great detail in this chapter.
3.1 General Aspects of Greimas’s Semiotics

Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917-1992) was a Lithuanian linguist,\(^{26}\) who became established as an important figure in French structuralism, especially in semiotics, mainly in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Despite of the general fall from grace of structuralism, in the advent of post-structuralism in the late 1960’s, Greimas continued with his line of studies throughout his later life. A research group working with him and his theories, became known as the Paris School of Semiotics and also played an important role in the development of his theories. (Parret 1989: vii-ix.) Greimas is well published in French, with his central works usually cited as being *Sémantique structurale* (1966), *Du Sens* (1970), *Maupassant: La Sémiotique du texte* (1976), *Sémiotique et sciences sociales* (1976), *Semiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* (with Joseph Courtés 1979), and *Du Sens II* (1983).

His works, however, were not translated into English before the 1980’s, which is probably why his theories did not become so well known internationally. One reason for the delay in translation may have been the fact that Greimas’s texts are quite technical and at times allusive and difficult to comprehend.\(^{27}\) Throughout his work, Greimas also saw semiotics in general as a still incomplete scientific project, and the theoretical principles he had established as something that needed to be completed and transformed (Perron 1987: xxxi). Because of this, some aspects of his theories are indeed transformed in his works, and the views on some concepts and their imports may vary considerably between works. Together these factors, at times, still make it quite difficult to grasp the details of his theories, and the complete whole they comprise. On the other hand, because of the incomplete and developing nature of his theories, the reader is afforded some leeway in interpretation. Some have, indeed, taken more liberties than others in applying certain parts of Greimas’s theory separately from the intricacies of the complete theoretical construct. This trend may in part be a consequence of the lack of early comprehensive translations. (Perron 1989: 1.)

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\(^{26}\) See e.g. “Greimas, Algirdas”, in Facta-tietopalvelu [Facta-information service], <http://www.facta.fi/?aid=27378&subcat=307&acat=262>.

The most widely applied theoretical construct has, by far, been the “semiotic square”, and probably the second most famous one the “actantal model”.\(^\text{28}\)


As noted, Greimas was originally a linguist. His main focus was on a structuralist approach from early on, and in linguistics he was most influenced by Ferdinand de Saussure\(^\text{29}\) and Louis Hjelmslev. However, his main interest became semiotics\(^\text{30}\), and he actively looked for influences outside of linguistics. Claude Lévi-Strauss and Georges Dumézil in anthropology, Marcel Merleau-Ponty in phenomenology, and Vladimir Propp in folklore, among others, were important sources of influence to him.\(^\text{31}\) In addition to structuralism, phenomenology and narratology then became the intellectual traditions that guided his approach most (Parret 1989: x-xi). In structuralism the key idea is that no single element in itself is meaningful, its meaning can only be grasped in relation to other elements. These relations, furthermore, comprise a structure that has to be studied, if one wants to understand how the phenomenon of meaning in general works. According to structuralists, there are universal structures that represent the way human beings comprehend and operate

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\(^{28}\) Representative of how widespread the concepts are, is that one can find descriptions on how to apply both the semiotic square and the actantal model even in a basic study book of communication management, see Åberg 2000: 65-68, and 128-130. Searching the internet, using for example <www.google.com> services, one can find over 6000 pages for “semiotic square”, and over 1500 pages for “actantal model”, a large portion of the pages introducing the applications of these concepts (search conducted on 17.3.2008).

\(^{29}\) Who can be considered the forefather of the structuralist movement (Jackson 1991: 6-7).

\(^{30}\) Or more precisely semantics, the study of meaning. The term semiotics can denote the study of signs in general, semantics being one area of this study. These terms are, however, often used interchangeably, and in this thesis we will only use the term semiotics of this field of study. See e.g. “semantics” in Encyclopædia Britannica Online, <http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9110293>.

\(^{31}\) For an account of the different stages in the development of Greimas’s theory see “On Meaning” (Greimas 1989b).
in the world. (Hawkes 2003: 6-7.) Structuralists were generally very optimistic about being able to create a generalised theory and a scientific method that would be able to account for the phenomena in various fields of study. They were, however, attacked for being reductionist, and, for example, for not allowing for cultural specificity. (Norris 1987: ix-x.)

Greimas’s goal was definitely to create a unitary theory and method that could be used to scientifically study and explain meaning, or signification. The originally linguistic attempt to systematise the structures of language became a model for systematising the structures of meaning across all human sciences. (Schleifer 1983: xii-xv.) A premise in the project was that no meanings can be apprehended as such, but only after they have been articulated or narrativised. What became the cornerstone of Greimas’s semiotic studies then, was the development of a type of semio-narrative grammar that could account for how the meaning actually becomes articulated. It was based on the assumption that all discourses, be they figurative or abstract (philosophical, scientific, etc.), as well as other semiotic systems, possibly expressed in other than natural languages (cinema, figurative painting etc.), are organised according to similar semio-narrative principles, or structures. These principles are at work on an underlying level, below the discoursive level, in a way generating it. (Perron 1987: xxvii-xxviii.)

In the end two semio-narrative levels, a fundamental one and a surface one, and one discoursive level can be separated. The articulation of meaning moves through these levels, from the abstract at the elementary fundamental level, to the eventual manifestation at the discoursive level. This process is called the generative trajectory. (Ibid. xxviii-xxix.) The generative trajectory, as represented in diagram 1. below, incorporates the key areas of Greima’s theory. In addition to the three different levels it is also divided between the syntactic and semantic sub-components at each level. An equivalence between the levels

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32 Signification can be defined as articulated meaning, and prior to this definition it could be paraphrased as a "production of meaning" or as "meaning already produced" (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 298).

33 There is a similarity between the relationship of these levels, and de Saussure’s concepts of langue and parole, and Chomsky’s concepts of competence and performance (Hawkes 2003: 70). However, according to Greimas the model can not easily be compared to the models of generative linguistics (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 132-133).

34 To give very simple definitions of the terms syntactic and semantic, we can say that the former refers to the organisation and relations of the elements in a sentence or discourse, and the latter refers to the meanings invested in those elements. For more exhaustive definitions see e.g. “syntax” in “Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary” (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 328-330).
is presupposed, which means that, while conversion from one level to the next more complex one takes place, the basic logic and elements still remain the same on all levels.\footnote{The concrete nature of the conversion between the levels can be seen as problematic, and for example Paul Ricoeur has argued that also the figurative features at the discoursive level can bring new elements to the discourse that can not be seen as pure conversions from the lower levels. For further discussion see Ricoeur 1989 and Greimas and Ricoeur 1989.}

**Diagram 1.** (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 134.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENERATIVE TRAJECTORY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>syntactic component</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deep level</td>
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<tr>
<td>surface levels</td>
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<td>Discoursive Structures</td>
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</tbody>
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The minimal conditions for apprehending and producing signification constitute what is called the elementary structure of signification. This structure can be formulated in the form of the semiotic square, as the structure of relations between contradiction, contrariety and complementarity, as depicted in diagrams 2. and 3. below. As such it is the basis for the fundamental syntax in the generative trajectory. The elementary structure of signification is also the locus of semantic investment and putting contents into form. When projected onto the semiotic square, the contents can be perceived in semantic categories, which can represent the semantic micro-universe of a certain discourse. Certain abstract categories can hypothetically be considered semantic universals, namely the axiological structures of life and death, of the individual universe, and of nature and culture, of the
collective universe. (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 314-315.) These semantic investments constitute the other half of the deep level of semiotic and narrative structures that of fundamental semantics (Ibid. 275-276).

**Diagram 2.**

(Greimas and Courtés 1982: 309)

![Diagram 2](image)

**Diagram 3.**

(Greimas and Courtés 1982: 310)

![Diagram 3](image)

The semiotic square that can illustrate the elementary structure of signification, is also one of the central devices in Greimas’s semiotics in general. It visually represents the possible relationships born from the opposition of two terms, i.e. from binary opposition, one of the structuralist key ideas. Though the pattern itself would seem quite simple and universally adaptable, in Greimas’s semiotics it should not be considered as a purely logical construction, separate from the analysis of the semantic components involved. (Ibid. 308-311.) Its application, however, is quite widespread, and also Greimas himself has used it in varying contexts and in speaking of different levels of the generative trajectory, not just at the deep level when exploring the elementary axiological structure of a given discourse.\(^{36}\)

The semiotic square can also be used to generate metaterms, like the contradictory metaterms of truth and falseness and contrary metaterms of secret and lie in the analysis of

\(^{36}\) Greimas has used the semiotic square to analyse, for example, the figurative elements of the discourse in “Maupassant: The Semiotics of Text” (1988), see e.g. pages 43 and 70.
the contrary terms of being and seeming as represented in diagram 3. above on the right (Ibid. 310).

In the generative trajectory the levels of surface narrative syntax and narrative semantics constitute the surface levels of the semiotic and narrative structures. At the surface levels more specific choices have to be made, before final discoursive structures can come into play. The initial deep level only operated with terms and abstract concepts, which now have to be converted into a more concrete form and made to take anthropomorphic shape. On the syntax’s side the most basic structure is the elementary narrative utterance, which contains a function and the actants that are related by this function in the utterance. (Ibid. 332-333.) In utterances of state the function is junction, either conjunction or disjunction, between the subject and object (Ibid. 363). In utterances of doing the function is a transformation of that junction by a subject that can be the same or different than the subject of the junction. Thus the utterance of doing governs the utterance of state, and this kind of a structure can be called a narrative program. It is an elementary syntagm, or unit, of the surface narrative syntax. (Ibid. 245.) Narrative programs can be simple or complex, and instrumental narrative programs can be integrated within a base narrative program. Modal utterances can also be connected to narrative programs, since modalities like wanting-to and being-able-to can affect their realisation. (Ibid. 333.)

A chain of connected and subordinate narrative programs forms a narrative trajectory, most prominently that of the subject-actant, central in the whole discourse (Ibid. 207). The subject-actant is one of the actants of narration, which include both subject and object and sender and receiver. The narrative trajectory of an actant, whichever it may be, represents this actant’s position in the discourse as a whole. The actants occupying these positions can be called functional actants, and they subsume the different actantial roles present at different stages of the narrative trajectory, i.e. the different narrative programs that make up the trajectory. (Ibid. 5-6.) The syntax at the surface level is also affected by a polarised structure, according to which the different narrative trajectories of the narrative

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37 In linguistic terms the function would be a predicate (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 332).
38 Also the helper and opponent are often mentioned as actants. This will be discussed further at a later stage in this chapter.
39 The actants of the narrative programs can also be called syntactic actants to separate them from the functional actants of the whole discourse (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 5).
discourse can come into contact with each other, in either a polemic or a contractual relationship (Ibid. 333). The relations of the actants, or the actantial model\textsuperscript{40}, are part of the surface narrative syntax, but they are also instrumental on the semantic side. At the surface level the virtual values of fundamental semantics have to be actualised, and they can only be actualised as the objects of value in junction with the subject. (Ibid. 277.)

Finally, the generative trajectory arrives at the discoursive level with separate discoursive structures. This level has been less studied in Greimasian semiotics, maybe in part because the analysis of the practise of this level has been so extensive in other fields of study. Central concepts in the semantics of the discoursive level are thematisation and figurativisation. The objects of value the subject is in con- or disjunction with, for example freedom, are thematised as some representative theme of that value, as for example escape. This theme is still abstract, and can be concretely figurativised, as for example setting out for a faraway place. These semantic investments are spread throughout the discourse, which takes its syntactic shape according to the procedures of discoursivisation. (Ibid. 274-275.) Three syntactic procedures have been identified, and they are actorialisation, temporalisation and spatialisation, which set the discourse in time and space and invest the actants into discoursive actors (Ibid. 330.) In the case of actorialisation it must be noted that an actant can be manifested in several actors, and that an actor can manifest several actants at the same time (Greimas 1987: 106). Also, the actants are not necessarily represented by human actors, since, as described earlier, e.g. the object-actant could be freedom.

The generative trajectory, and all aspects of Greimas’s theories, include yet much more intricate and careful details than can be described here. Also, some of the concepts briefly presented here, actually have much further reaching definitions and implications, and can consequently also pop up in other contexts. The theory is primarily meant for studying meaning and the structures that generate its articulation. This is the approach of semiotics, especially structuralist semiotics. From this theoretical viewpoint, in an analysis of a given discourse, the figurative or formal elements and occurrences of that discourse are not interesting as an object of study in themselves, but because of their complicity in the

\textsuperscript{40} Which will be explained further at a later stage in this thesis.
process of signifying, of articulating meaning. The approach sees the discourse, whichever
the language or form of its manifestation, as a meaningful whole, where the separate
interrelated components together form the meanings of that discourse. (Bertrand 1989:
107-108.) The complexity of the components should also be appreciated in the analysis, as
Greimas warns against reductionist and mechanical applications (Greimas 1988: xxiv).
However, one of the practices in Greimasian semiotics has also been to analyse larger
corpuses of discourses on a more general level, and sometimes to define typologies of
some sorts.\textsuperscript{41}

In this thesis our use of Greimas’s theory will be more like defining a typology of a corpus
of works than a search for meanings. Though the theory comprehensively describes all the
components that come into play in a discourse, we will only concentrate on one part the
theory. The typology we are after is the actantial distribution of our chosen films. The
focus is thus, on the actantial positions of the surface levels of the semiotic and narrative
structures and their manifestations on the discoursive level. As we noted at the start of this
chapter, the so called actantial model has often been separated as its own entity and
promoted as a simple and general tool for the analyses of discourses. Seeing that the
actants are, however, a part of much larger theoretical constructions, we will try to
incorporate more of the relevant elements and context into our approach. While attempting
to do the theory justice, we at the same time try to get the most out of it for our purposes.
The next subchapter presents in finer detail the elements that will be part of our subsequent
analysis.

3.2 The Actantial Structure and the Modalities

3.2.1 The Development of the Main Elements

Actants and the organisation of narrative functions were central elements, already in the
early development of Greimas’s theories, elements which were later streamlined and
integrated into the surface levels of semiotic and narrative structures. The early research
owes a great deal to Vladimir Propp, who had done a study on Russian folktales in the

\textsuperscript{41} See e.g. “Paris School Semiotics II: Practice” (Perron and Collins 1989b).
1920’s. Greimas got wind of the work, translated in the late 1950’s as *Morphology of the Folktales*, from Claude Lévi-Strauss and he has later credited it as having furnished the syntactic component of his work (Greimas 1989b: 541). Propp had studied Russian folktales and described the functions that they were made up of. After studying the relationships of these functions and the characters they were attributed to, he had defined certain spheres of action and seven characters these spheres corresponded to. According to him the inventory of the functions could be reduced to 31 functions that had to be in a sequential order. (Greimas 1983: 222) Greimas saw that, with a structuralist approach, these functions and characters could be still much more reduced and freed from the sequential constraint, which he accomplished in his first book, *Structural Semantics* (1983, originally *Sémantique structurale* 1966).

Greimas first turned to the seven characters, which he reformulated as the opposing actant-pairs of subject vs. object and sender vs. receiver, and, with hesitation, of helper vs. opponent. The defining relation between subject and object was desire that could be manifested as the subject’s quest for the object. The sender’s and the receiver’s relation was that of communication. The helper and opponent again appeared to Greimas more as circumstnants that, as partial formulations of the subject, affect his abilities. A strategic consideration was that these actants were not necessarily tied to a single representative character in the narrative. Based on Propp’s material Greimas then constructed a model, depicted in diagram 4., where the object of the subject’s desire is also the object of communication. (Ibid. 197-207.) This is the form in which the so called actantial model has usually come to be known, though Greimas himself has rarely referred back to it in this particular graphic form.42

**Diagram 4.** (Greimas 1983: 207)

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  sender ← object → receiver
   ↑       helper → subject ← opponent
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42 For example Ronald Schleifer has used this model, adding to the diagram the concepts of knowledge to describe the axis between sender and receiver, of desire between subject and object, and of power between helper and opponent. See e.g. Schleifer 1987: 103.
The reduction of Propp’s 31 functions subsequently led to the formulation of the canonical narrative schema, a syntagmatic organisation of the narrative functions in the discourse. The schema\(^\text{43}\) presents an initial contract between the subject and the sender, who communicates the sought after values to the subject. This leads the subject to acquire competence through a qualifying test, and then to performance, where confrontation or transaction with an opponent\(^\text{44}\) takes place, which is called a decisive test. The fulfilment of the initial contract, and values, is then judged by the sender by a glorifying test. (Bertrand 1989: 113.) The schema was initially primarily seen as the program of performance by the subject, but when focus was shifted to the object of value, with which the subject is in turns disjoined and conjoined, it was seen as a series of transfers of that object, which other subjects are also pursuing. This highlighted the polemic nature of the narrative schema. This schema was, however, basically based on just the limited corpus of the Russian folktale, and its organisation could not be presumed to definitively represent all narratives. Its basic components were nevertheless deemed general enough to keep as a possible reference model. (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 203-206.)

The concern to widen the area of application to cover distinct discourses took the theory in a more formalised semio-linguistic direction (Greimas 1987: 63). The functions were turned into sentences, or utterances, with the function relating the actants (Greimas 1989b: 542). As described in the context of the surface levels of semiotic and narrative structures in the previous sub-chapter\(^\text{45}\), the utterances of state and doing form narrative programs, which in turn form the narrative trajectories present in a given discourse. The crux of the narrative programs, and hence of the whole discourses comprised of these narrative programs via the narrative trajectories, is the changes in junctions between the subject and object. This obviously gives rise to the actants subject and object, and the trajectory of the subject, but it does not give reasons for the existence of the actants sender and receiver. The sender’s domain was since explained as transcendent in relation to the subject’s narrative trajectory, and his function as the framing of the subjects trajectory (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 207-208). The last significant development in Greimas’s theory, the addition of modalities, further consolidated this view. Fitting the canonical narrative schema, the

\(^{43}\) Presented here in a later and already more refined form.
\(^{44}\) Or more correctly the anti-subject. This will be discussed further at a later stage in this chapter.
\(^{45}\) See page 24 of this thesis.
sender’s trajectory then comprises of, either communicating the values and modalities to the subject, or judging his performance in the end, or both (Ibid.).

Defining the concept of modalities became an important project in Greimasian semiotics. Traditionally modality had been defined as what modifies the predicate of an utterance. This gave rise to the definition of a modal utterance that over-determines a descriptive utterance, both of which can be either utterances of state or of doing. After this primary description, different types of modalities were perceived. The most central ones seemed to be of wanting-to, having-to, being-able-to, and knowing-how-to, which could all modalise both being (or state) and doing. The aim was to define the basic model of this occurrence by inter-defining and classifying the different perceived modalities. Two considerations in this project were that, on the one hand modality was a subordinating syntagmatic structure, and that, on the other hand different representative forms of a specific modality could be attained by projecting it on the semiotic square. (Ibid. 193-195.) A good many possible modalities, their representative forms, and their combinations were indeed classified and named, and their range found to be quite wide.46

There was found to be a difference between modalising utterances of doing and utterances of state, or being. The first instance was found to deal with the subject’s competence. (Greimas 1987: 143.) The subject’s performance of a narrative program, which means his realisation of his conjunction with the object47, presupposes competence that consists of a constellation of modalities (Parret 1989: xiii). Wanting-to-do and having-to-do are virtualising modalities and being-able-to-do and knowing-how-to-do are actualising modalities, which make possible the realisation of the doing. (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 195.) The second instance of modalising utterances of state was, instead, found to affect the status of the objects of value, which the subject is in junction with, making them modalised values. The virtualising modality of wanting-to-be makes the object of value desirable, and having-to-be indispensable. The actualising being-able-to-be makes the


47 In the case of the subject’s performance, the same subject represents both the subject of doing and the subject of state (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 227).
object of value possible, and knowing-how-to-be genuine. Any object of value can also be over-determined that is, be modalised by several modalities at the same time. One must also remember that the modalities can appear in any of their representative forms found through the semiotic square. In this case the forms of, for example, having-to-be (indispensable) would also include having-not-to-be (unrealisable), not-having-to-be (fortuitous), and not-having-not-to-be (realisable). A final remark was that the modalities of wanting-to, having-to, being-able-to, and knowing-how-to, could all themselves also be posited as the object of value and again be modalised. (Greimas 1987: 140-147.)

3.2.2 Further Features of the Actantial Structure and Its Discoursive Manifestations

In accordance, and along with the elements represented above, some further refinements relating to the workings of the actantial structure and its discoursive manifestation, have to be brought up. In the actantial structure the principal relation is, in a way, the relationship between the subject and the object of value. It is what produces the doing, the narrative programs that constitute the discourse through the trajectories. Without this doing then, there would seem to be no discourse. This doing does not have to be explicit, as obviously part of the narrative programs can remain implicit in the manifested discourse (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 246). Considering the existence of the virtualising and actualising modalities, however, one should also be able to describe a discourse where no realised doing actually takes place, be it explicit or implicit.

The doing that does take place in the discourse, can be related to at least two separate dimensions. The first is the pragmatic dimension that covers concrete doing and competence, and concrete subjects and objects. The other dimension is cognitive, which deals with similar but knowing/knowledgable instances. (Ibid 32-33.) Jacques Fontanille has

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48 These names for the modalities are only tentative, not absolute (Greimas 1987: 145).
49 Basing his study on the projection of the concept of doing on the semiotic square, Peter Stockinger (1989) has argued that, for example, the maintenance of a state should be considered a doing, even though it does not cause a change in junction.
50 The terms virtual, actual, and realised have also been used to depict the relationship between the subject and object. The relationship can be called virtual when the junction does not yet exist, actual when the relationship is disjunction, and realised when there is conjunction. Then, for example, a transformation that changes disjunction into conjunction, could be called realisation, and the object as a result realised (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 255).
also depicted a third, thymic dimension that has to do with moods and feelings.\textsuperscript{51} The narrative programs of these doings can subsume instrumental programs, required for their execution. In this case the base narrative program also represents the base value, the other possible objects of value being instrumental.\textsuperscript{52} (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 246, 365.) The values in general can be categorised into two broad groups. The first are descriptive values, which are represented by concrete objects that can be stored, and objects like states of feelings. Further, the objects that can be stored are objective values that can usually be described with the verb -to have. The states of feelings are subjective values, described by the verb -to be.\textsuperscript{53} The other broad group are the modal values, or modalities, wanting-, having-to-, being-able-, and knowing-how-to-be/to-do.\textsuperscript{54} (Ibid. 364-366.)

The question of values brings to the fore the other significant pair in the actantial structure, the pair sender and receiver. The sender is the one who communicates to the receiver that usually coincides with the subject-actant, the elements of modal competence, and the set of values at stake. The sender is often posited in a transcendent universe, whereas the subject-receiver exists in an immanent universe. (Ibid. 294.) This means that the values the sender possesses, are not part of the closed circuit of values of the immanent universe, where conjunction with an object of value automatically means disjunction with it for someone else. Instead the sender can communicate values to the receiver, without being disjoined from them as a result. (Greimas 1987: 102-103.)

The initial contract between the sender and receiver, which is a discoursive configuration especially prominent in the canonical narrative schema, can be put in place by the sender’s manipulation. This can include the sender’s persuasive doing, and the receiver’s interpretative doing. Both of these are forms of cognitive doing.\textsuperscript{55} The formation of the contract results in a change in the subject’s modal competence. (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 33).

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{51} This study was based on the already existing ideas of A.J. Greimas (Fontanille 1989).
  \item \textsuperscript{52} The subject can actually also have several separate objects at the same time (Greimas 1987: 147).
  \item \textsuperscript{53} It is not clear, if cognitive values are subjective, since they can not be stored, but they are defined as being descriptive (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 245). The states and feelings would best seem to describe the objects in the thymic category.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} In this context, the modal values apparently, indeed, describe the modalities that the sender can communicate to the subject as the parts of his modal competence, and not modalities as the object of value. How a modality as an object of value would be categorised, is not quite clear, but such objects are possible, see Greimas 1987: 140-147.
  \item \textsuperscript{55} This type of cognitive doing can include tricking the other party (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 33).
\end{itemize}
1982: 184-185). The sender does not dictate specific doings, but equips the receiver-subject with the modal value, or modality, of, in this case, having-to-do (Ibid. 73). The other role of the sender can be to sanction the subject’s execution of the initial contract, or the values prescribed in it. The sanction can be either pragmatic or cognitive, and either positive or negative. (Ibid. 267.)

The narrative discourse can also be seen as a circulation of objects of values, which is organised as a series of transfers of values (Ibid. 365-366). On the figurative plane these transfers can appear in the form of confrontations, which can be polemical or contractual. Exchange represents a type of contractual confrontation. (Ibid. 51.) It involves two objects, which the exchanging parties have deemed equally valuable, trusting the fiduciary contract formed between them for this purpose, often as a result of some persuasive doing (Ibid. 59-60). A transfer of just one object of value is equally possible. In this case the transfer of the object can be a performance, where the first party acquires the object by his actions that cause the second party to be disjoined from the object. This depicts the polemic confrontation. The other form of transfer of a single object is a gift, where the giving party himself causes his disjunction with the object and the receiving party is conjoined with it without acting. This transaction does not represent a confrontation, but is in fact situated between sender and receiver. (Ibid. 339.) The confrontations, instead, can actually bring out the presence of another subject, the anti-subject. The anti-subject’s narrative trajectory is similar but opposed to that of the subject, both striving for the same object. (Ibid. 205.) What distinguishes the anti-subject’s trajectory is that it is assigned values contrary to the subject’s. Which one actually is the subject and which one the anti-subject, is decided by the narrator privileging one over the other. (Bertrand 1989: 113.)

The anti-subject is not explained within the framework of the original actant model. He actually originates from the projection of the subject onto the semiotic square, which leads to the four possible positions of the proto-actant (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 249). This

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56 In the fiduciary contract the two parties of the exchange agree that the objects to be exchanged are equally valuable (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 60).
57 In this case the first party has more competence than the second, and for that reason is able to dominate (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 95).
58 Exchange can also be situated between sender and receiver, but gift is necessarily so (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 110, 137).
kind of splitting up of the actant should be considered with all the actants, if the discourse in question is even slightly complex (Greimas 1988: 45). The most common additional actantial positions, however, are only the anti-subject and anti-sender (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 249). The anti-sender then would appear to account for the opposing values possibly assigned to the anti-subject. The original actantial model also had an opponent along with a helper, but their position is quite different. As noted earlier, they are actually part of the subject actant, so to speak, as they can, in the form of separate actors, embody the role of the subject’s modal competence. They then represent for the subject either being-able-to-do or not-being-able-to-do. (Ibid. 20-21.)

One should also remember that the actants in general, can be represented by multiple actors in the manifested discourse. A collective actant combines individual actors that have common modal competence and/or form of doing. These individual actors can either successively substitute for one another, or be simultaneous members of a group that have something in common, and thus form a collective actant. (Ibid. 35.) A separate instance can also be delegated to carry out an instrumental narrative program in an actant’s trajectory (Ibid. 246). Some very general conclusions can be made from the actorial distribution of the actants in a discourse. For one, discourses that posit many actants in one actor tend to be more psychological, whereas a discourse with actants represented by autonomous actors would appear more sociological (Ibid. 8-9).

### 3.3 Questions of Applying Greimas’s Theory to the Material

In this chapter we have already made remarks on our intended approach to and use of Greimas’s theory in this thesis. Firstly, the use of the theory is more in the way of a method

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59 We will consider this to be so, though this question has not been elaborated further. In his analysis in “Maupassant: The Semiotics of Text” (1988) Greimas seems to present this case, see pages 45 and 152. The concepts of anti-sender and anti-subject are both later developments in the theory, and are not perhaps yet so carefully outlined.

60 Greimas and Courtés (1982: 238) briefly note that the figure of the opponent is a “metonymic manifestation of the anti-subject”. However, as the relationship between opponent and anti-subject has not been clearly defined, and whether they are talking about a figure or the semi-actant position of the opponent is ambiguous, we will see the opponent as simply the embodiment of the subject’s lack of competence, not as the competence of the anti-subject.

61 This does not mean that just any separate characters in the manifested discourse could be interpreted as simultaneously representing one common actant. The actant position is still defined as the narrative trajectory of that actant, which is formed of the related and subordinating narrative programs, not of random and unrelated programs, represented by separate characters.
in our analysis than a theory that is expected to explain the findings. Secondly, we will limit ourselves to only one part of Greimas’s theory, as we search for a typology of the actantial distribution in the films. Because our material is limited to only three films, we will not operate on an overtly general level, however, but will approach each discourse as its own entity. The aim is nevertheless to arrive at comparable results, instead of extensive individual analyses of the films and their deeper meanings. Since Greimas’s main interest, however, was the study of meanings, we have also bypassed some elements related to the actantial structure, the primary importance of which is in the area of meanings.62

Greimas has himself also tried to advance the use of his theory as a methodological approach for the analysis of discourses. His main investment in this project was undoubtedly Maupassant: The Semiotics of Text (1988), a 250 pages long analysis of a six pages long short story. In it he purposefully applied different approaches, linking “…textual variations with methodological variations” (Greimas 1988: 245). Though the approaches varied, he applied a common practise of segmenting the discourse, primarily according to spatio-temporal criteria on the discoursive level (Ibid. 1). This kind of organisation of the material facilitated his rigorous analysis that included the figurative and textual phenomena of the discourse. Our analysis will not, however, concentrate on the figurative level in other than actant related issues. Instead, the actantial positions of the discourse will be established by defining the narrative programs that form the trajectories of the actants. A somewhat similar approach has been used by Greimas himself in another, short, analysis of a recipe (Greimas 1989a).63 Because our application of Greimas’s theory is to some degree our own compilation, there is, however, really no directly comparable model for it. Outside of Greimas’s research, the actantial analyses in general are often more simple and intuitive, and do not consider many of elements we will include in the analysis.64 This lack of an explicit model leaves us to face some questions on our own, some questions, however, being quite difficult in any case, with or without a model to refer back to.

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62 Such an element is, for example, the concept of thematic roles, which are “…the actantial formulation of themes or thematic trajectories.” (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 266).
63 Which, however, concentrated on the construction of an object of value.
64 An example of this could be the short example analysis Hébert (2006) offers along his description of the actantial model. For a longer academic application see e.g. “Elements for an Analysis of the Gospel Text: The Death of Jesus” (Bucher 1971).
Defining the instances that represent the different actants on the level of the final manifested discourse, is obviously not straightforward. A particular stumbling block in this process could be the sender’s position. According to Greimas’s description of the sender, his role is to omnipotently transmit to the receiver-subject both, the values (objects) to be pursued, and his abilities (modal competences) to pursue them (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 294). This means he is not in a reciprocal relationship with the other actants in the discourse, but in a way above them and unaffected by them. This can make it difficult to define who the sender is exactly, if there is no distinct character carrying out his doings on the manifested level. Defining the sender is, however, still relevant to the understanding of all the actantial positions. It also gives access to the value system of the discourse, as “[o]ne of the reasons for the actantial position of Sender is actually to transform an axiology, given as a system of values, into an operative syntagmatics” (Greimas 1988: 44, emphasis original). A further complication in the analysis may be that a single discourse is not necessarily always coherent. In some cases it can also be a combination of elements belonging to separate discoursive microuniverses. (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 276.)

The fact that discourses are indeed complex and unique entities, not just clear-cut manifestations of predetermined components, is also evident in Greimas’s example analysis in Maupassant: The Semiotics of Text (1988). There he, for instance, defines two different senders in the discourse, an individual and a social one (Greimas 1988: 77-79). What becomes clear as well, is that a completely accurate application of his concepts to any discourse that is at all complex is, if not impossible, then at least very demanding. For these reasons, we have deliberately chosen discourses that are relatively simple, and that we expect the theory will fit. Regardless of how scientific and objective Greimas has meant the theory to be, it still inevitably requires interpretation, not least in regard to the actants. Who is the subject and who is the anti-subject, who is an opponent and who the

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65 Though this is quite clearly stated, some questions about the sender’s position still remain. The most notable is probably the question of the subject’s competence. On several occasions Greimas says that the subject must acquire competence, see e.g. “competence” in “Semiotics and Language: An Analytical Dictionary” (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 44-46), but how does this happen, when the sender is the one who communicates this competence to him? Is acquiring competence then in effect always a reward of some kind from the sender? We plan to consider this question more in depth in Conclusions, at the end of this thesis.

66 Apparently, a figurative character that in some way represents the sender, could always be defined as a result of a rigorous analysis of the figurative level. For example, in “Maupassant: The Semiotics of Text” Greimas finds the sun, the sky, water, and a mountain to represent the proto-actant positions of the sender (1988: 44-45). In our analysis, however, we do not have space for an extremely detailed analysis of this type.
anti-subject, what figurative form does the sender embody, if any, and even, what the object of someone’s desires finally is? In seeking the answers to these questions, one has to, in the end, just proceed with the course that appears to offer most heuristic value.

Leaving the challenges of implementation behind, the questions that using this type of theory raises still have to be considered. Firstly, it is obvious that analysing a discourse using a predetermined structure will produce results that bring out exactly that structure. That is to say, when one looks for something, one is more likely than not to find it. However, being conscious of this, we will strive to respect the integrity of the discourse, not forcing the structure when it does not fit. Secondly, in applying this type of structure, one not only looks for certain things, but also disregards others. This approach, quite simply, does not do justice to the full complexity and richness of the film in question, and leaves out many aspects that could, and possibly also should, have been studied. This task is left to be carried out in film analysis proper, since our objective is decidedly only to study the actantial positions in the films. Another possible question is the applicability of the theory specifically to film. Semioticians, among others, in the field of film studies have emphasised the uniqueness of the filmic language and its grammar and have questioned the applicability of theories not developed particularly for this language (Ehret 2005: 4). This is not really a concern for us, however, because our focus is on structures below the discoursive level, below the level of languages.

3.4 The Individualisation Thesis

This thesis is part of the research project The Chinese Individual: Negotiations of Rights and Responsibilities, conducted by researchers from China and the Nordic countries, headed by the University of Oslo. The project has set out to study the profound changes taking place in the position of and in the concepts related to the individual in China today, also wanting to take into account the local historical and cultural perspectives. As China, along with other Asian societies, has commonly been described as a community oriented society which stresses family relations, it has often been assumed that individuals have no room for individual choices which could possibly conflict with social and political norms.

67 Christian Metz’s “grande syntagmatique” being one of the most well known of the “film grammars” (Ehret 2005: 172).
However, there has been a definite rise in the claims for individual rights, which in the research project is considered to be more than a superficial occurrence. It is taken to represent deeper structural transformations in the social practices and mentality of the Chinese. Understanding these changes, their background, depth, and their significance is the objective of the project.  

In this thesis the perspective of the research project comes into play primarily in the chapter where the results of the actantial analyses we will have completed will be discussed. The actantial dynamics, presented in the films, will be investigated in the light of some of the theories and concepts related to the project. The aim is to find out if the theories, mainly of individualisation, could be used to analyse and explain some of the findings. Though these theories deal with the actual occurrences in society, in the “real world”, one must understand that our investigation takes place on a different level. The three films can only be seen as representations of the real world, or of the picture the filmmakers want to present of the real world. No direct link between the actual state of contemporary Chinese society and these films can be presumed. Be that as it may, it is still possible, and indeed worthwhile, to study the suitability of these theories and concepts to these re-presentations of that society.

One of the central theoretical approaches in the research project has been to examine the changes taking place in Chinese society, especially in the rights and responsibilities of the individual, in the context of the “individualisation thesis”. This is also our approach in the discussion of the results of the actantial analyses of the films. The individualisation thesis originated from the need to describe the situation created by the considerable social changes that took place in Western societies in the second half of the 20th century. However, its relevance to the Eastern European countries and China, as a result of their opening up, has also been suggested. The thesis is primarily comprised of the interrelated theories of social theorists Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, and Anthony Giddens, and its common fundamental idea has been summarised by Cosmo Howard (2007a: 2) as follows:

68 See ”About the Project” under ”The Chinese Individual: Negotiations of Rights and Responsibilities” at <http://www.hf.uio.no/filosofi/forskning/forskningsprosjektet/chineseindividual/about/>.

69 Consciously or not, for whichever reason or other.

The individualization thesis posits that, as a result of the changes wrought by social modernization in the twentieth century, human lives have been extracted from the bonds of family, tradition, and social collectives, which once prescribed in detail how people were to behave. Humans have been liberated from these detailed determinations to take greater control of and responsibility for their own lives. At the same time, however, these writers claim that people are now more dependent on a series of modern institutions and structures, including the welfare state, education system, and labor markets, and that these impose new and often contradictory demands on individuals.

To elaborate further we can say that the emergence of individualisation is related to the level of differentiation in a society. When the society breaks down into separate functional spheres that the individual is related to only in that partial aspect, it loses its encompassing sight of the individual who, instead, becomes endowed with taking one’s life into one’s own hands. Individualisation becomes “institutional individualism” when the diverse official instances also begin to relate their regulations and incentives directly to the individual, instead of, for example, to the family. In the individualised society the individual has to become active and navigate his way in the complex, and sometimes contradictory, network of institutional guidelines. What has come to complicate the situation further, is that global factors increasingly also affect the individual’s life. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2005: 23-26.) As a result, the factors affecting the individual’s life can be so complex, take place so faraway, and change form so quickly that he, in reality, has no way of comprehending or managing them. The individual’s life has become described by uncertainty, while he is unable to see what causes this uncertainty. (Ibid. 48-52.)

As many of the factors in an individual’s life have moved out of his sight, he has been left with the understanding that he himself is responsible for what happens to him. If he is unable to find a job, it is because he has not done everything he could have, or because he is just not good enough. He can not blame anyone else for his troubles, which does not, however, mean that he has caused them or could solve them himself. (Bauman 2001: 47.) The individual’s individual responsibility has also become highlighted by the disintegration of social collectives. The safety nets offered by the family and
neighbourhood have fallen apart, and the individual can no longer rely on the help and sympathy of the former fellow members of these social collectives. Rights and obligations are not a part of relationships in the individualised society, and no bonds can be presumed to last. (Ibid. 86.)

The individual’s responsibility is not only to survive in the world, but also importantly to take charge of one’s own identity. The individuals are no longer born into predestined identities, but instead it has become their task, both freedom and obligation, to form their own identities. (Bauman 2005: xv.) As the social collectives have disintegrated and tradition loosened, one now can, and has to, choose the forms of his identity, which can also be diverse and vary at different times. What is challenging is that there are no more ready roles that one can comfortably slip into, and that would provide a ready solution to what one wants, and how one is to act. The individual has to think for himself, and make these decisions alone. (Hoggett, Mayo, and Miller 2007: 99.)
4. THE ACTANTIAL ANALYSES OF THE THREE FILMS

This chapter presents the actantial analyses of the three films, *Incense* (Xianghuo 2003), *Beijing Bicycle* (Shiqi sui de danche 2001), and *South of the Clouds* (Yun de nanfang 2004). Greimas’s theory and concepts of the actantial structure are highly integrated into these analyses, and their presence is so extensive that they cannot be separately referred to at every moment that they are being applied. Thus, unless otherwise expressed, the theory and concepts used in this chapter refer to the information presented in chapter 3, where they have been described in full detail. Before each analysis a summary of the film in question will be presented. The aim is to present the films as they are, prior to any theoretical assumptions or interpretations, in order to give a reader, who is unfamiliar with the films, a chance at objective access to the material. The combined results of the analyses and their significance will be discussed in the next chapter, and thus no further conclusions about the results are drawn in this chapter.

4.1 A Summary of the Film *Incense*

The film *Incense* (Xianghuo 2003) starts by portraying a very poor monk in a small barren countryside village in Shanxi, where the principle source of livelihood is slaughtering sheep. Coming home to his rundown temple building, the monk sees his neighbour outside the temple, killing a sheep, which the monk is not too happy about. The neighbour is not affected by the monk’s comments but, instead, makes fun of the monk’s shabby appearance. Carrying out his chores inside the temple, the monk decides to fix his shoes and takes some fabric for the purpose from under a stick supporting an old statue of Buddha. After fixing his shoes he, however, discovers the statue at the temple has collapsed and broken, which leaves him distracted. The neighbour fixes an old bike for him, while the monk tells him that the statue at the temple has collapsed and needs to be fixed. The monk plans to ride to town to look for help from the town leader, who had promised to help the

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71 Particularly on pages 19-36.
72 Obviously this can never be achieved in full, since a written summary of a film can never present the film exactly “as it is”.
73 The director, Ning Hao, has described this story as taking place in Shanxi (28th HKIFF catalogue: 42). The exact place is not made explicit in the film.
temple when he had visited it. The neighbour strongly doubts he’ll get any help, but the monk decides to go anyway.

Riding the bike along a wintry country road, the monk arrives in town and runs into an acquaintance from the village. The man enthusiastically tells him about the monk’s cousin’s success as a hairdresser in town. The monk goes on to the offices of the town leader and sees the man in charge of religious affairs. He tells the man, who is playing cards with his chums, about the need to fix the statue in order to keep the temple running. Keeping the temple going is especially important in a village where people kill animals for a living, which is a sin. The statue would have to be fixed in time for the New Year, when the temple receives most of its donations for the next year. The man is, however, unwilling help and claims it is because they do not have the money, and also because of the new policies that prioritise bigger temples. He even suggests the monk should give up being a monk and start a small business, instead. Receiving a new guest who brings him gifts from her church, the man sends the monk off to see another officer who might help. The other man is equally unhappy to see the monk and unwilling to help him, but promises to give him some money, if he finds antique window frames at his temple and brings them to him for their collection.

Leaving the offices, the monk finds the bike broken and goes to see his cousin. The cousin recommends him to give up being a monk and come to work with him. The monk refuses. He gets some money from the cousin and returns to the village carrying the bike. The neighbour fixes the bike again and suggests that the monk goes and sees his old teacher at the bigger temple. After praying to Buddha at his temple, the monk drives to town again with window frames from the temple. The man at the offices promises him 2000 yuan for the frames but only after the New Year, and forbids him from selling them privately. The monk then continues on his way and goes to his teacher’s temple. Some new statues, worth 3000 yuan, are just being painted, and the teacher is polishing his new motorbike. The teacher, however, also complains about not having any money and only offers the monk a deal of coming to work at the bigger temple for part of the profits. After leaving the teacher’s temple going by his cousins place, the monk finds it closed by the police on suspicion of prostitution. He returns to the village with the bike breaking again on the way.
Back at the village, the monk decides to go to town to beg for alms, as he has seen some people do there. In town he goes up to people on the street unsuccessfully and is advised to get a book of good deeds to write down the names of the donators. After getting a notebook, he gets good money, as he also promises an old woman that her future grandchild will be a boy, even though it has already been confirmed to be a girl. At the end of the day he goes to the bank with 1350 yuan worth of small bills to change them into bigger bills. A police officer sees him coming out of the bank and takes him to the police station. There two officers question him, accusing him of pretending to be a monk, take his money, and put him in jail with prostitutes watching an educational video on sexually transmittable diseases. The girls seem to believe in karma and would like to help the monk to get the money for the statue after he has revealed to them why he is there. He, however, refuses not considering it proper. He soon gets out, but does not get the money back from the police, because according to them monks are not allowed to beg for alms outside the temple.

The monk, at his wit’s end, is sitting on a kerb of the street in town, when a man approaches him and offers him 100 yuan, if he tells the man’s Buddhist girlfriend that he is a good man. The monk does so and later buys a tiny Buddha statue from a street stall with part of the money. He sees a blind fortune teller on the street, and after leafing through some fortune telling books he decides to start telling fortunes himself. People gather around, and he manages to make money again. When he is leaving at night, a gang of boys attack him, accusing him of tax evasion, beat him up, kick the bike, and take his money while the blind fortune teller looks on. That night is the beginning of the New Year, and the monk burns his fortune telling paraphernalia on the street. The next day he wakes up in a shed, buys new shoes with the little money he has left and starts carrying his bike back to the village. On the road a small vehicle stops at his side, and a man offers the monk a ride. In the vehicle the man explains that he is a Buddhist and tells the monk about his neighbours’ trouble. The wife is ill, and nothing seems to help. He suspects the house is cursed. The monk agrees to help, and they head back to town, where the monk sells his tiny Buddha statue for 3000 yuan to the man’s neighbours to remove the curse. He then rides his bike, fixed by the man, back to his village.
The monk has then purchased a new impressive Buddha statue for the temple which he admires with his neighbour. The monk even smokes a cigarette offered by the neighbour, which he shouldn’t do, and the neighbour gives him a tape player with a tape that has Buddhist chanting on it. The monk says he should do the chanting himself, but in the end accepts the tape and plays it to the whole town using the town’s overhead radio. People are gathering at the temple for the opening ceremony for the new statue, when two men appear taking measurements outside the temple. They tell the monk that the temple will be torn down to make way for a new road. They also tell the monk to go to town and pick up the window frames, because they have been discovered to be worthless. The film ends with the monk standing in front of his temple marked with a sign implicating that the building is to be torn down.

4.2 An Actantial Analysis of Incense

Looking at the whole film, it would, at first look, quite clearly seem to depict the monk-subject’s quest for the object-statue, from which he is disjoined in the beginning of the film. This is obviously a very simplified description of the discourse, but going into a more detailed analysis we can already work on the assumption that the monk-character represents the subject actant’s narrative trajectory on the manifested discoursive level. It is this character’s junction with an object, and the changes in that junction, i.e. narrative programs, that are depicted. Also, no other figurative character seems to take on or be delegated with this trajectory. As the narrative trajectory is formed from the different subordinating narrative programs, which themselves may include instrumental narrative programs, the question of the object may not be as simple as that. We may assume that the figure of the statue is at least part of the answer, but further analysis will reveal more.

4.2.1 The Narrative Programs

In trying to define the narrative programs of the discourse, one has to look at what happens on the manifested level. The very first narrative program in this film would seem to be the monk fixing his shoes. The neighbour criticises the monk’s clothes, and presumably as a result the monk decides to fix the shoes. The neighbour communicates to the monk the
modality of wanting-to be conjoined with better shoes, and he goes on to perform the conjunction, which he is able-to do. In this particular narrative program the neighbour is the sender, the monk is the subject-receiver, and the shoes are the object. We will return to the significance of this program later, but at this stage it can be seen that it is already one of the narrative programs constituting the subject’s trajectory, because it leads to the next program: the change in junction between the subject-monk and the object-statue, which falls apart as a result of taking the fabric for the shoes. The new state of disjunction gives rise to the narrative program that will dominate the rest of the discourse, which is, getting the statue fixed by way of getting the instrumental object -money for it. This narrative program for the statue is, however, not the base program of the discourse. For the monk, the statue is not valuable in itself, but because it is instrumental in achieving the modal value of being-able-to keep the temple running. This becomes clear at the offices of the head of religious affairs in town, when the monk explains how important it is to keep the temple running in the village, and how it can not be done without the statue for the New Year’s celebrations.

The base narrative program for the whole discourse is for the monk to become conjoined with the modal object of value of being-able-to run the temple again. Being conjoined with the statue is an instrumental program, and the statue an instrumental value, which in turn requires an instrumental program of getting the instrumental value -money for fixing the statue. The monk can not get money in the village, and this leads to acquiring one more instrumental object of value, the bike. For the bike the monk goes to the neighbour who helps him to get it operational, thus making possible one part of being-able-to, in the superior narrative program of getting the money. In this program the neighbour is then a helper for the monk. In this role he also offers the monk some modal know-how, in the form of knowing-how-not-to do, when he distrusts the town head’s promises of help, which the monk, however, does not accept. In order to perform the program of getting the money, the monk has to have competence, which is a composition of different modalities. In this instrumental program, the virtualising modality for the monk is having-to; he

74 These are syntactic actants, representing actantial roles that will be subsumed by the different trajectories of the functional actants on the larger scale of the whole discourse. In other words, we do not yet know which actants’ trajectories these actantial roles are parts of in the whole discourse.

75 A representative form of the modality of know-how-to, arrived at by the semiotic square. See e.g. Greimas 1987: 138.
perceives the object-money as indispensable in the light of the superior program of fixing the statue. In order to be competent, he would also need to have some actualising modalities of knowing-how-to and/or being-able-to. When the monk turns down the neighbour’s know-how, one may already suspect his incompetence.

The monk’s lack of competence becomes clear, when he seeks help from the officer in charge in town. It is obvious that the man at the offices could probably help, but the monk does not know-how-to get the money from him. Instead, the other person, knowing to bring gifts to the officer, is received enthusiastically and her worries are listened to carefully. The monk has been ignorant of the necessity of this kind of exchange in order to get help. Seeking help from the other man at the offices, the monk is proposed an exchange: window frames for the money. In this exchange the other man, however, will prove to be more competent and dominate, since he will get the frames he considers valuable, without the monk getting his money in time. In town the monk also visits his cousin that an acquaintance had told him about, and the cousin tries to persuade him to give up being a monk. The cousin offers help in the instrumental program of getting money, but this help is in contradiction with the base value of keeping the temple running. In this instrumental program for the money he would, however, qualify as a helper, if one would not place too much weight on the fact that the help would also be a result of a kind of an exchange, not an altruistic act.

When the monk loses his instrumental object of value, the bike, the neighbour is there to help him to fix it again. He also suggests that the monk should go and see his old teacher at the bigger temple. With the knowledge, received from this instrumental helper, of the instance that might help, the monk tries to get the money, but again is not-able-to. It is not clear, whether the monk could get the money, if he had the know-how of the right strings to pull, but in any case on this occasion he is not-able-to do so. His persuasive doing has no influence on the teacher. He is instead tempted with a counter persuasive doing, an offer of an exchange, by which he could get the money, but would have to leave his temple and go to work at the bigger temple. This is another case of a helper, or an exchange proposer, in the instrumental program, who is actually a type of an opponent in the base narrative program.
In the instrumental program of getting the money, the monk, after having observed people in town, thinks he has acquired the know-how for getting the money. After having seen a beggar on the street, he goes to town and starts begging for himself. People on the street offer him know-how on how to get more money, but they are also participants in an exchange. When a woman suggests to the monk that she will give him more money, if he promises her a male grandchild, she is helping herself as much as she is helping the monk. The monk is, however, now competent to get the money via the exchanges he makes with people and manages to get about half the money he needs for the statue. The polemic nature of the discourse comes out when there is a confrontation with the police who are after the same object of value, the money. The police are vastly more competent than the monk in this confrontation over the money. They posses much more being-able-to than the monk, who is actually not-able-to do anything, and loses all the money to the police. Whether the police are merely an opponent that represents not-being-able-to for the subject in the instrumental narrative program, or an actual anti-subject in the whole discourse, can be discussed further, when the position of the sender in this discourse will be considered.

The monk still needs to get the money. He refuses to take the money from the girls in the cell with him in exchange for some good karma for them, because he evaluates with interpretative cognitive doing that he would be breaking with values related to the base value of keeping the temple running. He, however, does agree to lie to a Buddhist girl on the street, when a man offers money in exchange for this. He decides to continue with the narrative program of getting the money and thinks he has acquired a new know-how by observing a fortune teller on the street and reading some books. He seems to be competent again to get the money by exchanging fortunes for money. When a gang of boys comes to take away his money, his competence is, however, once again proved to be lacking. One can assume that if he had known-how-to, he might have made some kind of a deal with the boys beforehand, since they are obviously not interested in the blind man’s similar business. Whether or not this confrontation could have been prevented, in this situation the monk is completely lacking in contrast to the boys’ being-able-to, in regard to the possession of the money.
Since the New Year is already starting, the monk appears to give up the program for the money. He renounces\textsuperscript{76} the objects that were instrumental in his getting money by fortune telling, and buys the shoes that are not related to the any instrumental program of the base narrative program. As he has been deprived of the instrumental object -bike as well, he has to walk home, but is offered help with another type of transport on the way. The same instrumental helper also presents the last chance to be conjoined with the money for the statue. By taking the monk to the ill woman’s house he gives the monk being-able-to get the money. He also relates know-how to the monk by virtually putting words into his mouth, when they are negotiating the exchange of money for the tiny Buddha statue. He also fixes the monk’s bike. Being conjoined with the money, the monk can now carry out the superior narrative program of being conjoined with the new statue of Buddha as well. Carrying out these instrumental programs does, nevertheless, not make him able-to perform the base narrative program of keeping the temple running. Men from the town inform him that the officials have decided to tear down the temple, their action apparently representing an insuperable not-being-able-to for the monk’s base program.

\textit{4.2.2 The Actantial Positions of the Discourse}

To make more specific sense of the actantial positions, represented by the narrative programs we have now defined, it is best to start with approaching the question of the sender. Starting out, we already tentatively defined the subject-actant as the monk, and his base object of value as being-able-to keep the temple running. It is clear that no figurative character can easily be seen to represent the sender behind this base program. Without wanting to go into a very detailed textual analysis of the figurative level, to find any figure that could be considered as symbolically standing for the sender, an implicit sender can be defined for the subject’s narrative trajectory instead. We have seen that for the subject-monk the base object of value is being-able-to keep the temple running. He has also explained that it is important, because in his village the main livelihood is killing sheep, which is a sin according to Buddhist principles, and thus the villagers need a temple where they can purge their sins. From this we can gather that what makes the monk pursue his base object of value is his faith in the Buddhist principles. These principles are the

\textsuperscript{76} Renunciation is the form, in which the subject of state is also the subject of doing that causes the disjunction between the subject of state and the object (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 262).
axiology, or value system, that the sender represents in the discourse.\footnote{If one wanted to name the actual sender, then one possibility would be to see Buddha as the sender. However, the sender might as well be some other character that has made the monk believe in these principles. This is simply not made explicit in the discourse.} What kind of persuasive doing or manipulation has taken place by the implicit sender, for the subject to accept his cause, is not clear, nor so relevant in this case. It is, however, clear that the monk feels he has-to carry out the task for the common good, it is not just a question of him wanting-to do it for himself.

Throughout the discourse, however, the monk-subject seems constantly to be faced with situations that directly challenge the sender’s values. Considering the consistency of this phenomenon, defining the opposing position of the anti-sender, as well, seems to be called for. Doing this is also generally recommended in the case of any complex discourse. In the context of this discourse, values that are contrary to the Buddhist principles of the sender, appear to be materialistic and self-seeking values. This actually offers an explanation for the curious conflict that emerges, again and again, between the monk-subject’s instrumental program of getting money and his base program of keeping the temple running. Since money is one of the most obvious materialistic objects of value, it is easy to understand why the subject in his quest for money would run into values opposing his.

In this discourse, however, the position of the anti-sender appears to be even more central than could be concluded from this observation. It seems that, since it is the anti-sender’s value system that money is a value in, pursuing this object of value also requires one to follow the anti-sender’s principles. Most of the discourse thus concentrates on a narrative program that is actually dominated by the anti-sender. Not only when we consider this instrumental narrative program, but also when we look back at the whole discourse, with the general positions of sender and anti-sender in mind, can we see their presence right from the beginning. In the very first narrative program the monk is urged by his neighbour to pursue the materialistic value of the shoes. The neighbour is obviously a representative of the anti-sender, in this case, and when the monk “makes a deal with the devil”, so to say, and fixes the shoes, the values of the sender suffer a blow. The breaking of the Buddha statue, in the first place, could then be seen as a punishment by the sender for breaking their contract, or as a test of the monk’s commitment.
According to the present theory, in addition to communicating values to the subject, one of the sender’s tasks is also to communicate modal competences to him. In the instrumental narrative program of getting the money that dominates the discourse, the sender does not endow the subject with much competence at all. The subject does not really have personal know-how or being-able-to, and throughout the whole instrumental program he actually has only one helper, who does not want him to sacrifice his values in exchange for help. This is the neighbour, who is shown to generally live by the values of the anti-sender, but who in this case helps the monk. The reason for his help may not be altruistic though, since he may want the monk keep the temple in the village so he can use it, but this does not compromise the monk accepting his help. If this, however, means that even this helper is not sent by the sender but motivated by the anti-sender’s value of self interest in mind, then the sender does not supply the subject with any competence for the instrumental program at all. In this case the program is truly dominated by the anti-sender. In the early stages of the discourse the monk still naively thought he could get help from the town leader just by asking. He thought that the town leader stood for the same values and was sent by the sender as a helper, but the monk was soon proved wrong. Even though the leader had, apparently, previously promised to support the sender’s values, i.e. had promised to help the temple, he had either broken his promise, or had not been sincere to begin with.

How should the instances that offer help to the subject, in the instrumental program of getting the money in the form of exchange, be considered then? Exchange is actually a structure that requires a fiduciary contract to be formed between the two parties. This makes it very easy to conceive of these instances as delegates of the anti-sender, trying to make a contract with the subject, trying to persuade the monk to accept the values he would acquire in the exchange, as equal to the ones he would be renouncing. The anti-sender is speaking through these instances, the characters of the cousin and the old teacher, whose help the monk refuses, but also the characters of the lady wanting a male grandchild, the man asking the monk to lie to the Buddhist girl, and finally, the man asking him to remove the curse on the house. When the monk accepts these exchanges, he accepts

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78 A possible explanation for this is that the subject could actually be mistaken, or perhaps tricked by the anti-sender and is not supposed to go after the object of value -money to begin with. This could be the reason why he is not provided with competence by the sender.

79 Defining a character as a representative of the anti-sender, does not depend on this structure of exchange. Here it merely highlights the relationship.
the anti-sender’s values and breaks his contract with the sender.\(^{80}\) Having given in to these values, he actually starts proposing these exchanges himself, when he copies the fortune teller’s performance of getting money.

Though the subject-monk has received enough competence to get money on two occasions before the last occasion, his competence to remain conjoined with the money is still limited. Both the police and the gang of boys come into a polemical confrontation with the subject over money, dominating the situation with their superior competence. In these situations the monk is in conjunction with money, and these characters take it away from him. If the definition of the anti-subject was that he is striving for the same object as the subject, but is assigned values contrary to the subject’s, then these instances would seem to fit the description. However, we must still consider that the actual base value for the subject is keeping the temple running, not the money itself, and in this case it is clear that neither the police or the boys are pursuing this object.\(^{81}\) Taking this into account these characters can not be considered as anti-subjects in the whole discourse, but as opponents representing not-being-able-to for the subject in the narrative program of getting the money.\(^{82}\)

Though the anti-sender does not guarantee complete competence to the subject, he still is a strong presence along the subject’s trajectory. In addition to the characters that propose exchange to the monk and in this way help him in the instrumental program, the anti-sender’s narrative trajectory is actually represented by other instances in the discourse as

\(^{80}\) Looking at it from the point of view of the other parties in the exchanges, one could see that the monk is actually the one who tricks them. When they form the fiduciary contract for the exchange, they are convinced that what the monk offers in exchange is valuable, that his Buddhist services are genuine. This is obviously a serious violation against the principles of the sender, as he misuses the people’s trust in them.

\(^{81}\) Because the base value is the “final value aimed at” (Greimas and Courtès 1982: 246) we will consider this as the defining value in regard to the anti-subject. The anti-subject is the opposing character to the subject and to his values on the scale of the whole discourse, he represents one position of the proto-actant. This is why we consider that he should oppose the subject in relation to his actual base value, and not just any random instrumental objects of value the subject may need along the way. If every character that opposed the subject and was after any common object would be considered an anti-subject, then there would be innumerable anti-subjects, most lacking any further trajectory. As noted in chapter 3. (page 32-33 of this thesis), the difference between an opponent and the anti-subject has not been thoroughly defined yet. Thus, we interpret as opponents, and not anti-subjects, the characters that oppose the subjects, but are not after the same base object of value.

\(^{82}\) Since they are actually preventing the subject from carrying out a program that would contradict his base value, should they be considered helpers for the subject instead? This view is probably too far-fetched, since they do not represent any being-able-to, or even being-able-not-to for the subject, but actually force him to start over.
well. The anti-sender is communicating values and modal competences to the subject in varying forms. In the beginning, he directly communicates materialistic values to the monk in the form of the neighbour, and in the form of the officer in town he quite simply suggests the monk gives up his work as a monk. There are also two instances, in which the subject receives a gift from the anti-sender. These are the cases, in which early on, the acquaintance tells the monk about the cousin, in other words, gives him competence in pursuing the anti-sender’s values, and in which, in the end, the neighbour gives him a tape player for praying, which makes it possible for him to give up praying himself, which is something he should do according to the Buddhist principles.

As we have noted, all the persuasive doing by the anti-sender, or manipulation, has an effect. The monk accepts the deal proposed by the anti-sender, but it is not clear whether he realises what he is doing or is tricked. He starts quite innocently, by accepting to collect names for donations, but soon finds himself much further down the road. One could even say that his sender has not provided him with much know-how of the ways of the world. When he acquires competence by imitating the fortune teller, however, he can not really be said to have been tricked, since nobody is persuading him anymore. One occasion, in which he seems to knowingly accept the values of the anti-sender, considering the sender’s values as impossible (not-being-able-to be conjoined with), is the unconnected program towards the end, in which he buys new shoes in town. This program is actually a duplicate of the very first program in the discourse, in which he wanted the better shoes, instigated by the neighbour-anti-sender. The sender has not been actively present in the discourse, dominated by the program for the money, but he emerges at the end in the position of the judicatory sender, sanctioning the subject’s performance of the base narrative program he was sent to carry out. The sanction in this case is negative, the monk has not succeeded, and the temple will be torn down. From another point of view, this can be seen as a victory for the anti-sender, whose values have prevailed over the sender’s.

The analysis of the sender and the anti-sender is especially significant in regard to the values and deeper meanings of the discourse. If one were to continue further with

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83 Which is always a transaction between sender an receiver. In this case the sender is the anti-sender.
84 If we consider the neighbour’s help in general to be motivated by the anti-sender, then his help would also be a gift from the anti-sender.
85 See e.g. Greimas 1987: 145.
Greimas’s theory, one of the operations would be to take these positions down to the fundamental level and the elementary structure of meaning formulated in the semiotic square. The main interest here, however, is the actantial structure on the semio-narrative level and the figurative form it takes on the manifested discoursive level. So, putting aside the value systems advocated by the sender and anti-sender, some general features of the other actantial positions can be summed up. The subject is represented by a single character throughout the discourse. His object of value is modal, being-able-to run the temple, and to attain it he needs instrumental values that are descriptive and objective: the statue, money, and the bike. His virtual modality is having-to do; he feels the object is indispensable. He, however, does not in the end possess actualising modalities of being-able-to, or knowing-how-to in the base narrative program. He himself is not competent in the instrumental programs either, he is even struggling to remain conjoined with the bike throughout the discourse. In these programs, however, he has a helper, i.e. personified competence, in the form of the neighbour, and later also opponents, personified “anti-competence”, in the form of the police and the gang of boys in town. Otherwise, instead of being offered help, he is generally proposed an exchange in order to get help. The actants are mostly represented by separate instances, so the discourse would appear more sociological than psychological. These are also some of the aspects that will be taken up in the discussion in the next chapter.

4.3 A Summary of the Film *Beijing Bicycle*

The film *Beijing Bicycle* (Shiqi sui de danche 2001) begins with a group of young migrant men and boys from the countryside being interviewed for and getting jobs at a bicycle delivery company in Beijing. They are tidied up and supplied with quality bicycles for the job. The boss of the company then gives them a speech, telling them to appreciate the opportunity they have been given. They will first get 20 per cent of the money from the deliveries, but when they have made enough, they will own the bike and start making 50 per cent of the money. As out-of-towners they will have to start learning the streets by heart immediately. At a street shop one of them, a seventeen years old boy, tells his shopkeeper friend about the job, which makes him happy for the boy. While eating at the shop, the two of them watch a rich girl in the neighbouring building try on different outfits,
which they consider a waste. Starting the job, the boy delivers a package to a fancy building not quite knowing how to use the revolving doors. He marks his first delivery in a book, and soon he has tens of deliveries marked. He tells his friend that he will soon own the bike. The rich girl then visits their shop, but says nothing to them.

At the delivery offices the boy is getting his salary from a female clerk, but he is not given the bike, though he has counted that he should get it already. When he demands to talk to the boss, the girl promises to give him the bike at the end of the next day. Dissatisfied he marks the bike and leaves it at the offices. Hearing this, the friend tells the boy not to trust city folk, but still to appreciate the job. The next day the boy is called on to make a delivery for a Mr. Zhang. When he gets to the address and asks for Mr. Zhang, he is first sent to a shower and then to a massage parlour, where a Mr. Zhang says he has not ordered a delivery. At the counter the receptionist demands the boy to pay for the shower, which he cannot afford. When he tries to flee, the director, another Mr. Zhang, comes and tells her to let the boy go and gives him the package he was ordered to deliver. Outside the boy sees that his bike is gone, and he forgets to make the delivery, while he is desperately waiting for the bike to appear. The next day the boy loses his job, and the clerk tells him to be happy that he has not been fined for losing the company’s bike. When he manages to get in to see the boss, he is told that the bike was already his, but he has to be fired, because he failed the delivery, and also because he now has no bike. Because of the boy’s persistence, the boss promises him the job back if he finds the bike, which he then goes looking for all over the city.

On a hutong-alley another boy, also around seventeen years old, is showing off his new bike to his friends who are happy his father has finally bought him the bike. The boy helps a girl with her bike and is flustered when she compliments on his bike. Happily he drives home to a shared courtyard house on an alley and hides the bike. At home the father apologises for not being able to get the boy a bike, since their money is needed for his little sister’s school expenses. At night the boy secretly practises doing tricks with the bike. Elsewhere, at the same time, the delivery boy is looking for the bike, first with his friend, then alone. At a bicycle storage he is checking bikes for his mark, but is caught by a guard and arrested. The next day the delivery boss gets the boy out of jail, but says that he can
not help him anymore, after this they will be finished. The delivery boy’s friend sees the other boy with the girl by his store and recognises the bike. The delivery boy goes after the couple and sees them together by the river. The girl asks the other boy to come with her to a more sheltered place, but just as the boy is about to touch her, he sees the delivery boy taking the bike. The boy runs after the delivery boy, and catches him up, when the delivery boy runs into a truck. The other boy’s friends come and push the delivery boy around for stealing the bike. Taking the bike, the other boy goes with his friends to an arcade and ignores the girl who finds him there.

When the other boy returns home, the delivery boy follows him and sees him hiding the bicycle. At home the father is looking for some money he has hid, and asks the boy if he took it. The boy denies it, and the father says they have to stick together, though they are from two different families and again apologises for not getting the bike. At night the delivery boy takes the bike back for himself. In the morning, the other boy can not find the bike, while the delivery boy wakes up with it in front of the delivery offices, when the boss comes to work. The boss is impressed by his determination, and gives him his job back. At the same time in a classroom, the other boy is consoled by the girl who tells him a bike is not that important. The boy gets angry and drives the girl away. Later, at the street shop the delivery boy accidentally rides into the rich girl, who soon gets up after being knocked down and leaves without saying a word. After school the other boy, his friends, and some other kids watch a cool kid doing tricks with a bike. The friends want to help the other boy to get his bike back, even though they suspect it might be stolen goods. He denies the bike being stolen, as he sees the girl leaving with the cool kid. The friends remember the delivery office the boy was from and decide to go there. They see the delivery boy coming and chase him. They catch him, beat him up, and take the bike.

Riding home, the boy runs into the girl, but she is still angry. The other boys console him on the way home. At home the father is waiting for the boy with the delivery boy and after finding the mark that the delivery boy had made on the bike, the father gives the bike back to him. The other boy is very angry, and says he paid for it with the money that was originally meant for the bike. The father hits him for stealing the money from him, but the boy blames him for breaking his promise again and again. After the incident the other
boy’s sister tells him that it was not fair he lost the bike. In class the next day, the boy’s friends also think he should get his bike back, since he had paid for it. They chase the delivery boy into a construction site and try to take the bike, but he will not let go. They explain that the other boy has paid for it, and already invested in it with new parts, so it is no longer the delivery boy’s bike. After spending the whole day fighting and arguing over the bike, the boys agree to take turns with it. At the street shop the delivery boy’s friend is sceptical about the deal. The delivery boy sees the rich girl looking for something and then being told to get in a car, while his friend is getting him an old bike to use, when he does not have his own bike. Using the spare bike, he does his job, but the bike breaks and he has to run to make the deliveries.

The boys change possession of the bike on an alley every day, and gradually become more friendly towards each other. At the street shop the friend tells the delivery boy that the rich girl has actually turned out to be just a servant girl for the rich people. She is a migrant worker like them and has been stealing clothes from her employers. On a street elsewhere, the other boy is riding the bike in circles around the girl, but she ignores him and goes away with the cool kid who is very self-confident. On another day, the boy follows the girl and the cool kid riding together in the alleys. He takes a brick and hits the cool kid on the head. He then goes to the exchange place and tells the delivery boy he will not be needing the bike anymore. The cool kid appears with his gang, and they chase both of the boys into a dead end in the alleys. They will not let the delivery boy leave with the bike, though the other boy tells them he has nothing to do with the matter. Then the gang beats up both of them. One of the kids stays on to destroy the bike, and when he will not stop, the delivery boy hits him on the head with a brick. The delivery boy then leaves and walks on the streets, beaten up and carrying the wrecked bicycle.

4.4 An Actantial Analysis of *Beijing Bicycle*

In the film two distinct coherent narrative trajectories stand out quite clearly. The film starts by depicting a delivery boy’s relationship with a bicycle, but soon also presents another boy’s relationship with the same bike. Without yet defining what kinds of subjects these characters represent, we can already assume that they, indeed, represent subject-
actants, each with a narrative trajectory, formed of the narrative programs they are the subjects of. These characters also seem to remain constant as representatives of their respective trajectories throughout the discourse. Both of the trajectories are depicted with approximately the same amount of time and space on the manifested level of the discourse, so no simple conclusions can be drawn from this. The figure of the bicycle is obviously also central, as even the name of the film\(^6\) contains it, but what its position is as an object in relation to these two trajectories, has to be further defined.

4.4.1 The Narrative Programs

The first part of the manifested discourse concentrates on setting up and depicting the narrative program of the delivery boy striving to be conjoined with the bicycle. In the very beginning of the film, the boss of the delivery company explains, or communicates, to the boys what a good opportunity for making a living the job they have been given is. He also communicates to them what a great instrument the bike is in this way of making a living. He then spells out a contract where, by working for lesser pay for a limited time, they will gain, that is be conjoined with, the bike, when that time is up. This would seem to resemble the initial contract of the canonical narrative schema, in which the sender communicates the sought after values to the subject. There is no question of the fact that the boss-character is in some way tied to the sender, but when the sought after values in the discourse are more closely examined, the position is made less obvious. The delivery boy is communicated by persuasive doing a wanting-to-be conjoined with the job, and a wanting-to-be conjoined with the bike for the job. But the reason why he wants to be conjoined with the bike and the job, is not that they are such great things in themselves, but because they represent such a good way of making a living. Then, the modal being-able-to make a living would appear as the ultimate sought after value, which the boy apparently has-to-be conjoined with, while these objects are only instrumental values in that base narrative program.

The base value behind the instrumental narrative programs, or the senders position in the whole discourse is, in the end, not so strategically important at this stage. Whether it be the

\(^6\) The original name of the film, Shiqi sui de danche, roughly translates into "the seventeen years old’s bike". 
base narrative program or an instrumental program, the delivery boy’s pursuit for the bicycle by working, and later in order to be-able-to work, in any case dominates the part of the discourse representing his narrative trajectory. In the beginning he is already conjoined with the job, as a gift, but the bike he has to earn by the job, for the job. The delivery boy’s competence to carry out the program of getting the bike by working is presented as limited right from the beginning. Because he is an out-of-towner, he does not know the streets of Beijing, and because he is from the countryside, he does not know how to use the revolving doors in the fancy building. He, however, gains this know-how by practise and persistence and manages to do the required amount of work for the bike. He is, however, not-able-to be conjoined with the bike, when the female clerk at the office tries to profit from his work some more, and is able-to do so. His persistence then appears as know-how, which represents partial competence in his getting the bike, as he is not swindled as badly as he might have been. The clerk is forced to promise him the bike the next day. As a result the boy’s friend also offers him some apparent know-how in all his programs, when he tells the boy not to trust city folk in general.

The delivery boy still has to work for one more day to carry out the program for the bike, but his competence comes up short in a complicated way. First of all, he lacks know-how in doing his job, since he agrees to take a shower in order to do a delivery. After making this mistake, he himself is not-able-to get out of the situation with the receptionist demanding payment for the shower, but he receives help from the manager who makes him able. While wasting time on the delivery he has, however, lost the bike. Whether the bike would not have been stolen, if he had not left it for such a long time, is not clear. In any case someone has made him unable to become conjoined with it. The delivery boy is so distracted by this obstacle in the program for the bike that he actually, in part, causes a disjunction with the superior, or perhaps intertwined value, i.e. the job. The job is taken away from him, primarily because he did not make the delivery, and only secondly, because he has no bike for the work. The boss reveals to him that he had, in fact, already become conjoined with the bike before it was taken away.  

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87 It does not come out in the manifested discourse, whether the boy could have kept his job, if he had made the delivery. Would he have perhaps had to start working for a new bike all over again? So, it is not clear if the boy, indeed, himself causes the disjunction with the job, or if he would in reality have lost it, because of the bike anyway.
Thanks once more to the delivery boy’s persistence in his persuasive doing, he is able to make a new contract with the boss. If he is able-to become conjoined with the bike, he will become conjoined with the job. The bike now becomes an instrumental value in the program for the job, whereas being conjoined with the job, used to make him able-to perform the program for the bicycle. The boy had had the good sense, or know-how, to mark the bike earlier, but this only slightly facilitates his being-able-to find it. His friend also wants to help, but actually is of no help in looking for the bicycle. In the search the boy either lacks know-how, or is faced with an external source of not-being-able-to, when he is caught going through the bikes at night, and captured for supposedly trying to steal one of them. He is made able-to go on with his doings when the boss gets him out. However, the boss retracts the contract, communicating to the boy that the bike is not worth getting into trouble over. He also tells the boy that he should find another way of making a living, i.e. another way of carrying out his base program. He then withdraws his help from the boy. This is also obviously a case of communication between the sender and the receiver-subject, but this will be discussed in more detail later on.

Leaving the delivery boy’s narrative trajectory, the discourse then presents the other boy’s trajectory. On the manifested discoursive level, the boy’s narrative program of becoming conjoined with the bike, actually remains implicit. From his friends’ and his father’s comments it is made clear that he has been wanting a bike for some time. How he has managed to acquire it, i.e. how he has performed the narrative program, is not depicted. The boy keeps it a secret from his friends, and hides the whole fact of acquiring the bike from his father. It is made clear that there has been some kind of a contract between the boy and the father, where in exchange for doing what is asked of him, the boy will get the bike. However, this is obviously not how he has got the bike. What is also depicted is that the bicycle is somehow connected to the girl. The girl compliments on the boy’s bike, and the next day they go riding together. Getting to be with the girl seems to actually be what the boy wants, since that is what makes him happy. This would reveal the program of getting the bike as an instrumental program for the base program of getting the girl. The
girl is, thus the base value, as she does not appear to be an instrument in getting something else, for example prestige.  

The boys’ two separate narrative trajectories come into contact at the moment, when the other boy is just about to fulfil his base program of getting the girl. In the delivery boy’s program for getting the bicycle he receives help from his friend, whose recognition of the bike makes the boy able-to, in the first place, find it. He is then able-to take the bike, when the other boy has left it unattended to be together with the girl. The other boy, however, opts for going after the bicycle, leaving the girl and later ignoring her. The delivery boy is not-able-to get away with the bike, maybe because he does not know the alleys so well and ultimately loses it to the other boy and his friends, who are superior in force, i.e. more competent. The delivery boy, however, is quite competent on account of his persistence again, as he knows to follow the other boy as he returns home. He also knows to wait until the night to take the bike back. He has now been competent enough to get the bike, and is thus also competent to get his job back, as the boss appreciates his efforts. He has apparently now fulfilled his narrative programs making him conjoined with his base value of being-able-to make a living, and the instrumental values of the good way of making a living, the job, and the instrument for the job, the bike.

The other boy is now no longer conjoined with the bicycle. The girl tries to communicate to him that he does not need the bike to get her, but he does not seem to understand. As a result the girl goes off with the cool kid who has an even better bike and is better at handling it. The boy apparently cognitively concludes that he still needs the bike to get the girl, and with the know-how and being-able-to, offered by his friends, he forcefully takes the bicycle from the delivery boy. Having the bike does not, however, make him able-to get the girl, who is mad at him. The two boys confront each other again over the bike, as the delivery boy has the know-how to use the other boy’s father’s help to get the bike back. With the father’s help he is more competent than the other boy and gets the bike. At this

If one wanted to go further with the interpretation, one could also see the girl as an instrumental object in getting an object in the thymic domain, i.e. a feeling of happiness or love. As this domain is not so well defined at this stage of the theory, we will not go into any deeper analysis of this domain in this discourse. The difference between the base value of being-able-to make a living, and the instrumental value of the good way of making a living, is that the first is motivated by having-to, and the other by wanting-to. The delivery boy could just as well use other instrumental ways of carrying out the base program, if he was not motivated by wanting-to do it this particular way.
point the other boy reveals that he originally acquired the bike by using the instrumental object, money, he took from the father. He had, however, considered the object-money as already belonging to him, according to their former contract of exchange, and the father as an instance that made him unable-to be rightfully conjoined with that object.

Not being conjoined with the bicycle, or the girl, makes the other boy quite depressed. His friends want to help him, and they again corner the delivery boy together. This time they are not-able-to take the bicycle by brute force, probably because they now know that the delivery boy is not just a thief, and they thus refrain from hurting him. They try to get the bike by persuasive doing; they tell him how the other boy is entitled to the bike, because he has invested in it. Since the delivery boy does not agree, they try to negotiate some kind of exchange. If the delivery boy gives them the instrumental object of money, he can keep the bike, and the other boy can buy a new one, but this is not even possible for the delivery boy. In this confrontation, or test, both subjects seem to be equally competent in acquiring the object, and neither can dominate. As a result they agree to share the object-bicycle. This causes obvious problems for the delivery boy in remaining conjoined with the object-job, but his friend helps him to some degree by lending him an old bike that eventually breaks down. Apparently he, however, manages to remain conjoined with the job and the base value of being-able-to make a living, though he is only half-conjoined with the instrumental bike.

Also half-conjoined with the bicycle, the other boy apparently realises it is not the instrument for him to get the girl. He sees the cool kid conjoined with the girl and confronts him by hitting him on the head with a brick. He must, however, also realise that doing this, does not make him able-to get the girl, instead this makes it even more impossible. At this stage it would appear that the boy sees the girl as a desirable (wanting-to-be conjoined) but at the same time impossible (not-being-able-to-be conjoined) object. As a result of his cognitive realisation regarding the bicycle, the object is revalorised as not being valuable, and the boy renounces it by giving the bicycle to the delivery boy.

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90 If one wanted to continue with the concept of the thymic domain, this would obviously represent the lack of the base value, happiness.

91 Greimas has named these modalisations of being as desirable and impossible, see e.g. Greimas 1987: 145.
permanently. The delivery boy is now completely conjoined with all his objects of value, but not for long. The cool kid’s gang beats up both of the boys, and one of them destroys the bike. The delivery boy is not-able-to stop him in time from destroying the bike, but he finally stops the guy by hitting him on the head with a brick. In the end the delivery boy’s instrumental object, the bike, has been destroyed, and one can guess that he will probably also lose the job, if not for not having a bike, then for hitting the boy on the head, if he is ever caught.

4.4.2 The Actantial Positions of the Discourse

Considering the actantial positions, we now come to the question we left open at the start of this analysis: What kinds of subjects do the two characters of the boys represent? We see that their relationship is polemical over the possession of the bicycle. Their striving for the same object could suggest the positions of the subject and the anti-subject. One might also want to consider the possibility that the two characters actually represent the same subject in two different manifested characters. Neither of these descriptions, however, quite fit the discourse. The two characters represent two different narrative trajectories, which both contain different base narrative programs and base values. The delivery boy has to make a living and wants the job and the bike to be-able-to do this. The other boy wants the girl and has-to have the bike for this purpose (or so he believes). These trajectories can not be considered to contain the same base object and opposing value systems, which would be required of the relationship of the subject and the anti-subject. Because the trajectories are so different, it is also impossible to consider them as one subject’s single trajectory.

The only feasible interpretation would then seem to be to consider the two subjects as simply two subjects. Their positions as subjects are not dependent on, or related to each other as such; they just happen to co-exist in the same discourse. When their trajectories come into contact, it is not as the trajectories of the opposing subject and anti-subject, but in different ways, most often as opponents representing not-being-able-to in the other one’s

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92 Revalorisation is described as an object acquiring new value as a result of new knowledge (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 264), but we interpret it as equally possible for the object to also lose value as a result of knowledge. For renunciation see footnote 76.
program. It is possible to explain this by considering the discourse to contain elements from two different discoursive micro-universes. In other words, the discourse then includes two separate sub-discourses that, in this case, come into contact with each other from time to time. Taking this stand, we then have to define the actantial positions in both of these discourses separately.

In the delivery boy’s trajectory we have defined being-able-to make a living as the base object of value. His virtualising modality in this program is having-to, but it is difficult to say what kind of a sender would be behind this having-to. If one wanted to go out of one’s way to define this instance, the answer might be something as general as the society that has placed the boy in the position, in which he has to find a way to make a living. Looking at the character of the boss, one could see this as a plausible explanation. When the boss communicates to the boy that the job in question is a good opportunity, he is actually saying that it is a good opportunity for a boy in his position. According to this sender-society, for a migrant worker from the countryside, physical labour is what he should be doing. The sender has made the boy accept the contract, by which this is what he has-to do. As a delegate of the society-sender the boss gives the delivery boy -receiver the job as a gift and communicates, by persuasive doing, the job and the bicycle as objects of value that the boy then wants-to-be conjoined with. The boy’s friend also acts as a delegate of the sender, when he endorses the view that the job and the bike are, indeed, valuable objects.

In addition to the initial contract, there is also some further communication between the subject and the sender throughout the discourse. This happens on the occasions in which the sender has to sanction the subject’s performance of the doing and the values, prescribed in the contract. First of all, when the delivery boy comes to the boss after losing the bicycle, it is clear that he has broken the terms of the contract by not making the delivery. The boss would have to sanction his performance as a failure, but instead he gives the boy another chance and makes a new contract; the boy will get the job back if he finds the bike. He does this, because the boy is so persistent, and the new contract he makes will also depend on the boy’s continued persistence. On the second occasion the boy receives the job back, i.e. the sender rewards him, when he actually persistently shows up with the bike, though the boss had at that stage already reneged on their contract. What is obvious, then,
is that the sender appreciates the boy’s persistence. But when one considers this persistence further, one can interpret it as more than just a character trait. Instead one can actually construe it as a depiction of the subject’s commitment to the contract and the values prescribed in it. Because of this commitment the sender can not evaluate the boy’s performance as a failure. On the earlier occasion, when the boss had got the boy out of jail, the sender had made a negative judgement of the boy’s performance, because he had thought the boy had been out stealing. This again revealed honesty as another value in the sender’s value system.

Considering that, in addition to the sought after values, the sender also communicates to the subject his modal competence, one could interpret that being committed to the sender’s values and especially complying with the value of honesty, occasionally gives the boy competence to carry out different doings.\footnote{This does not necessarily mean that competence is always a reward for complying with the sender’s values. In this discourse, however, there seems to be a certain connection.} For example, persistence, i.e. commitment, and honesty make him able-to hang onto the bike, when the gang of boys tries to take it from him, gives him know-how to resist the clerk swindling him totally, and gets him the help of the other boy’s father. Of course, this does not apply to all of the subject’s competence. In general, modal competences can also take the forms of separate characters which are helpers and opponents. One of the helpers is the other boy’s father who makes the delivery boy able-to get the bike. Another character that consistently tries to supply competence to the boy is his friend. He offers his know-how-not-to, by warning the boy against trusting city folk, tries to help to look for the bike, and lends the boy his old bike. In all these efforts he does not, however, offer much actual know-how or being-able-to. He is not of much help in looking for the boy’s bike, and his old bike breaks down very soon. His know-how is also called into question by a few things. First of all the boy can, in fact, trust city folk, such as his boss, the other boy’s father, and another helper; the manager at the massage parlour. Also the friend’s knowledge of the rich girl, who we haven’t yet mentioned, proves to be wrong.\footnote{The only significance the rich girl character seems to have is connected to this interplay of seeming and being (see diagram 3., page 23 of this thesis), which portrays the friend’s lack of knowledge.}

There are also characters that represent not-being-able-to for the boy. Obviously, on many occasions, the other boy and his gang make him not-able-to be conjoined with the bike and
the other connected values, and the cool kid’s gang does that permanently in the end. Other opponents along the way could be the receptionist at the massage parlour and the guard at the bicycle storage as they highlight the boy’s lack of competence. Characters that also look like opponents are the clerk at the delivery office who made the boy not-able-to get the bike when he should have, and the implicit character of the thief who originally stole the bike. Instead, these characters could, however, be seen as representatives of the anti-subject. If we consider that their object is probably also to make a living, or money, then their base object is the same as the subject’s. If we then consider that the value system the subject is assigned includes the value honesty, it is quite clear that the cheating clerk and the stealing thief represent opposing values. Anyhow, this anti-subject is not a very strong presence in the manifested discourse; the subject’s performance is much more central. The related anti-sender also does not seem to make an appearance, at least to any considerable degree.

Looking at this subject’s final performance of his programs we can see that his commitment is rewarded by him succeeding to be conjoined with all his objects of value on two occasions. However, on both occasions he is not-able-to remain conjoined with the object-bicycle, which has an effect on the other objects as well. On the first occasion he ends up sharing the bike, which makes it difficult for him to hold on to the job. On the second occasion, at the end, the bike is destroyed, which leaves open the future effects on the conjunction with the other objects of value. Nevertheless, this does not look like a negative judgement, or punishment\textsuperscript{95}, by the sender on the subject’s performance of the base program. Just before the bicycle is destroyed the delivery boy actually receives it as a gift or recompense\textsuperscript{96} from the other boy, who has to be seen as the sender’s delegate in that instance. The delivery boy, losing possession of the bicycle on these occasions, would seem to be more appropriately described as representing the lack of competence on the subject’s part, as the sender just does not supply the subject with competence to remain conjoined with his objects of value.

\textsuperscript{95} A negative judgement by the sender can be expressed in the form of a punishment (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 264).

\textsuperscript{96} A positive judgement by the sender can be expressed in the form of a recompense (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 264).
The other boy’s narrative trajectory is very different from the delivery boy’s, as we have already noted. Also the actantial positions in the manifested discourse, depicting his trajectory, are obviously very different. His base object of value is the girl, whom he wants to attain. The virtualising modality for him is, clearly, wanting-to be conjoined, which makes the object desirable. Finding the sender, who has persuaded the receiver-subject-boy that the girl is desirable, is actually not that difficult. The character, communicating values to the boy and judging his performance as a sender, is the girl herself. The communication of values, or more precisely, in this case, of competence, takes place in the classroom, where the girl tries to make the boy understand that he does not need the bicycle to be with her. In the base program of getting the girl, the boy believes he has the know-how, when he thinks he will attain the girl by getting the bike.97 The sender-girl then communicates to him that the bike is not an object of value instrumental in getting her. She tries to offer him the proper know-how, knowing-how-not-to-be, which would reveal the object-bike as an illusory98 object. She also communicates to the boy that he actually does not need any instrumental object that he as himself already would be competent.

The judgement by the sender-girl comes, as the boy fails to understand his own competence and makes himself unable-to perform the base narrative program. He concentrates more on getting the bike than getting the girl and thus drives her away. Since he fails the base program, the sender’s sanction is negative. A negative sanction can take the form of justice or vengeance (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 267), and in this case the sanction, indeed, looks like vengeance. The girl goes off with the cool kid, whom the boy can not compete with, though she does not really seem to care for the cool kid. From the boy’s point of view, even this sanction by the sender-girl, does not seem to make him understand the real state of affairs. He still considers the bike as indispensable (having-to-be conjoined with) and struggles over it with the delivery boy. He also considers the cool kid as the main opponent or the anti-subject in his way of getting the girl, and he tries to remove this not-being-able-to by hitting the cool kid on the head. Apparently, becoming aware of the fact that these actions do not make him able-to get the girl, and that he has

97 This may be a mistaken interpretation of the sender’s communication on the subject’s part, because the girl has, in fact, complimented on the bike, and maybe has said something about it earlier, as well, to make him think she would like it.
98 See e.g. Greimas 1987: 145.
actually already failed the base program, he then renounces the revalorised bicycle, giving it to the delivery boy.\textsuperscript{99}

The only real opponent along the boy’s trajectory is actually the boy himself. He makes himself unable when he would, in actuality, be-able-to carry out his base program. Otherwise his opponents and helpers are in the program for the bicycle that he considers instrumental. The delivery boy is obviously an opponent with the bike, and the father an opponent in the instrumental program of money for the bike. The boy receives help from his friends, who always support him in getting the bike and also try to help him in the base program for the girl, e.g. by leaving them alone when necessary. None of these characters, in the end, affect his performance, since it is all up to him himself. This kind of actantial concentration seems to be very central in this half of the discourse. Looking at it more carefully one can, for the most part, only see two characters that represent all the actantial positions. The boy is the subject, receiver, and an opponent, and the girl is the object, sender, and in a way, both a helper and an opponent. Since the concentration of many actants into the same character(s) can be said to make a discourse more psychological, then this discourse is definitely psychological.

The film, as a discourse, is clearly divided into the two separate sub-discourses. The first is more sociological while the latter is clearly more psychological in regard to the actantial distribution on the manifested level. Though the two depicted trajectories have different senders and objects of value, their value systems do not seem to be decidedly contrary or contradictory. The significance of commitment could even be regarded as a common denominator in the sub-discourses. It is prominent in the delivery boy’s trajectory, but could, as well, be seen as insufficient in the other boy’s trajectory. If he had been more persistent and committed, perhaps he would not have abandoned the girl. An interesting common feature is also the relationship between being and seeming in the whole discourse. The delivery boy encounters the rich girl, who seems to be rich but actually is not (lie), and the other boy's trajectory is riddled with things that seem to be but are not (lie), or are but do not seem to be (secret).\textsuperscript{100}

\textsuperscript{99} Perhaps it could also be said that he had already realised this, before hitting the cool kid in the head, and renounced the object-girl.
\textsuperscript{100} See again diagram 3. on page 23 of this thesis.
Without discussing these features of the discourse in more detail we can try to take another general look at the actantial positions. First of all, both subjects are represented by single characters throughout the discourse. These subjects are, nevertheless, in rather different positions. In the other boy’s case, there is a lot of help offered to him by his friends and the girl, without him even having to ask for it. It is only the boy himself that makes him unable-to carry out his program. The modality in his program is also that of wanting-to, it is not something he has-to do. For the delivery boy, instead, there is not much help available, he has to struggle and be persistent to receive help and be-able-to carry out his program, and for reasons outside his influence he is not-able-to remain conjoined with his objects of value. His modality is having-to; he has to make a living, since no-one will supply it for him. The instrumental objects are, however, modalised by wanting-to; he wants a good job, not just any job. There is also an interesting phenomenon in the delivery boy’s trajectory, in which the instances that are on his side, as it were, and are actually able to make him able, are represented by more well-to-do businessmen, whereas the instances that in some way oppose him, are represented by not-so-well-off characters. This would seem to indicate that among the not-so-well-off characters, of which the delivery boy is one, there is a struggle for survival even at the expense of others, while the well-off characters can afford to help.\footnote{Of course, the delivery boy’s friend is willing to help him, but is not really able to.}

We will come back to, among other things, these features in the discussion in the next chapter.

4.5 A Summary of the Film South of the Clouds

At the start of the film South of the Clouds (Yun de nanfang 2004) we can see a man, in his mid sixties, looking into a cold and windy yard through the window of a humble apartment. He then goes jogging in an uninviting industrial landscape with another older man who spurs him on. Arriving home, he collapses, and his daughter helps him up. Visiting him, the other older man tells the daughter, who is a fitness trainer, that she had better get her father in shape for the high altitudes of Yunnan.\footnote{Yunnan, literally “south [of the] clouds”, is a mountainous province in Southern China.} While the father is resting in bed, his son and grandson visit him, and try to persuade him not to go to Yunnan, but somewhere closer and cheaper in the North, so they do not have to worry. The father refuses and says he has his reasons for going to Yunnan. Later at night, the daughter living
with the father, also tries to persuade him to stay, or at least to postpone his journey. She says that their money is tight enough as it is, and they do not want to worry about him. She also tries to find out how much money he has saved for the journey. She wants the father to give her the money as an investment to start her own fitness centre, but he says that losing weight is nonsense and that the 10,000 yuan he has saved from his small salary by rationing his own food, would not be enough to start a business anyway.

Later, the man is working out with his friend again, doing exercises imitating animals. At home the man eats with his family. His son is not there, and when the son’s wife complains he might be out gambling again, the man snaps at her. On another day the daughter asks for the father’s help with writing a business proposal, which is what he used to do for his boss at the factory. He does not believe an investor would trust a young girl with money, and when the daughter demands his help, he is sceptical of the possible investor’s intentions. When they are out exercising again the friend tells the man about the time he had been working in Yunnan as a young man. A girl from the matriarchal Musuo-culture had had a crush on him, but he had not dared to go out with her fearing the supposedly sexually liberal customs of the Musuo. The man listens to him attentively.

The man is at home again, when the daughter tells him that her meeting with the investor went well, and that they will meet again after her class. She does not want the father to come with her, but he shows up after the class anyway. The daughter and the investor leave together, and when the daughter returns home, she tells the father they mostly talked about him. The investor wants to introduce the father to a lady, but the father is not willing and tells her to introduce his friend, instead. On another day the father rides his bike to his old factory and gives some money to a collection for the widow of a colleague. At home he eats alone with the daughter, as none of the other family members come. Later on he exercises alone. Some time later his friend comes around to thank him for introducing the lady to him. They want to get married soon, because the arrangement is good for both of them. However, because of this the friend will not be going to Yunnan with the man. The man is upset and later tells the daughter he will be leaving for Yunnan soon.
On the train the man tries to be friendly with people, and at night he talks with an officer, telling him he is returning home. When he arrives in Kunming, after more than two days on the train, there is a businessman waiting for him at the station. He is surprised, and the businessman tells him he has been asked to take care of the man by a friend in the daughter’s class, because the daughter was so worried. The businessman drives the man in a convertible to an upmarket hotel, where the man says he wants to rest after the long journey. The businessman says he will be back the next day, though the man says it is not necessary. After the businessman has offered to help with anything, the man asks if he could possibly find a cheaper hotel for him. Resting the day at the hotel, the man wakes up late at night and goes out, but no place is open and the streets are empty. In the morning he has breakfast with the businessman, who is having his shoes shined. The businessman is free for the day and insists on taking the man around in his car. The man is somewhat ill at ease, but in the end asks if they could go to a factory number 512, not far from town. The businessman does not understand why, but agrees to go, and also tells the man he has found a cheaper hotel.

Driving in the countryside, the businessman tells the man he first came to Yunnan from Xi’an for business and then for his wife. On the way he very rudely asks for directions from another driver, which makes the man very uncomfortable. Arriving at the factory, which is a branch of his old factory, the man is not let in. He does not want the businessman’s help to get in but, instead, goes to see the living quarters of the factory workers. He wanders around and runs into a retired lady with a grandchild. The lady lets him use their bathroom. He leaves the place very thankful and happy. The man and the businessman spend the night eating and drinking in town, and the businessman tells his story. He left his wife in Xi’an for his new wife in Yunnan, but he is no longer happy and he is too ashamed to go back, and is thus stuck in Yunnan. The man gets emotional and tells the businessman that he should not give up. He says that nowadays people are free to move, unlike when he was young. He has lived his whole life for others, but finally he can live for himself. The journey has been a dream come true for him. At his new hotel the man asks the businessman for suggestions for what to do the next day. He says Kunming is not really Yunnan and that the man should go to the Lugu-lake where the matriarchal

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103 The capital of Yunnan.
Musuo-people live. The man agrees and calls his daughter from the lobby to tell her he will be away for a couple of days. After answering, the daughter gets a massage along with the investor, but she tickles too much to endure it. They leave, and at a disco the daughter warns the investor she will dance till very late. The investor says he will wait for her.

Back in Kunming, the father secures all his money in his bag, and takes it to bed with him and goes to sleep. In a dream sequence he is then travelling to the Lugu-lake. He tells a man by a campfire that he had come to work at factory no. 512 in the 1960’s by exchanging jobs with a local worker. The man by the fire then tells him that he is now in the area of the Musuo, where women have all the power. He can stay as long as he wants, but he has to abide by the rules of not working and not worrying. The man then wanders around and runs into a monk who tells him, in another language, that the man has lived in the North and has two boys and a girl. He then sees a young local woman and wants to tell her about his dream. In it he had been working in a factory in the North as a young man. A worker from the Yunnan factory no. 512 had wanted to change places with him, and he had agreed. The paperwork had, however, taken so long that in the meantime a woman had become pregnant with his child, and they had been forced to get married. He had had to give up coming to Yunnan, and his life had become very unhappy. His wife had been bad tempered and had died young. Facing all kinds of problems, he had had to work hard and support three children. It had been overpowering, and the more difficult life had become, the more wonderful Yunnan had become in his mind. This was how he had passed the last forty years. After finishing the tale, the man is relieved and says it is good that it was just a dream. The girl says it was all true, and the man wakes up in his hotel room.

After waking up, the man goes to the lobby to call his daughter, but she does not answer as she is seen crying in a strange bed. The man stops trying to call and sees a young woman sitting in the lobby. Soon the woman appears at his door, wanting to come in to talk with him. She forces her way in, saying she is also from the North. She tells him she is upset, because her father is sick, and she does not have money to help him. The man gives the girl some money to get rid of her, but she insists on working for the money. He refuses, but two policemen come in and arrest them both. At the police station the man is questioned, but he insists he did not do anything. The girl has already confessed to prostitution and...
paid the fine, but he angrily refuses to do so. The businessman comes and tries to get him to confess and pay the fine of 5000 yuan, saying it is better to lose the money than be sent to a labour camp. When he still determinedly refuses, the businessman tries to negotiate with the police, but runs into an older officer who knows him and dislikes his flashiness. This officer later meets with the man. He is sympathetic to the man, but says that after the girl’s confession they had to let her go, and now can not find her to question her further. They can not keep the man in jail, so he should go and stay at the hotel where they can reach him, while they keep his ID-card to be on the safe side. The officer says that as they are both old and wise, the man should know what to do.

The man roams around in the hotel, and when he is asked to pay, calls the officer to ask who will pay for his stay in the hotel. He becomes doubtful, when he hears he should ask for compensation later on. At night he secretly gives his bag with the money to the businessman. He is apparently the only customer at the hotel and befriends the chef in the empty restaurant. On another day he is sleeping during the day, and when a cleaner wakes him up he gets very angry and demands to see the manager. The police officer then visits him and suggests that he should return home. They will contact him in case they find the girl. The man, however, refuses to leave the case unsolved. The officer then tells him to relax and find work at the hotel, if he is bored. The man is stubborn and can not accept this, because working would then be a punishment, a form of reform. The man finds the chef in the kitchen and is happy to hear he likes writing a journal not to forget his life experiences. At night he can not sleep and goes to the yard where the chef is leaving to go and pick up some vegetables. The chef persuades him to come along, since the farm can still be considered a part of the hotel. At the farm the man says he can not work, but when the chef tells him they are picking the food just for themselves, he is relieved and starts working. In the end the man walks to a lake resembling the one in his dream, and starts laughing and crying at the same time.

4.6 An Actantial Analysis of South of the Clouds

In South of the Clouds the discoursive level is not simply a straightforward depiction of events. It also includes a segment which is actually a dream, but which at the same time,
conveys important information regarding the actual events of the discourse. This is, however, just a question of a more unusual choice for the figurative representation of part of the discourse, and it does not significantly complicate the analysis. Also, the discourse starts with events already underway and returns to explain earlier events later on. Regardless of these figurative forms, the discourse distinctly concentrates on the man-character’s quest for going to Yunnan. The character of his daughter is also quite strongly present in part of the discourse, but from start to finish the man’s aspirations and doings are the most central. Hence, again, this character is considered to represent the subject-actant’s trajectory. The object-actant has to be examined further, since going to Yunnan is obviously not all there is to it.

4.6.1 The Narrative Programs

The discourse starts from the middle of a narrative program already in motion. The man-character wants to go to Yunnan for reasons he will not reveal, at least, to his family. For the first part of the discourse no more is revealed about the object than that for the program in progress it is getting to Yunnan. The man is preparing for the journey by working out with the help of a friend to be-able-to physically cope with the transition. He also receives know-how from the friend by listening to his experiences of Yunnan, and he apparently relies on the friend’s constant supply of know-how, as his friend is supposed to come along with him. However, the man’s family, and especially his daughter oppose his going. They try to persuade him to stay, and the daughter also tries to persuade the man to give her his money, which is an instrumental object in the program of going to Yunnan that the man is already conjoined with. For the daughter the money is an instrumental object in setting up her own fitness centre.

Actually, the daughter-character also has a trajectory, the significance of which will be considered later. As noted, she wants to set up her own fitness centre. The reason for this, as she explains to her father, is that it is tiring to work hard for others, since she would be much better off, if she was her own boss. This would also produce money for both of them in the long run. Her base object, then, is freedom, both the freedom of being-able-to do what she herself wants to do, and economic freedom. The fitness centre is an instrumental
object in the program for this freedom, and money, in turn, an instrumental object in setting up the centre. She fails to persuade the father to give her the money and then demands his help with getting the money from the investor. He apparently helps her, but also possibly risks her chances of getting the money by showing up at their meeting. She also participates in an action that could be seen as the last effort to make the father stay and possibly give her the money instead of using it for the journey. Claiming it to be to please the investor she tries to get the father to meet a lady. The father avoids this by offering his friend up instead, in effect, losing part of his competence, when the friend decides to stay with the lady instead of coming with him. Later on it is implied that the daughter pursues the money by sleeping with the investor in exchange, after there is no longer a possibility for her to get the money from the father.

In the father’s trajectory, though he has lost the friend’s know-how, he is still competent enough to go to Yunnan. When he arrives and is greeted by the businessman, sent by the daughter, it is clear from his reaction that merely coming to Yunnan was not the goal for the man. There is something else he wants that the businessman is preventing him from getting. Before revealing the base object of value, however, the man still wants to carry out another part of the program related to Yunnan. It apparently includes going to see factory no. 512 and the people there, which the businessman in part makes him able-to do. As the man tells the businessman that the journey has been a dream come true for him, and when he is actually dreaming, the base value for the man is gradually revealed and is shown to be somewhat complex.

The man’s narrative program of coming to Yunnan, and especially to factory no. 512, had started forty years earlier, when he had been offered the chance, and he had decided to go. He had, however, been made not-able-to carry out this program, in the first place by bureaucracy and later, as a consequence of his own actions, the repressing social practises of the time. As a result, his life had become unhappy and he had been forced to live his life for others, as he tells the businessman. The years of repression have made him want to finally live for himself, to be free to do what he himself wants, not what he is forced to do. The object-Yunnan then seems to have been posited with new values over the years. The
program of getting to Yunnan had become to represent the program of freedom as well, being in a way instrumental in it.

The final base object of value for the man is, then, the freedom to do what he wants and not what others want him to. The presence of the businessman sent by the daughter is, at first, an obstacle in this program, since the man is restricted by the businessman watching over him and taking care of him, for example, taking him to an expensive hotel. The man is only able-to go around freely by himself at night, when he can not really do anything. Soon the businessman, however, offers the man some being-able-to and know-how-to in the instrumental program of being in Yunnan, helping him with what he wants to do there. As the businessman reveals that he, too, feels stuck and unhappy, the man urges also him to do what he wants and not let himself be restricted by others. The man now appears to be conjoined with his objects of value, being free and in Yunnan, though he also seems to be aware of the fact that this state is dependent on the instrumental object -money, as he knows-how-to secure it from thieves by taking it into bed with him. His conjunction with all his objects is, however, soon threatened because of the very object-money. The prostitute also wants to get it, and persuades him to give her some of it. This gets him into trouble, as the police, who are probably also after the money in the form of fines or bribes, arrest both of them.

Being arrested obviously presents a major infringement on his freedom, the base value. It also poses a threat to his instrumental object -money, as the police officers demand he should confesses and pay a fine in the amount of half of his savings. The man is, however, competent enough to refuse to submit to the will of the police, and though the man’s freedom of action is limited, he can, nevertheless, not actually be forced to do anything. The businessman also tries to persuade him to submit, but he does not. His persistence is competence, both knowing-how-to and being-able-to, in being conjoined with the value freedom in the form of not being forced into doing something. Because of the man’s persistence the sympathetic older police officer has to return some of the man’s freedom of action by sending him to stay at the hotel. The police obviously see that they will not-be-able-to make him do what they want, i.e. to confess and give them his money. They just
want to get rid of him. The man himself, however, sees that because the police are still officially in control of him, his freedom of action is limited to what he can do at the hotel.

The man also sees the threat to his instrumental object -money, when he realises he will have to spend it on the bills for the hotel, where he must officially stay arrested. The businessman helps him to secure this object. At the hotel the man is delighted to hear that the chef relishes life experiences and encourages him to continue enjoying his life. He is, however, annoyed when the cleaner interrupts his sleep during the day, in other words, limits his already limited freedom of action making him not-able-to do what he wants. The police officer tells the man that he is actually, unofficially, free and able-to do whatever he wants, but the man does not interpret and accept this quasi-freedom as the object of value - freedom he is after. Because the police officer is an official, his suggestions become orders and limit the man’s actions even further, since he does not want to do anything he is told to. The chef helps the man know-how-to do small things just for himself, but on the whole, he is truly backed into a corner and his actions are very much limited. On the one hand, he has carried out the base narrative program of freedom by being able not to submit to the will of others, but on the other hand he really has not carried it out, because in the end he is not able to live according to his own will, either.

4.6.2 The Actantal Positions of the Discourse

The main narrative programs in *South of the Clouds* are represented in a somewhat unusual manner, their early stages not being depicting. These stages are only learned of from the man’s own account, as he describes, in a dream, what happened forty years earlier. What actually happened is, thus, not so clear, and this makes defining the actant-sender, for one, more difficult. According to the man’s description the very first reason for him wanting to go to Yunnan had simply been that he had been offered the chance. The motivation for going had, however, apparently changed through the years, because the unobtainable object had come to represent the exemption from all that had since gone wrong. Should one, then, look for the sender, who communicates to the subject-receiver the sought after values, form behind the very first program of going to Yunnan, or from behind the later amended program of freedom?
Though it is not easy to see any instance behind either of the programs right away, we can try to find out more about the sender by looking at the concept of chance related to the first program. This chance had represented a choice for the man, either he stays or he goes. Either way, the choice had been his. He had chosen to go, but had also himself caused the pregnancy that had, in effect, prevented him from going. It can now be assumed that the sender behind the program of going to Yunnan, had communicated the freedom of choice as a value to the subject, which value had then been posited in his chosen object, Yunnan. It would be possible to consider that the sender had later judged the performance of the subject as a failure, as the subject had made himself unable to go, by getting involved with the woman, and the sender had punished him for his failure with all the misery that had ensued. This misery would then only have made the already existing value of freedom in the object-Yunnan stronger. Another way of looking at the matter would be that all the difficulties had not, actually, been a punishment for failing, but just different types of lack of competence to carry out the program, along the narrative trajectory. In any case, the base object of value appears to have been the same all along.

Considering that in this discourse the man is still depicted as pursuing the object-freedom, it makes more sense to think that he is continuing his original program for freedom than that he had already failed it earlier. In looking for the sender behind the now unitary base object of value -freedom, no instance, outside the subject himself, comes to the fore. Seeing the subject as the instance that persuades him to want to do things the way he wants to do them, actually seems quite sensible. In this case, the subject really “owes it to himself”\(^{104}\) after all those years to finally live for himself for a change. In addition to the man himself, there is the character of the friend who, to some extent, could be seen to communicate the value-freedom, when he tells the man he regrets having been afraid of non-conforming in his youth. The character of the man also appears to act as the sender, communicating values in the discourse on two occasions. When the man and the businessman are out eating and drinking, the man urges also the businessman to go for the value-freedom. The same happens more subtly with the chef, when the man encourages the chef to continue valuing the different experiences in his life, which can be seen as the opposite of just carrying out what is expected of him.

\(^{104}\) This is how Greimas describes a possible situation, where the subject- and sender-actants are represented by the same character (Greimas 1987: 112).
Because the whole discourse, and especially the objects of value, are so complex, it seems sensible to try to see if it would be beneficial to also define the position of the anti-sender. Since the values, propagated by the sender, can be demonstrated with the concept of freedom, then the anti-sender’s values should in some way oppose this concept. In this discourse the opposing values for freedom seem to be conforming and submitting. These are values that the man had to abide by, for forty years, and that made his life miserable. This, however, begs the questions of what, or whom the man conformed and submitted to, in other words, what are the instances that propagate and enforce these values in the discourse. These instances that stand for control in relation to the man’s trajectory, are on the one hand the representatives of the establishment that have power over him, and on the other his family that represents his socially defined obligations to them. Right at the beginning of the discourse the man’s family members all try to persuade him to stay for the family’s sake, which, in fact, is the action of the anti-sender.105

As noted, the other instance that represents the anti-sender’s values in the discourse, is the instance of the officials and other representatives of the establishment that have power over the man’s life. In addition to the representatives of the establishment in his youth that restricted his potential for carrying out the program of going to Yunnan, he comes across new officials that still advocate the same values and restrict his chances of carrying out being free. By restricting the man’s actions, the officials embody not-being-able-to in his programs, and are thus opponents.106 However, the police officers that deal with him, and probably also the persons in his youth, do not only oppose him, but also communicate their values to him and try to make him accept them. As representatives of the anti-sender they try to manipulate the subject-receiver into accepting a contract with their values of conforming and submitting as the values he wants-to, or has-to pursue. The subject sees that he has-to go along with submitting to their limitations of his freedom, but he is able-to resist conforming to their will regarding his doings. This means the anti-sender partially manages to force the man into accepting his values, but also that the man is partially

105 There is also a brief situation that is not connected to any narrative program, where the daughter-in-law criticises the man’s son for possibly having gone gambling. In this case, the woman is communicating the value of conforming to familial obligations, which makes the father angry.
106 Even though they are also after his money, they are not anti-subjects, as their base object of value is different.
competent to resist them. In other words, the man is only partially competent to carry out the values of the sender.

Now, the anti-sender having been defined, the trajectory of the daughter also seems to make more sense. We can see that in her base narrative program she is after the same base object of value as her father; they both want the freedom to do what they themselves want. What more, she is also after the same instrumental object -money and tries to get it from the father. Most importantly, however, it is evident that she stands for the anti-sender’s values, at times also speaking as his delegate, which in fact makes her the anti-subject. She is trying to get the same objects of value as the father, but she finds her justification in the anti-sender’s value system that gives her the right to demand the father to conform to the interests of the family. In their polemic confrontation she tries to manipulate\textsuperscript{107} the father, and also to trick him, but apparently the father is more competent as he can resist her actions. She, however, manages to inflict damage on his competence, taking away the friend’s help. In the end, he remains conjoined with the instrumental object -money and is able to pursue the base object, while the daughter has to admit defeat in their confrontation.

In the discourse there are several characters that affect the man’s competence one way or the other, i.e. are helpers or opponents. As described, the police officers are focal opponents, making the man unable-to perform his program fully. The prostitute-character can not actually be called an opponent, since she herself does not affect the man’s abilities, but only gives the police an opportunity to do so. The cleaner also briefly limits the man’s freedom, when she makes him not-able-to sleep when he wants to. Another opponent in the man’s program for freedom is the businessman, who at first both limits his freedom of action and makes him submit to his will. He is, in fact, literally sent by the anti-sender, represented by the family, as an opponent to make the man not-able-to be free of his obligations to them.

Soon the businessman, however, turns into a helper, making the man able-to do what he wants. At the beginning of the discourse, the friend-character was also a helper, offering

\textsuperscript{107}Manipulation can also be found on the performing subject’s trajectory (in this case the anti-subject), not only on the sender’s (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 206).
the man being-able-to and knowing-how-to, but now he is taken out of the game by the daughter’s actions. The lady who let the man use her bathroom at the factory, is in a way also a helper, because she makes the man able-to familiarise himself with their life at the factory, but she might just as well be described as part of the object. At the end of the discourse the chef directly helps the man to know-how-to be free in his confined situation, but this does not make the man able-to be free on a larger scale. In addition to these instances, an important factor in the man’s ability to carry out his program’s is his persistence. The fact that he has persistently saved money from his small salary has guaranteed him the money for the journey, and persistence makes him able-to resist both his family’s and the police officers’ demands. As was concluded in the analysis of *Beijing Bicycle*, persistence can actually be seen as commitment to the values of the sender, and here the strong commitment to being free also gets the man a long way in his program, though it does not make him completely able to carry it out in the end.

To sum up, it is possible to make some notes on the general features of the actantial positions in this discourse. The man-character represents the subject-actant throughout the discourse. He is his own sender, and the base object of value -freedom is something he wants-to be conjoined with for his own sake, and not because he has-to be conjoined with it. He has actually wanted the same object for forty years, but has not been competent enough even to try to carry out the program before now. He has become competent by being persistent, by being committed to the value-freedom. He is now offered some help by the friend, the businessman, and the chef without him having to make any effort or ask for it, but the opponents, and to some degree the anti-subject, are so competent that he really has to struggle persistently to be-able-to resist them. As it was in his youth, the anti-sender’s institutional forces are too strong for him as an individual subject-sender to resist, even with the help of his helpers. In the end he is able-to be only half conjoined with the object of value -freedom. An interesting observation is also that the characters that represent the opposing institutional instances, can actually be nice and sympathetic persons, who from their point of view, want to help the man, but they are still opponents and anti-subjects because of their position. Together with the results from the other

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108 See page 63 of this thesis.
analyses, these aspects will next be discussed further and organised in the following chapter.
5. DISCUSSION ON THE RESULTS OF THE ACTANTIAL ANALYSES

The purpose of this chapter is to collect and discuss the results of the actantial analyses conducted in the previous chapter. One of our aims in this thesis was to define a typology of sorts of the actantial structure in the three films in our analysis. Each of the sub-chapters here will now deal with one of the aspects in the possible common typology of the films. These aspects will also be discussed in relation to the Chinese cinema tradition, when possible and relevant. The major part of this discussion will, however, concentrate on the possible relevance of the individualisation thesis in explaining and interpreting these aspects. A presentation of the theory regarding the individualisation thesis can be found in chapter 3.4109.

5.1 The Individual Subject and Others

One of the most distinct commonalities between the three films is that in all of them the subject is represented by a single male individual. The fact that the lead characters are consistently male is an aspect that has to be considered. This preference for male leads can, at first, seem like a departure from the Chinese cinema tradition. Starting already from the 1930’s onwards female characters have commonly been the ones cast at the centre of films that deal with social issues (Cui 2003: xi-xvi). However, there was a noticeable break from this tradition in the underground films of the 1990’s, which focused on male characters, almost sidelining women altogether. The three films in our analysis can be placed in this lineage of films,110 which makes the choice of male characters over female ones seem less striking. One of the reasons for the upsurge of male characters in the underground and independent films may be the very fact that the female as an icon has become so invested with meanings that she has become a less attractive choice for realistic or alternative representations. Whether or not there are also some ideological reasons for the new-found interest in the male perspective is a hard to say.

The fact that the films concentrate on single characters can also be explored within the cinema tradition. The melodramatic practice of portraying an individual at the mercy of

109 Pages 36-39 of this thesis.
110 See pages 16-17 of this thesis.
society, suffering social injustices, has been widely used in Chinese cinema. It has been associated with bringing out pressing social problems and calling for transformation.\footnote{See chapter 2., pages 7-17 of this thesis.} It may be reasonable to presume, then, that these films are continuing this tradition and possibly have similar purposes, especially since all of the lead characters are among the more disadvantaged in the society. Setting a single individual against the superior forces of society is, however, a very effective dramatic tool in general and it is definitely not typical of Chinese cinema alone. This may raise the question, whether the use of this type of setting in the films necessarily implies an intentional participation in the discourse of social problems, or if it can possibly be more related to the simple choice of a dramatic narrative structure. If one looks more closely at the traditional position of the individual in Chinese cinema, one can also see a difference to how the individual is portrayed in these films. When the individual has traditionally been used as a symbol of the general state of the society, she has been portrayed as suffering from the breakdown of that society. The focus has been on how she has been left alone to cope with misfortunes as a result of the failure of society, instead of on her needs and wants. Though an individual has been at the centre of the films, it has not been the point of view of the individual, but of the society or the collective that has been presented. She has also always been presented in connection to these instances, especially to the family, or the family-home.\footnote{See, again, chapter 2., pages 7-17 of this thesis.}

In the films in our analysis the point of view is the individual’s, the focus being on his needs and wants. In the actantial analyses the male individual stood out as the subject in each discourse, and all the films quite pronoucnedly concentrate on this subject’s pursuit of a certain object. One could argue that Greimas’s theory is actually biased and only looks for individual agents as subjects with objects to pursue. One must, however, remember that the subject could also be a collective actant if, in fact, there was a group or several successive individuals forming the subject (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 35). Unlike in Chinese films traditionally the family-home does not have a central position in most of the films in our analysis either. It never appears or is mentioned in \textit{Incense}, where the lead character is a monk, or in the first sub-discourse of \textit{Beijing Bicycle}, where the lead
character is a migrant boy in the city. The family is present in the second sub-discourse of *Beijing Bicycle*, but it represents just one of the opponents among others along the boy’s trajectory. In *South of the Clouds* the family does have a more important position, but it is also that of the opponent and the anti-subject and, at times, of the anti-sender. The man is not generally presented as someone who primarily identifies himself as a member of his family, but as someone trying to, literally, get away and break free from it. Towards the end of the film the man’s family back home actually completely fades into the background and is never mentioned again.

The new position of the individual and the diminished significance of the family in these films could be interpreted in the light of the process of individualisation. According to the individualisation thesis, this contemporary process of social transformation causes the individual’s ties to family, tradition and social collectives to become undone. As a result the individual’s life is no longer governed by these determinants and he is free to pursue personal goals. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2005: 22-23.) On the other hand these instances, like the neighbourhood and family, can no longer be relied on either. All binding mutual obligations have expired, and bonds can only be presumed to last until further notice. (Bauman 2001: 86.) This description would seem to, for the most part, hold fast for the position of the family in these films, but the family can by no means be presumed to be the only possible source of communal relations. To study the actual significance of these relations in the three films in our analysis, we have to also look at the different characters that represent helpers and opponents along the subjects’ trajectories.

In *Incense* the monk’s neighbour is a helper for him in some of the instrumental programs. He helps the monk on several occasions out of, what would seem like, neighbourly duty. The analysis, however, revealed that the neighbour may as well have been acting out of selfish motivations and not out of loyalty to the monk. His help can not be taken for granted merely based on their relationship then. In the course of the film, the monk goes to look for help from many of the instances that could be expected to be obliged to help him. The town officials do not help him, even though they have promised to do so, and neither

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113 If one wanted to insist on the centrality of the family-home, even in these films, then one could say that the lack of the family-home is exactly what is significant in these films. However the lack is in no way underlined in these films, and only comes out if looked for.
does the monk’s teacher at the bigger temple. The police even become his opponents and take advantage of him, when he has managed to get some money together. Generally the monk is not offered any help out of obligation but, instead, it is offered to him only if he is able to produce something in exchange. The monk’s failure to get help by relying on presumed loyalties, and the unreliability of promises made, would seem to testify, quite convincingly, for the individualised state of his society in this respect.

In *Beijing Bicycle*, though the significance of family seems to be minor for both of the boys, there are actually other characters that the boys can rely on. The delivery boy has his friend who is always ready to help, and the other boy has his gang that fights for him even when he is quite apathetic himself. In the delivery boys life there are, however, also quite a few opponents and even anti-subjects, all of whom seem to live by the “every man for himself” principle. All of these characters are from the, more or less, lower classes of society, like the boy himself, and seem to exemplify the lack of solidarity and class-consciousness, a condition which is typical for the individualised society where the individuals, in similarly disadvantaged positions, can not perceive a common cause (Ibid. 47-50). Although these opponents feel no obligations towards the boy, there are still the two helpers that do: the delivery boss and the manager at the massage parlour. These better-off characters seem to feel some sort of social responsibility for the poor boy, because they are in a position to help him. Communal relations and obligations have not completely disappeared from this society, then, though they may be in short supply on the whole.

The film *South of the Clouds* presents quite a different picture in this respect. Family and the representatives of the establishment actually represent the strongest opponents for the man, both of which are instances that one would have expected to have lost their grip on him in the individualised society. However, they have a strong hold on the man, and his sense of responsibility and obligations are constantly being appealed to. For example, even the prostitute invokes his responsibilities to her as a fellow Northerner, and the cleaner has the right to wake him up, because it is not conventional or traditional to sleep during the day. The man is pursuing individuation, i.e. the capacity for self assertion (Ibid. 47), and trying to escape these constraints, but is finding it hard. On the other hand he seems to be
at the receiving end of these relations; nobody really feels obliged to help him in his escape. His friend is a helper who may be motivated by obligation, but is not too committed to these responsibilities. When the friend’s own interests come into conflict with the promises he has made, he does not hesitate to choose in favour of his own interests. The help the man receives from the businessman and the chef is not offered to him out of responsibility, but out of choice, out of the genuine will to help. The man appreciates this, as all of these characters are pursuing the same goal of individuation. It would just seem that the society has not quite caught up with this objective yet.

5.2 Objects of Value

One of the common features in all of the three films is that, right from the beginning, the subject is very determinedly pursuing an object. This pursuit stands out clearly in each film and does not have to be carefully looked for in the actantial analysis. Though, in the analysis the objects themselves are revealed to be more complicated than could have been thought and to differ considerably between the films, their position is still similar in all of the films. Each film depicts only one base narrative program and one base object of value, although there could have been several successive and even simultaneous ones. Throughout the films the subjects are also very committed to their base objects of value. This situation, however, is not exactly what one would have expected to find by the standards of the individualisation thesis. The individualised society has been described as an insecure place characterised by constant fast changes. The disintegration of stable institutions and traditional social structures has created a situation where nothing is certain and nothing can be expected to remain the same. This has presumably also affected the way people perceive of their objects of desire. What people desire is instant gratification, since “…it is far from certain […] that the prizes which look attractive today will still be desirable when they at long last come.” (Bauman 2001: 155-156.) As one can see, this attitude, in fact, differs considerably from the subjects’ attitudes towards their objects in the films in our analysis.

Another presumable effect of the changes in the individualised society is that along with people’s objects of desire, their whole worldviews and identities have become more
fragmented and selectable. The individual can no longer defer to tradition or traditional and social roles and the ready patterns of behaviour they have offered. He now has to decide for himself what he wants, and how he wants to go about it, whether he likes it or not. Finding suitable values that can guide one in the decisions of what one wants and needs to do has become a daunting task for the individual in this kind of society. (Hoggett, Mayo, and Miller 2007: 99.) Looking at the films, one can see that this is also not quite the situation for the individuals they depict. With the exception of *South of the Clouds*, in all of the films the objects that the subjects “choose” to pursue, and the ways they pursue them, are very much determined by the subjects’ predetermined social roles and positions. Since the different subjects are in very different social positions, they also have different objectives. The values that guide the subjects in their actions are all communicated to them by outside sources, the senders of the discourses. Only in *South of the Clouds* is the sender the subject himself.

The monk in *Incense* has as his base object of value the maintenance of the temple. He has to keep the temple going because it is his duty as a monk. In this social position he is responsible for offering the townspeople a proper place to practise the Buddhist customs handed down to them through tradition. The implicit sender behind the monk’s actions expects him to uphold this tradition, and that is what the monk tries to do, no questions asked. In his pursuit of this object, he also just does what is expected of him. First, he tries to get help from all the expected instances. When he finds this does not work, he adapts to the new demands and acts according to the others’ suggestions and their example. In these attempts he actually becomes guided by the anti-sender, but in any case he is not personally active in deciding the course and objective of his actions.

For the delivery boy in the first sub-discourse of *Beijing Bicycle* his base object of value is also something he has to pursue, because of his position in society. The boy has to make a living for himself, since that is what migrant workers in the city have to do. The sender for the boy can actually be defined as the society that has imposed these demands on him. The boy is also convinced, by the same sender, of the way he wants to make this living. He sees the job and the bicycle as good instruments in his pursuit, because it is so suggested to him. For the other boy, in the second sub-discourse, the base object of value is more personal,
he wants to pursue the girl. Though this behaviour can not exactly be described as being determined by the boy’s social position, it is, nevertheless, not in any way in contradiction with what one would expect of a teenage high school boy. The boy has received his motivation to pursue the girl from the girl herself and he also looks to her and to his peers for how he should make a good impression on her. As all of them have bikes, he perceives that he also needs one to get her; it becomes the obvious choice for a solution. The social aspect has thus not lost its relevance as a determinant for this boy’s actions either.

As mentioned, *South of the Clouds* is the only one of these films that presents an individual whose choices and actions are not based on the expectations or suggestions of any external social instances. The man, actually, even goes out of his way not to comply with any proposals that could be interpreted as being imposed upon him. He is his own sender, and his base object of value is freedom, or in this context individuation. Though the base objects of value are so considerably diverse in all the different discourses, there is one object that has an important position in all of the discourses. Money is shown to be a highly relevant instrumental object of value for all of the subjects in their pursuit of their base objects. It is also shown to be hard to come by and difficult to hold on to. This particular object has value for everybody, so the subjects are not the only ones pursuing it. They, however, seem to be in a more unfavourable position than some to obtain it. Another object that seems to have special meaning is the bicycle. Wang Xiaoshuai has said that he chose to use it in *Beijing Bicycle* since “[t]he bicycle is the most typical representative of China” (Tang 2002). The fact that the subjects in both *Incense* and *Beijing Bicycle* are having such a hard time coping with even this object, no doubt carries symbolic meanings.

### 5.3 Competence and Responsibility

During the course of every one of the three films, it becomes evident that in each one, the subject’s competence is significantly limited. All of the subjects are shown to lack both being-able-to and know-how-to, in doing what would be necessary to obtain the object and to overcome the obstacles they come up against in the process. They all do their best, but end up coming short and being faced with their failure to perform. Though the subjects come across different obstacles also in the form of opponents, none of the films
concentrate on portraying a battle or duel between a subject and an anti-subject. The situation the subject has to navigate is much more complex and less clearly defined than a simple juxtaposition of forces.

The individualised society has been described as a similarly complex place for the individual. Though the individual is supposed to have been liberated from all constraints and thus be able to decide his own fate, he is in reality still affected by factors that are out of his control and now, most importantly, also considerably out of his sight. Factors that have social effects have not disappeared but have, instead, gone into flux and often become so complex and removed from the individual that he is unable to comprehend them. (Lash 2005: ix-xi.) The situations he ends up in, as their result, may just seem to appear out of nowhere, leaving the individual to cope with them as best he can. Since the individual is unaware and un-understanding of the factors affecting his life, he also can not effectively operate within their parameters and see if and how he could affect them. He, however, has to decide the best course of action and take responsibility for these decisions and their consequences, however badly informed they may be. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2005: 46-52.)

In the terms of the actantial analysis, the subject’s competence can be said to lack being-able-to when a situation that he can not affect presents an obstacle for him. In the first sub-discourse of *Beijing Bicycle* these types of situations are the most important reason for the subject’s failure, that is, his competence prominently lacks being-able-to. These situations are, for example, when the clerk cheats him, when his bike gets stolen, when the other boy’s gang comes to take the bike, and when the bike is destroyed in the end. These are not, however, only situations in which the boy is relatively powerless, but also situations which he could not have personally predicted and thus avoided. They seem to appear randomly, but are not random acts on the part of those who are behind them. This is consistent with the description of individualised society, where unpredictable factors can suddenly affect the individual’s life out of his control. In *South of the Clouds* the subject’s failure also mostly comes down to his lack of being-able-to overcome obstacles. In his case, however, the instances that obstruct him are predictable and known to him. His opponents, and the anti-subject, are his family and the officials that represent the
establishment. He has come up against the constraints put up by these same instances, time and time again, and is just not powerful enough to overcome them. This does not really suggest that the society in *South of the Clouds* would be individualised and its structures dispersed, quite the opposite.

An interesting common phenomenon, especially in the first sub-discourse of *Beijing Bicycle* and in *South of the Clouds*, is the significance of persistence which represents the subject’s commitment to his object of value. In both of them it is clearly something that consistently gives the subject more competence. In the context of the individualised society this positive effect could be interpreted as somewhat exceptional, since long term commitments are not generally something that produce good results for the individual, who has to live with constant change (Bauman 2001: 156). Recognising that “mulish stubbornness and determination” are recurrent themes in many contemporary Chinese films, including *Beijing Bicycle*, director Wang Xiaoshuai has explained:

“The system of law in China right now has a lot of holes, and a lot of people seem to be struggling to find their own way. So in order to deal with this increasingly complex society, which they might not understand, stubbornness is what oftentimes gets them through. It’s certainly a common characteristic a lot of peasants have, and in the big city, it helps them to survive.” (Tang 2002.)

Though Wang acknowledges the development towards complexity and confusion, typical for the individualised society, he still supports the view that things have not got too out of hand. This may be in order to encourage people not to become desperate, a development that can even threaten to turn into blind rage, when people perceive that the uncertainty in their lives has become completely overwhelming (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2005: 48-49). The somewhat unrealistic confidence in the power of determination against all odds that is invested into the persistence of the characters in the films, may then be a comment in support of social stability. It definitely puts more responsibility on the shoulders of the individual, by implying that if he fails it may be because he was not determined and persistent enough.
If, in the first sub-discourse of *Beijing Bicycle* and in *South of the Clouds* the subject’s competence most prominently lacked being-able-to overcome obstacles, then in *Incense* and the second sub-discourse of *Beijing Bicycle* the subject’s competence most prominently lacks know-how-to do what is necessary. In *Incense* the monk thinks he knows how to get help from the town offices and from his teacher, but his knowledge is revealed not to be valid. They will not help him as it is, but might have done so if he had known the right things to do. In the individualised society, the individual’s knowledge is necessarily uncertain and its nature is more “possibilistic” than even probabilistic (Lash 2005: x). This is also the case for the monk, his once certain knowledge has become uncertain, and the possibilities involved have moved out of his reach. Since the instances the monk seeks help from, would previously have been responsible for helping him, then perhaps Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s (2005: 3) description of the contemporary situation between the social services and their applicants in Western societies could be descriptive of the monk’s situation, as well. In their words “[o]ne has to win, know how to assert oneself in the competition for limited resources – and not only once, but day after day.”

Another aspect of the uncertainty of knowledge in the fragmented individualised society is that in addition to possibly turning out to have lost its validity, it may also turn out to have become misleading. Basing his decisions on partial and uncertain information, the individual can not have true insight into the consequences of his actions, which may come out opposite to what was intended. (Ibid. 48.) This is also painstakingly true for the monk. He considers that he has obtained the know-how necessary for his purpose, but is actually misguided, by the anti-sender. He makes the wrong choice of pursuing the money and ends up compromising his values as a result. In the second sub-discourse of *Beijing Bicycle* the boy similarly makes bad choices and does not understand the real state of affairs. In his case, however, it is not easy to blame the circumstances. It is primarily the boy himself who does not accept the correct know-how when it is offered to him and acts as his own opponent.

In the case of the monk in *Incense* the fact that he makes the wrong choices can not really be blamed on him. According to director Ning Hao’s (2004b) description, “[t]he film honestly reflects the daily life of people in the remote area of Shanxi Province. They are
not quite aware of what really happened around them, the monk is only one of those people.” The same can be said about the delivery boy’s and the man’s responsibility for their failure in the first sub-discourse of *Beijing Bicycle* and in *South of the Clouds*. Still, at the end, they are all left alone to bear the responsibility. Though the failure was not their fault, the delivery boy and the monk do not have anyone else to blame for it either. This is one of the dominant features of the individualised society (Bauman 2001: 47). In *South of the Clouds* the man does, instead, know who to blame for his troubles, though it will not do him any good.

Considering the actantial theory itself briefly, one can see that this unfair responsibility of the subject is actually in-built. In the actantial structure the sender’s task is to communicate to the subject-receiver both the values at stake and the elements of modal competence. In this relationship the subject-receiver is literally the receiver; their relationship is not reciprocal. (Greimas and Courtés 1982: 294.) The subject can thus apparently not affect the modal competence he is given, or not given, by the sender. In the end, it is, however, the subject who bears the responsibility for his performance which is sanctioned by the sender as either success or failure. In this discussion on the subject’s competence and responsibility we have deliberately not emphasised the sender’s position, because then all the questions about the subject’s competence would have to have been attributed to the sender, and the subject would have been predefined as responsible, whether or not this would have been how it was presented in the film.

5.4 Unhappy Endings, Grim Views of the Future, and the Moral of the Story

The final common feature, prominent in all of the three films, is that they all end in the failure of the subject. They all finish with a situation where the subject has not succeeded in obtaining the base object of value he was pursuing. In *Incense* and in the first sub-discourse of *Beijing Bicycle* the subject has apparently also been sanctioned as failing by the sender, and prevented from continuing with the program, by the object, quite literally, being destroyed. The subjects in the second sub-discourse of *Beijing Bicycle* and in *South of the Clouds* have also possibly been sanctioned as failing, but instead of their objects being destroyed, the subjects have been backed into a corner where there does not seem to
be anything they can do anymore. All of the films, thus, also present no prospect of things changing for the better in the future.

Having already established these films as part of the Chinese cinema tradition that is characterised by a serious attitude towards the responsibility of cinema to participate in the discourse about society, we can presume that these films also, to some degree, share this concern.\footnote{114} Do these unhappy endings and pessimistic outlooks for the future, then, have some special significance in this context? In the past these types of endings have been prevalent particularly in the relevant films of the 1940’s and 1990’s. Both of these eras had been preceded by a time of optimism about the future that, however, turned into disillusionment. The belief that war would bring victory and change everything for the better in the 1930’s, was followed by the actual war and its injustices. The 1980’s were predominantly a time of liberation and economic growth which, however, ended in the Tian’anmen Incident in 1989 and opened the door for the growing inequality that came with the economic reforms.\footnote{115} Perhaps these films in our analysis then also wish to describe some sort of disillusionment within contemporary Chinese society.

The actantial analysis, carried out in this thesis, supports the view that these films deal with questions that are more related to society than just to the subject’s inner dynamics. This comes out in the actantial distribution where, in all but the second sub-discourse of \textit{Beijing Bicycle}, the actants are basically spread into separate characters. Also, the fact that the films do not concentrate on a duel between the subject and the anti-subject, leads one to conclude that there are other instances that one should pay attention to. Because these films lack the heavy sentimentality and the polarisation of good and evil that is typical to melodrama, the moral of these stories does not come out so expressly. The above discussion on the results of the actantial analyses has, however, suggested that the issue these films are putting forth may have to do with the individualisation process. The pessimistic vision presented of the future, could then also be a type of warning about where things seem to be heading, and not necessarily an expression of already experienced disillusionment.

\footnote{114}{See chapter 2., pages 7-17.}
\footnote{115}{See pages 12-13 and 15-16 of this thesis.}
6. CONCLUSIONS

One of the aims in this thesis was to see if and how Greimas’s theory regarding the actantial structure, separated as its own entity in the form described in this thesis, could be used in the analysis of the three films, and possibly also of discourses more generally. I believe the actantial analyses conducted on the three films in this thesis to have successfully proved the applicability and usefulness of this theory. I, however, doubt whether this theory would be as successful in the analysis of discourses that are more complex and that would possibly depict several main characters with various less clearly defined ambitions. This, however, remains to be studied in further actantial analyses that will, no doubt, continue to be conducted, in one form or another.

In applying the theory I did, however, also encounter some problematic theoretical questions. The main issue is about the subject’s competence. If the subject’s modal competence, that is his knowing-how-to or being-able-to, is always communicated to him by the sender, then his performance is not really up to him. If the subject fails, should we not talk about why the sender has not supplied him with enough competence, instead of talking about the subject’s failure? Again, if the subject acquires competence in the course of the discourse, is it automatically a reward of some kind from the sender, who is responsible for his competence, and should we then interpret that the reward is a result of the subject doing something that the sender wants to reward? Could the subject’s failure, then, be blamed on the subject not doing enough to please the sender? Also, if the helper represents the subject’s competence communicated to him by the sender, then would it not be sensible to consider the opponent to represent the anti-subject’s competence, communicated to him by the anti-sender? Then the subject’s lack of competence could also be caused by the anti-sender’s actions, which would seem to make more sense than simply blaming the subject for something he could not have controlled. This would make the discourse look more like a battle of wills between the sender and the anti-sender, whose wills the subject and anti-subject would represent. I believe this would clarify the theory to some degree and, according to my understanding of the theory, would not contradict it.
The main purpose for using Greimas’s theory in this thesis was to find out how the individual, his relationships with others, and his possibilities in society were portrayed in the three films. The aim was also to see if these films really shared a common actantial structure and if a common actantial typology of these films could be defined. The analyses did, indeed, reveal several common traits that added up to a type of typology when explored. This typology could, in the future, be used as a basis for approaching some of the other possibly similar contemporary films in order to investigate if they also share common features, and if they, thus, together comprise a larger trend in Chinese cinema at the moment. As I examined the typology of the three films in relation to the individualisation thesis, many of the common traits seemed to generally support its arguments. There was, however, a considerable discrepancy between the way the subjects’ relations to their objects were portrayed in the films and the way the theory describes the individualised individual’s relationship to his objects of desire. In most of the films the subjects were shown to still be considerably steered by the expectations directed at them and to still commit to certain objectives for the long term. This might be considered to signal that Chinese society has not, at least yet, become as fragmented as the individualisation thesis would suggest.

The ways in which individualisation was depicted in the films, actually, also differed between the films. Incense depicted an un-understanding and unwilling individual trying to survive in the thralls of the individualised society. Beijing Bicycle portrayed a semi-individualised society, where the two boys could still count on certain relations for getting help in the pursuit of their individual goals. South of the Clouds actually portrayed quite a different picture to the other two films. It showed an un-individualised society where individuals, as individuals, were fighting for the society to become more individualised. The study of individualisation in the films also produced a significant finding. This was the fact that, in accordance with the individualisation thesis, all the films portrayed the position of the family as insignificant or negative. This finding is significant because it is in contradiction with the general findings of the other studies in the research project The Chinese Individual: Negotiations of Rights and Responsibilities. They have so far
consistently shown that the family has actually retained a central position in contemporary Chinese society as an important collective “between” the individual and the state.\footnote{This result has been stated in the project report to the Norwegian Research Council in September 2007.}

These findings lead one to wonder why these films would want to represent the position of the family in such a way which does not seem to be descriptive of the prevailing situation. In this context one must remember that these films are re-presentations, produced by the filmmakers, and thus the question really is: why have the filmmakers wanted to present the situation in such a way? One possible answer could be that the films depict the way the filmmakers believe the situation to be. If individualisation has been promoted in China as the ideal or prevailing social development, then maybe the filmmakers, lacking empirical data into the subject, also believe that this development has taken place. On the other hand, as I suggested at the end of the discussion on the results of the analyses, the films may also be giving out a warning about what the filmmakers see as a threatening development. The films do present quite a negative view of the societies they portray and the individual’s position in them, and would seem to criticise them. However, none of the films highlight the family’s weakened position as a particular problem, so it would not seem so convincing to consider them to be concerned with this issue.

As noted, the films generally seem to want to criticise the state of contemporary Chinese society. This is in vein with the earlier Chinese cinema tradition, where films have regularly taken up the task of critically bringing social problems to the fore. If one also wanted to consider possible reasons for the interest in commenting on social problems, then the filmmakers concern for those who are suffering as a result of the changes could be the simple answer. However, another possible reason, as noted, is the concern about the possible consequences of these problems. If these problems escalate and lead to widespread desperation, they may threaten the economic and social stability of China. As I noted in the discussion, in connection with the positive effects attached to persistence, the films do, to a small extent, seem to support social stability at the expense of reality by propagating a type of “false consciousness” about some of the characters’ possibilities. This is not, however, the main effect of the films which present quite a grim view of the present and future state of Chinese society and the unable individual’s position in it.
Whether this pessimistic portrayal possibly also reflects a more prevalent sentiment in contemporary China, is perhaps something that should be studied further in the future.
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