

Transnational Chinese Cinemas

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Ju Dou (Gong Li) and Tianqing (Li Baotian) in *Ju Dou*, directed by Zhang Yimou, 1990. British Film Institute.

Transnational Chinese Cinemas

Identity, Nationhood, Gender

Edited by Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu



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Designed by Barbara Pope

*For my brother, Lu Xiaolong,
and my sister, Lu Xiaoyan*

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Preface

The idea of a volume of critical essays on Chinese film originated from the conference “Rethinking Cross-Cultural Analysis and Chinese Cinema Studies” that I organized at the University of Pittsburgh in 1994. The participation of film scholars from all over the country as well as the presence of colleagues and students at the University of Pittsburgh made the conference an especially meaningful and productive event. For their attendance, support, and presentations, I thank Nick Browne, Diane Carson, Leo Chan-Jen Chen, Mao Chen, Xihe Chen, Anne T. Ciecko, Shuqin Cui, Wimal Dissanayake, Kristine Harris, E. Ann Kaplan, Jon Kowallis, Wendy Larson, Kang Liu, George S. Semsel, Paola Voci, Ban Wang, Min Wu, Zhiwei Xiao, Mingyu Yang, Xudong Zhang, Yingjin Zhang, and Yi Zheng. I am also indebted to my colleagues and the staff at the University of Pittsburgh for making inquiries, providing advice and wisdom, and helping me put things in order before, during, and after the conference. I extend my gratitude to Dianne F. Dakis, Lucy Fischer, Elizabeth K. Greene, Marcia Landy, Katheryn Linduff, Patrizia Lombardo (now at the University of Geneva), Colin MacCabe, Keiko McDonald, Cindy Neff, J. Thomas Rimer, Jonathan Wolff, and Joseph Zasloff.

As this book evolved, I received good advice, encouragement, and constructive criticism from a number of people. The anonymous readers of the University of Hawai‘i Press, Gina Marchetti, Lucy Fischer, and Nick Browne went over the entire manuscript or portions of it and offered helpful comments for reconsideration and revision. All the contributors of the volume collaborated with me with patience and trust. I personally have learned a great deal from each one of their essays. Gina Marchetti, Steve Fore, June Yip, Wei Ming Dariotis, and Eileen Fung, who were not present at the conference, readily sent their essays to me at my request, and their contributions have enriched the content of the book. May M. Wang, who collaborated with me on the bibliography and Chinese glossary, also deserves a note of thanks.

For their support of both the conference and the book project by providing funds or making arrangements, I am thankful to the Asian Studies Program, the University Center for International Studies, the China Council, the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures, Film Studies Program, Cultural Studies Program, and the Media Center at the University of Pittsburgh.

Since 1993, I have been supported by the University of Pittsburgh, mostly through the China Council, to travel and conduct research in China every summer. In the summer of 1994, I was awarded a grant by the Central Research Development Fund of the Office of Research, and another grant by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences to conduct research on New Chinese Cinema in China. While in China, I was able to meet and interview film artists and critics such as Li Yongxin, Xie Fei, the late Zhang Nuanxin, Huang Zongjiang, Li Baotian, Li Tuo, and Dai Jinhua. Li Yongxin and Chen Keli at the Beijing Film Academy have continuously assisted me in finding my way in the Chinese film world. My Junior Faculty Research Leave in fall 1996 released me from teaching duties and gave me time to finalize the manuscript. A combined research grant from the Office of the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the China Council made it possible for me to travel to the British Film Institute in London to obtain relevant research materials in October 1996. To the above individuals and institutions I owe a debt of gratitude.

It has been a pleasure to work with the editors of the University of Hawai'i Press. Sharon F. Yamamoto first expressed an interest in the project. Her intelligent, smooth, graceful, and pleasant manner of handling the project is unforgettable. Cheri Dunn's efficient work style kept the project moving in a timely manner in the later stage of preparation. Michael E. Macmillan's meticulous and masterful copyediting of the manuscript not only cleaned up errors and inconsistencies but also decisively enhanced its overall quality. I should also mention that when I was looking for a suitable publisher, Eugene Eoyang readily lent a helping hand.

Gina Marchetti's chapter first appeared in *Jump Cut* 34 (1989): 95-106, under the same title. Yingjin Zhang's chapter first appeared in *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 3 (1997): 73-90. An earlier version of Kristine Harris' chapter, under the title of "The New Woman: Image, Subject, and Dissent in 1930s Shanghai Film Culture," appeared in *Republican China* 20, no. 2 (1995): 55-79. I thank the editors of *Jump Cut* and *Republican China* and the University of Texas Press for permission to reprint these essays.

Keiko McDonald, whose office is next to mine, shares with me an intense professional interest in East Asian film studies. We have collaborated on several joint ventures such as a course on East Asian cinema, an East Asian film festival, and a workshop on teaching Asia through film. Katheryn Linduff and Tom Rimer are behind my professional development and all the projects I do at the University of Pittsburgh. Together with Kathy, I intend to explore a larger historical poetics of visuality throughout twentieth-century China. To Keiko, Kathy, and Tom, I must express my profound gratitude for their unfailing support of my career.

Anne T. Ciecko not only joins me as a fan of John Woo, Chow Yun-fat, and Jackie Chan but also has been a source of love and inspiration in many ways in the last two years. She patiently reads everything I write and offers wise suggestions. I have benefited a great deal from her knowledge of film and visual arts.

My brother Lu Xiaolong and my sister Lu Xiaoyan (Lo Siu-yin), one in Beijing and one in Hong Kong, are present in this book. Although situated far away on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, their love sustains me. When I was young, they took me to theaters to watch moving “electric images” (*kan dian-ying'er*). To them and my mother I dedicate this book.

• A Note on Transliteration from the Chinese

The transliteration system used in this book is *pinyin*. However, there are exceptions. It is more natural, respectful, and “politically correct” to keep certain names in their original Taiwanese, Hong Kongese, and Cantonese forms of romanization or as they appear in English subtitles in films. (John Woo, Ang Lee, Jia-chien, Wai-tung, Li T'en-luk, etc.) In many cases, two or multiple transliterations are provided for a name or term in its first appearance in order to familiarize readers and viewers of different backgrounds. (For instance, Fang Yuping/Allen Fong/Fong Yuk-ping, Guan Jinpeng/Stanley Kwan, Li Tianlu/Li T'ien-lu/Li T'en-luk, Wenqing/Wen-ch'ing/Bun-ch'ing, and so on). While *pinyin* helps create some sense of uniformity and order, for the purpose of, say, compiling a Chinese glossary, it is important for the reader to keep in mind the multilingual, multidialectal, polyglot, crosscultural, transnational, and diasporic condition of Chinese “proper names.”

Sheldon Lu/Xiaopeng Lu/Hsiao-peng Lu

Historical Introduction

Chinese Cinemas (1896–1996)
and Transnational Film Studies

Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu

This volume of essays is a collective rethinking of the national/transnational interface in Chinese film history and in film studies and cultural studies at large. The contributors come from the various disciplines of Chinese history, Chinese literature, comparative literature, cultural studies, English, and film studies. We embark on an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural venture into a topic of shared interest. The occasion for such a project is the globalization of Chinese cinemas in the international film market and the rapid rise of Chinese cinema studies in Western academia. The entrance of Chinese cinemas in the international film community prompts us to closely examine the nature of Chinese “national cinema,” the advent of “transnational cinema,” the relation of film to the modern nation-state, the nexus between visual technology and gender formation, and film culture in the age of global capitalism after the end of the Cold War.

Chinese cinemas cover a broad geographic and historical terrain, including Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and to some extent overseas Chinese communities. Asserting themselves boldly on the world stage since the mid-1980s, Chinese filmmakers have captured numerous major international film awards in recent years, and the international following for Chinese films grows annually. With this increasing popularity, the Chinese film industry has attracted a sizable amount of foreign capital and has been involved in frequent joint productions. With internationalization on this scale at both production and consumption levels, the issue of what actually constitutes Chinese cinema comes to the forefront—is it film produced by Chinese for Chinese? Assuming that some consensus on the nature of Chinese cinema can be reached, are there characteristics of this cinema that draw upon Chinese deep culture and set it apart from the Hollywood phenomenon? How reliably can these characteristics be perceived and interpreted by the international film community, and to what extent can these characteristics inform and influence the international dialogue on the meaning of film?

When I reflect on the development of a century of Chinese cinemas, a

number of historical events of global significance come to mind. A little more than a hundred years ago, in 1895, film was invented in the West. The year was significant not only in world film history but was also the year when the Qing empire ceded Taiwan to Japan after a military defeat. Since then, developments in the technologies of visibility in the international arena and the domestic political events of China, a would-be modern nation-state, have become more and more connected. On August 11, 1896, "Western shadowplays" (*xiyang yingxi*) were exhibited in the Xu Garden in Shanghai. In the ensuing one hundred years, imported Western film technology has been put to indigenous use and has become an indispensable part of the social, political, and cultural life of the Chinese nation.

As this book goes to press, another monumental historical event is approaching. Hong Kong, which became a British colony in the aftermath of the Opium War in the mid-nineteenth century, will revert to its "motherland" on July 1, 1997, and will be once again part of the Chinese nation. It is gratifying to know that the publication of this book will coincide with an international political occasion as rare and momentous as the return of Hong Kong to China. In fact, in May 1996, the veteran Chinese director Xie Jin began the production of the historical epic *The Opium War* to commemorate the event. In a few short years, a new century, and indeed a new millennium in the Christian calendar, will arrive, and history will turn another page.

The precise centennial scope (1896–1996) of the periodization of Chinese film history in this study is not accidental but was predetermined by the far-reaching global and national events mentioned above. We begin in 1896 because that was the year of the beginning of film consumption and distribution of an essentially transnational nature in China. (It is conceivable that an account of Chinese *national* cinema could start with the first Chinese film production in 1905 or with the first Chinese-made narrative film in 1913.) We end our discussion of the tripolar (Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong) Chinese cinemas in 1996, for from mid-1997 Hong Kong will no longer be a geopolitical entity separate from the Mainland. This entirely new chapter of Chinese history will undoubtedly have implications for the development of its cinemas, especially postcolonial Hong Kong cinema.

Although it is premature to predict the future configurations of Chinese national politics and Chinese film, we can at this critical juncture examine a century-long history of transnational Chinese cinemas as it comes to completion. We will track the successive modes of image production and consumption, from traditional "shadowplay" (*yingxi*), to "electric shadows" (*dianying*, the Chinese word for film) in the modern age of mechanical reproduction, and finally to electronic images in the postmodern era of simu-

lacrum, throughout the course of exactly one hundred years of Chinese film history. It is my assumption that such a historical poetics of visibility is inextricably linked to the politics of the modern nation-state and deeply embedded in the economics of transnational capital. Since the film medium is fully integrated in both the economy and culture and mediates the two, it provides us with a privileged instance to scan and map the contours of Chinese cultural politics in relation to the capitalist world-system in the twentieth century.¹

In what follows I will present a brief history and propose a theory of a century of what might be called “transnational Chinese cinemas.” For reasons that will become apparent, it seems that Chinese *national* cinema can only be understood in its properly *transnational* context. One must speak of Chinese cinemas in the plural and as transnational in the ongoing process of image-making throughout the twentieth century. Transnationalism in the Chinese case can be observed at the following levels: first, the split of China into several geopolitical entities since the nineteenth century—the Mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong—and consequently the triangulation of competing national/local “Chinese cinemas,” especially after 1949; second, the globalization of the production, marketing, and consumption of Chinese film in the age of transnational capitalism in the 1990s; third, the representation and questioning of “China” and “Chineseness” in filmic discourse itself, namely, the cross-examination of the national, cultural, political, ethnic, and gender identity of individuals and communities in the Mainland, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese diaspora; and fourth, a re-viewing and revisiting of the history of Chinese “national cinemas,” as if to read the “prehistory” of transnational filmic discourse backwards. Such an operation has the aim of uncovering the “political unconscious” of filmic discourse—the transnational roots and condition of cinema, which any project of national cinema is bound to suppress and surmount, for the sake of defending the country against real or perceived dangers of imperialism or in order to uphold national unity by silencing the voices of ethnic and national minorities.

I take the Chinese example as paradigmatic of the situation of world cinema at the present time. Transnational cinema in the Chinese case as well as in the rest of the world is the result of the globalization of the mechanisms of film production, distribution, and consumption. The transformations in the world film industry call into question the notion of “national cinema” and complicate the construction of “nationhood” in filmic discourse. Thus, my outline of Chinese film history may be read as an exemplary instance and a case study of the general tendencies in world film history. The study of a given national cinema then becomes the project of transnational film studies.

• National Cinema and the Modern Nation-State

As a new technology and form of art originated in the West, film was first brought to Shanghai in 1896, one year after its invention. Short films were exhibited in a variety show in the Xu Garden, perhaps by a cameraman-showman of the Lumière brothers. The next showman to arrive in Shanghai was an American, James Ricalton, who brought Edison's films and screened them in teahouses and amusement parks in 1897.² In the years up to 1949, foreign films were regularly shown in China, first in teahouses and then in movie theaters, and dominated the Chinese film market, accounting for as much as 90 percent of the market. As one might expect, Hollywood films were the predominant presence.

In 1905, the first Chinese film, *Dingjun Mountain* (Dingjun shan), was made by Ren Jingfeng at his photography shop in Beijing. It was a filming of an act of Beijing opera performed by the famous actor Tan Xinpei. Zheng Zhengqiu's short family drama, *The Difficult Couple* (Nanfu nanqi), made in 1913, has been regarded as the first Chinese feature film. Yet this film was produced by the Asia Film Company, an American studio in China owned by Benjamin Polaski. In the same year, Li Minwei and Polaski produced the first Chinese film in Hong Kong, *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (Zhuangzi shiqi). Polaski later took the film back to the United States, and it became the first Chinese film screened abroad. We can conclude from this that Chinese film was an event of transnational capital from its beginning.

The emergence and consolidation of a Chinese "national cinema" (*minzu dianying*) in the ensuing years must be read against this background of the importation of film as a Western technology, ideology, and medium of art.³ In the official narrative of Chinese film history, *The History of the Development of Chinese Film* (Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi), a monumental study written by Cheng Jihua and others in the early 1960s, the development of a leftist, progressive national cinema is to a great extent the story of an agonistic struggle against the cultural domination of foreign film, especially American film.⁴ The life-and-death struggle of China's national film industry is isomorphic with the plight of China as a nation-state in the twentieth century. Modernity, nation-building, nationalism, anti-imperialism, antiféudalism, and new gender identities are among the central themes of such a national cinema. Chinese national cinema necessarily becomes part and parcel of the forging of a new national culture. Amidst the proliferation of "soft" entertainment films (romance, butterfly fiction, martial arts, ghosts, costume drama), the left-wing film workers seized upon the political and revolutionary potential of this new technology of visibility and attempted to make it

into a mass art of conscious social criticism.⁵ Like other national cinemas, Chinese cinema is the “mobiliser of the nation’s myths and the myth of the nation.”⁶ Through the creation of a coherent set of images and meanings, the narration of a collective history, and the enactment of the dramas and lives of ordinary people, cinema gives a symbolic unity to what would otherwise appear to be a quite heterogeneous entity: “modern China.”

Film production aside, film censorship, studio ownership, government intervention, and public opinion are all important terrains in the establishment of a new symbolic China. Zhiwei Xiao’s essay in this volume, “Anti-Imperialism and Film Censorship During the Nanjing Decade, 1927–1937,” amply documents the contours of a national policy of film censorship. Immediately after the unification of China by the Guomindang (Nationalist Party) in 1927, the central government established a film censorship board, which continued until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, to check foreign films to be screened in China. Films perceived to portray the Chinese people in a degrading, offensive way could not be released in China.⁷ A famous case, as Xiao describes, is the controversy surrounding the screening of Harold Lloyd’s film *Welcome Danger* in Shanghai in 1930. Other banned Western films include *Death in Shanghai* (1933), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), *Wandering Through China* (1931), *Klondike Annie* (1936), *Cat’s Paw* (1934), *Thief of Bagdad* (1924), and the German/Japanese coproduction *New Land* (1937). American films such as *The Ten Commandments*, *Frankenstein*, and *Top Hat* were also banned on the grounds of “superstition,” as in the first two cases, or “sexual content,” as in the last case.

In the same period, a conscious effort was also made to prevent foreign ownership of film studios. There was often a “united front” among intellectuals, the public, and the government to protect a vulnerable Chinese film industry and resist foreign “cultural invasion.” Film censorship and the protection of the national film industry have been enduring legacies throughout the twentieth-century in China. During the period of Nationalist rule the government also stipulated that Mandarin be the standard dialect in films for the sake of cultural unity. (This policy had ramifications for any “local” Chinese cinema, such as that of Hong Kong, in which Cantonese rather than Mandarin has been the favorite dialect of filmgoers. Here is an instance of the resistance of the local to the national.)

Over the years, Chinese national cinema has grown to be a key apparatus in the nation-building process. It is an indispensable cultural link in the modern Chinese nation-state, an essential political component of Chinese nationalism. As Andrew Higson has written, national cinema has performed a dual function:

a hegemonising, mythologising process, involving both the production and assignation of a particular set of meanings, and the attempt to contain, or prevent the potential proliferation of other meanings. At the same time, the concept of a national cinema has almost invariably been mobilized as a strategy of cultural (economic) resistance; a means of asserting national autonomy in the face of (usually) Hollywood's international domination.⁸

The double process of hegemony and resistance in relation to the domestic audience and international film culture has defined the path and function of Chinese national cinema.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, national cinema turned into a state-sponsored, state-owned enterprise. As Paul Clark has argued, it was the key to fostering a mass national culture in Maoist China.⁹ The effort to build a unified and unifying picture of national identity through cinema has been intense and ferocious. This can be observed at both the level of the film industry and the level of the filmic text or film aesthetics.¹⁰ Film studios are no longer privately owned. They are reorganized and merged into a new national film industry. The biggest studios to emerge from the reorganization and consolidation include Changchun Film Studio, Shanghai Film Studio, Beijing Film Studio, and August First Film Studio, all under the ultimate surveillance and leadership of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Propaganda. The state has the absolute and exclusive right in film production and distribution. Cinema is often subject to being a vehicle of political propaganda and ideological indoctrination. There is strict censorship of both domestic and foreign films. The foreign films that the Chinese audience is allowed to see are selected predominantly from socialist-bloc countries. Hollywood films virtually disappeared from China.

The nationalization of cinema does not, however, imply a smooth and easy road, free from conflicts, contradictions, and collisions. The "Sinification" of a Western technology and the development of a native form of socialist art remain the paramount tasks for Chinese film artists. The enormity and complexity of such a process can only be hinted at here. Gina Marchetti's essay, *"Two Stage Sisters: The Blossoming of a Revolutionary Aesthetic,"* examines the arduous search for a new aesthetic. Film artists such as Xie Jin must find a solution to the question of how can one create an art form that must be, paradoxically, at once Chinese and Western, Marxist and Maoist, revolutionary and socialist. What is "socialist" cinema with unique "national," "Chinese" characteristics like? As Douglas Wilkerson puts it, "Can Western modes of cinematography, linked to the very mechanism of the camera through the dominant postmedieval perspective system, be