

Unfolding History around Film: “Visualizing Twentieth Century China”

A Film Course

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Editors’ note: Utilizing film in our teaching has become a staple of Asian Studies pedagogy, but the teaching of film courses has presented us with a unique set of problems. At the 2004 ASIANetwork Conference, one panel focused precisely on the difficulties of offering a film course on Chinese history, noting the ambiguities easily generated by efforts to teach students film and teach them history at the same time.

Li-Lin Tseng, a Ph.D. student at the University of Illinois, has successfully taught a film course in which modern Chinese history is taught as a context for both film study and the study of the history of Chinese film. We asked her to share her syllabus with us for publication in the newsletter in hopes that it might offer useful ideas to our members. She has graciously consented, and has provided, by way of introduction, a short description of her pedagogy and a helpful discussion of how she has handled some problems that have arisen in the course.

Introduction:

This course originated from my dissertation on early Chinese film entitled *Pictures in Motion: Zheng Zhengqiu and his Shanghai Contemporaries, 1922—1937*. I begin the course with the transition from silent to sound films (1922-1937) and end with contemporary Chinese films (2000s). During the term, fifteen assigned films are chosen from the 1,000 films that are included among my research materials. They are presented in chronological order so as to demonstrate particular problems and issues regarding the historical context in which the films were created. With these select films, I introduce American undergraduate students to an overview of Chinese film, giving them a general knowledge of both the history of Chinese film and the relevant issues they express with regard to Chinese culture and history. I have taught this film course twice at two different institutions: the Art History Division of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Spring 2004) and the History Department of Illinois Wesleyan University (May 2005). I have been invited to repeat the course at Illinois Wesleyan in fall 2006.

Pedagogy:

From my experience with students in the two institutions, class discussions work particularly well. Therefore I use class discussion as a teaching tool in order to raise questions and guide students to contemplate relevant issues about Chinese

film and culture. For example, on May 9, I assign Sun Yu’s *The Highway* (1934), a film representative of the left-wing cinema in the 1930s. I use the film to teach the rise of the Chinese left-wing cinema movement and the relevant political events in 1931, when the Japanese Kwantung Army invaded Manchuria in northern China. Historical events are of great importance because the left-wing cinema movement emerged in part as a political weapon for leftist intellectuals to disseminate Marxist ideology and awaken the Chinese audience to the idea of national salvation later. The republican government’s attitudes toward the Japanese invasion are also discussed through its policy on film censorship.

To generate good class discussions, I use readings, assignments and handouts to introduce students to the main issues and guide them in formulating responses to the films. First, I assign readings to provide a clear historical outline for students. Generally, at least two required articles (about 50 pages in total) are assigned before watching a film in order to provide students with adequate background information. I intentionally choose concise and straightforward texts. Students are required to hand in a written reading response (1-2 pages) to these articles, in part to assure that the students do the readings and learn how to grasp the main points of an article, and to facilitate class discussion. In the case of *The Highway*, the two required articles

focus on the left-wing cinema movement and film censorship between 1927 and 1937, so students become familiar with these issues before watching the film. In the syllabus, I also list one or two theoretical texts that are recommended. I incorporate ideas and arguments from these into the class discussions.

Second, I use short lectures and handouts to enhance students’ knowledge on a particular topic. Before showing a film, I give a structured lecture for 15-20 minutes on the director and also recapitulate the main points of the assigned readings. Key terms are listed on a handout that is distributed to students at the beginning of class. These terms are clearly defined in my short lecture so students can follow the lecture easily. While watching the film, students have to answer three to four questions included on the bottom of the handout, which concern the narrative structure of the film and related issues from the assigned articles. For example, the handout for *The Highway* asks students the following:

Use your knowledge from the assigned readings and the lectures to answer these questions.

1. Who are the protagonists? Who is telling the story? From whose perspective?
2. How is the cinematic narrative structured and established? What are the ingredients of the film?

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3. In what way is *The Highway* considered left-wing cinema? How does *The Highway* demonstrate leftist ideology?

Finally, during the discussion, I detail and expand the questions on the handout by asking the following questions: Who are the enemies of the construction workers in *The Highway*? Why did director Sun Yu choose a group of construction workers as the protagonists in the film? How does Sun's choice relate to the left-wing filmmakers' strategies and goals presented in the assigned readings and the lecture? Referring to the readings, I explain that the director couldn't make the enemies of the construction workers clear in the film because of the republican government's policy on film censorship, a result of the government's diplomatic stance toward Japan.

In this way, students learn how to analyze a film through using the tools of relevant Chinese film culture and political history. For class assignments, students are asked to write an analysis of a film to demonstrate their knowledge of both Chinese cinema and the issues surrounding it. My goal is to use questions and discussions to inspire and interest students and get them to participate in broader discussions, rather than ask them to rely solely on lectures. My goal is to help students learn from their own observations about a film and encourage thought-provoking discussions.

Tackling Problems

The most difficult problem I have encountered in teaching the course is American students' lack of familiarity with Chinese culture, and the Chinese style of cinematic narrative and cinematic convention, such as the use of slow-pacing in contemporary films. This problem becomes a big challenge when I teach Hou Hsiao-hsien's award winning movies. In Hou's films, the average length of each shot could reach 85 seconds and the actors' acting is minimal. This technique contrasts sharply with a Hollywood style of narrative. In Hou's autobiographical film *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* (1985), students have had difficulty comprehending the story about his

childhood memories because the narrative does not unfold according to typical Hollywood conventions. The students feel no connection with the film at all; the general comments I have received are:

"There is no central focus in the film!"

"We didn't grow up in Taiwan and we don't share Hou's childhood memories!"

"I know nothing about Taiwan."

My solution to these problems is to suggest that students think of film from another perspective and point out the different narrative structures between Hou's films and Hollywood's films. The students can learn from Hou's distinctive narrative structure, where it is not necessary for a film to be dramatic

or to incite the audience's excitement. For example, *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* is highly bound with Taiwan's national history under the Chiang Kaishek's regime in the 1950s and 1960s. During class discussion, I meticulously analyze Hou's

unique cinematic forms (i.e., the Japanese style of architectural settings, geometric composition, static camera position, etc.) and explain how the form visualizes Hou and his family's life in

Taiwan to create a nostalgic, mesmerizing effect for the film.

In addition to the analysis of Hou's cinematic form, I focus on his cinematic content: how Hou uses his personal memories (his autobiography) to reconstruct a national history in which the republican government's history in Taiwan is retold through Hou's remembrance of the past and the family's history. The untraceable national history is accumulated and articulated through the random narrative of Hou's childhood activities and substantiated through the experiences of the two generations: Hou and his parents and grandma. Hou grows up in Taiwan, speaks Taiwanese, and is

totally assimilated into Taiwanese culture, while his parents and grandma involuntarily settle in Taiwan because of the outbreak of the civil war. They speak Cantonese dialect, long for returning to China, and feel trapped in Taiwan. Through an accumulation of unrelated trivial things that occur in daily life, *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* represents a powerful image of national history, which contains a multi-layered, rather than a linear, narrative about Hou, his parents and his grandmother, and the 1950s and 1960s in Taiwan.

After a discussion of *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*, the students feel that their understanding of film is highly challenged, so much so that I have considered removing the film from syllabus. But, the students'

feedback on the course has suggested to me that it is best to keep the film precisely because of the challenge it presents. Among their responses were

"I don't think I want to see the movie again, but I am glad that I watched it!"

"This is what I can't see in a movie theater."

Besides *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*, China's fifth generation filmmaker Chen Kaige's epic film, *Farewell My Concubine*, was also a challenge to students, but in a completely different way. The students commented on Chen's film:

"I have never seen such a complex movie in my whole life!"

"I don't know which character I should blame? I am overwhelmed by the moral complexity of the film."

By the end of semester, students' understanding of the history of Chinese film changed. I was pleased with their final papers because I knew they finally embraced contemporary Chinese film, the most difficult category to understand in the history of Chinese film. I was particularly amazed with the students' ability to integrate class discussions and the assigned readings into their papers, providing some thought-provoking insights about the films on which they chose to write. Course evaluations indicated that students not only learned a great deal but also thoroughly enjoyed the class.



Scene from *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*

[S]tudents learn how to analyze a film through using the tools of relevant Chinese film culture and political history.

Sample Syllabus

History 270

Visualizing Twentieth Century China

May Term 2005, Illinois Wesleyan University
 Lectures: Monday-Friday: 9:00-12:00 am, CLA 305
 Screening: Monday-Friday: 9:00-12:00 am, CLA 305

Instructor: Li-Lin Tseng
 Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays 1:00-3:00 pm, CLA 305, or by appointment
 E-mail: ltseng@uiuc.edu

Course Description

This course introduces the history of Chinese film from the 1920s to the present. Our primary focus is on established filmmakers from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. This course divides the historical progression of Chinese film into three stages. The first stage is early Chinese film prior to 1949, witnessing the transition from silent to sound film. We will discuss Shanghai film studios, the Chinese left-wing cinema movement, the Chinese New Woman, and Shanghai prostitution. The second stage is the 1960s and the 1970s when films from Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong began to diverge from each other and established distinctive identities. Genres films, such as melodrama, martial arts, and kungfu, will be examined. The last stage includes films produced from the 1980s to the present, when Chinese cinemas rose internationally and broke away from cinematic conventions. Special attention will be paid to the Fifth Generation in China, the New Taiwan Cinema, and the Hong Kong New Wave. The goal of this class is not only to cover the historical development of Chinese film, but also to critically examine it through case studies and contextualization. This course will consist of film screenings, structured lectures, and informal discussions.

Course Requirements:

- 1) Attendance and Participation: Students are expected to attend each class meeting and should complete the assigned readings for each day.
- 2) 3 Reading Response Papers: Students will write 1-2 page reading response to what they have read and turn it in at the beginning of class on each due date. Please see syllabus for the due dates and plan your reading and writing time accordingly. Guidelines will be distributed.
- 3) Film Analysis: A 3-4 page paper based on an analysis of the narrative structure of a film and issues and problems surrounding it. Guidelines will be distributed.
- 4) Literature Analysis: Choose either one book or 3 articles/excerpts from required or recommended class readings and analyze. Guidelines will be distributed.
- 5) Take Home Final: The exam questions will be given to you one week before the final.

Required Texts:

1. *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943* ed. by Zhang Yingjing, (Stanford University Press, 1999).
2. *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* ed. by Nick Browne, Paul G. Pickowicz, Vinvian Sobchack, Esther Yau, (Cambridge, 1994).
3. Timothy Corrigan, *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*, 5th edition (N.Y.: Pearson & Longman, 2004).
4. E-Reserve [E]

Grading:

Attendance and participation	10%
Three response papers (1-2 pages)	15%
Film analysis paper (3-4 pages)	25%
Literature analysis paper (3-4 pages)	25%
Final paper (4-5 pages)	25%

I. 1920s-1950s: Origins of Chinese Film in Relation to Chinese Modernity in Shanghai

1. May 4: An Introduction to the History of Chinese Cinema
 Film: *Shadow Magic* (2000) by Ann Hu
2. May 5: The Cinema of Attractions
 Film: *Ballet Mechanique* (1924) by Fernard Léger
 Required readings:
 1. Tan Ye, "Hollywood and the Chinese Other" in *Cineaction* issue 60, 2003, 10-20. [E]

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2. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-garde" in *Film and Theory: An Anthology* ed. by Robert Stam & Toby Miller, 229-235. [E]
3. Timothy Corrigan, *A Short guide to Writing about Film*, 1-34.

Recommended readings:

Yingjin Zhang, "Introduction: Cinema and Urban Culture in Republican Shanghai" in *Cinema and Urban Culture*, 3-23.

3. May 6: Shanghai Film Studios: Mingxing, Lianhua, and Tianyi Motion Picture Companies

Film: *Laborer's Love* (1922) by Zhang Shichuan

Required readings:

1. Leo Ou-fan Lee, "The Urban Milieu of Shanghai Cinema, 1930-40: Some Explorations of Film Audience, Film Culture, and Narrative Conventions" in *Cinema and Urban Culture*, 74-98.
2. Zhen Zhang, "Teahouse, Shadowplay, Bricolage: Laborer's Love and the Question of Early Chinese Cinema" in *Cinema and Urban Culture* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 27-50.
3. Timothy Corrigan, *A Short guide to Writing about Film*, 35-78.

****The first reading response paper due on Friday**

4. May 9: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement

Film: *The Highway* (1935) by Sun Yu

Required readings:

1. Laikwan Pang, "The Left-wing Cinema Movement" in *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*, 37-69. [E]
2. Zhiwei Xiao, "Anti-Imperialism and Film Censorship During the Nanjing Decade, 1927-1937" in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, 35-58. [E] .

Recommended readings:

Zhiwei Xiao, "Constructing a New National Cultural: Film Censorship and the Issues of Cantonese Dialect, Superstition, and Sex in the Nanjing Decade" in *Cinema and Urban Culture*, 183-199.

5. May 10: The Concept of the New Woman

Film: *Center Stage* (1987) by Stanley Kwan

Required readings:

1. Laikwan Pang, "Woman's Stories On-screen versus Off-screen" in *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*, 113-132. [E]
2. Kristine Harris, "The New Woman Incident: Cinema, Scandal, and Spectacle in 1935 Shanghai" *Transnational Chinese Cinemas* (University of Hawaii press, Honolulu, 1997), 277-302. [E]

Recommended readings:

Timothy Corrigan, *A Short guide to Writing about Film*, 79-123.

Bryna Goodman, "The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory, and the New Republic" in *The Journal of Asian Studies* vol. 64 Number 1, Fed. 2005. (The Association for Asian Studies)

Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism," in *Film Quarterly*, vol. 54, Number 1, Fall 2000, 10-22. [E]

6. May 11: Shanghai Prostitution

Film: *The Goddess* (1932) by Wu Yonggong

Required readings:

1. Michael G. Chang, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s," in *Cinema and Urban Culture*, 128-159.
2. Zhang Yingjing, "Prostitution and Urban Imagination: Negotiating the Public and the Private in Chinese Films of the 1930s" in *Cinema and Urban Culture*, 160-182.
3. Film Script: "The Goddess ." Please print out the script from E-reserve and bring it to class.

Recommended readings:

Andrew D. Field "Selling Souls in Sin City: Shanghai Singing and Dancing Hostesses in Print, Film, and Politics, 1920-49," in *Cinema and Urban Culture*, 99-127.

****The second reading response paper due on Wednesday**

II. 1960s and 1970s: Formation and Development of Chinese Film Genres

7. May 12: China: Melodrama
 Film: *Stage Sisters* (1965) by Xie Jin, (or *Hibiscus Town*, 1986)
 Required readings:
 1. Stuart Cunningham, "The 'Force-Field' of Melodrama" in *Film and Theory: An Anthology* ed. by Robert Stam and Toby Miller, 191-206. [E]
 2. Paul G. Pickowicz, "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema" in *From May Fourth to June Fourth* ed. by David Wang, 295-326.[E]
 Recommended readings:
 Nick Browne, "Society and Subjectivity on the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama" in *New Chinese Cinemas*, 41-56.
8. May 13: Taiwan: Martial Arts Aesthetic
 Film: *A Touch of Zen* (1971) by King Hu, (or Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, 2000)
 Required readings:
 1. David Bordwell, "Richness through Imperfection: King Hu and the Glimpse" in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* ed. by Poshek Fu and David Desser. (Cambridge Press, 2000), 113-136. [E]
 2. Mary Farquhar, "A Touch of Zen: Action in Martial Arts Movies" in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, Chris Berry, ed., (U.K.: British Film Institute, 2003), 167-173.
 Recommended readings:
 Stephen Teo, "King Hu" and "King Hu's *The Fate of Lee Khan* and *The Valiant Ones*" in <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors>

**Film analysis paper due on Friday.

9. May 16: Hong Kong: Kungfu: from Bruce Lee to Jackie Chan
 Film: *Fist of Fury (The Chinese Connection)* (1972) by Lo Wei
 Required readings:
 1. David Desser, "The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception" in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* (Cambridge, 2000), 19-43. [E]
 2. Leon Hunt, "Wicked Shapes/ Wicked Lies: Performance and 'Authenticity' in Hong Kong Martial Arts Films" in *Kung Fu Cult Masters: From Bruce Lee to Crouching Tiger* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2003), 21-47.
 Recommended readings:
 Steve Fore, "Jackie Chan and the Cultural Dynamics of Global Entertainment" in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, 239-264. [E]

III. 1980s-2000s: The Rise of Contemporary Chinese Film

10. May 17: China's Fifth Generation Filmmakers
 Film: *Farewell My Concubine* by Chen Kaige
 Required readings:
 1. Sheila Cornelius and Ian Haydn Smith, "The New Wave," "Dissidence and Disguise," "The 6th Generation" in *New Chinese Cinema: Challenging Representations* (Chippenham: Antony Rowe Ltd., 2002) 34-52, 53-67, 106-117. [E]
 2. Yomi Braester, "Farewell My Concubine: National Myth and City Memories," in *Chinese Films in Focus*. Chris Berry, ed., 89-96.
11. May 18:
 Film: *The Story of Qiuju* (1993) by Zhang Yimou
 Required readings:
 1. Sheila Cornelius and Ian Haydn Smith, "Post-socialist Concerns" in *New Chinese Cinema: Challenging Representations* (Chippenham: Antony Rowe Ltd., 2002), 90-105. [E]
 2. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, "National Cinema, Cultural Critique, Transnational Capital: The Films of Zhang Yimou" in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, 105-138. [E]
 Recommended readings:
 Paul G. Pickowicz, "Huang Jianxin and the Notion of Postsocialism" in *New Chinese Cinemas*, 57-87.

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**** Literature analysis paper due on Wednesday**

12. May 19: New Taiwan Movie

Film: *A Time to Live, A Time to Die* (1989) by Hou Hsiao-hsien

Required readings:

1. I-Fen Wu, "Looking for Nostalgia: Memory and National Identity in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *A Time to Live, A Time to Die*" in *Cineaction* issue 60, 2003, 45-51. [E]
2. William Tay, "The Ideology of Initiation: The Films of Hou Hsia-hsien" in *New Chinese Cinemas*, 151-159.

Recommended readings:

June Yip, "Constructing a Nation: Taiwanese History and the Films of Hou Hsiao-hsien" in *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, 139-168. [E]

13. May 20:

Film: *Vive L'Amour or Long Live Love* (1994) by Tsai Ming-liang

Required readings:

1. Jared Rapfogel, "Tsai Ming-liang, Cinematic Painter," *Senses of Cinema*, 1-6. [E]
2. Olivier Joyard, Biography, "Scouting" in *Tsai Ming-liang* (Paris: Dis Voir, 2002), 45-76. [E]

Recommended readings:

Olivier Joyard, "Corporal Interference," in *Tsai Ming-liang* (Paris: Dis Voir, 2002), 79-118. [E]

****The third reading response paper due on Wednesday**

14. May 23: Hong Kong New Weave

Film: *Rouge* (1987) by Stanley Kwan

Required readings:

1. Hector Rodriguez, "Emergence of the Hong Kong New Wave," in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World* ed. by Esther C. M. Yau (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 53-72. [E]
2. Li Cheuk-to, "The Return of the Father: Hong Kong New Wave and its Chinese Context in the 1980s" in *New Chinese Cinemas*, 160-179.
3. Rey Chow, "A Souvenir of Love," in *At Full Speed*, 209-229. [E]

Recommended readings:

Leo Ou-fan Lee, "Two Films from Hong Kong Parody and Allegory" in *New Chinese Cinemas*, 202-216.

15. May 24

Film: *Chungking Express* (1994) by Wong Karwai

Required readings:

1. Gina Marchetti, "Buying American, Consuming Hong Kong: Cultural Commerce, Fantasies of Identity, and the Cinema" in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* ed. by Poshek Fu and David Desser. (Cambridge Press, 2000), 289-313. [E]
2. Marc Siegel, "The Intimate Spaces of Wong Kar-wai," in *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World* ed. by Esther C. M. Yau (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 277-294.[E]

Recommended readings:

Natalia Chan Sui Hung, "Rewriting History: Hong Kong Nostalgia Cinema and Its Social Practice" in *The Cinema of Hong Kong: History, Arts, Identity* ed. by Poshek Fu and David Desser. (Cambridge Press, 2000), 252-272. [E]

16. May 25:

Film: *In the Mood for Love* (2000) by Wong Karwai

No readings for today.

17. May 26: Final