

(review article)

Encyclopedia of Chinese Film. Yingjin Zhang, Zhiwei Xiao, et al. London: Routledge, 1998. 475 pps. (incl. introductory essays 72 pps.; bibliography 14 pps.).

This one-volume encyclopedia is a well-stocked supermarket for the student of Chinese film and a handy reference work for any scholar working with films from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. The book begins with a series of introductory essays, including three on the development of cinema in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan; one on "Transnational Cinema", one on "Chinese Film in the West", and one on "Foreign Films in China", the first three of considerable length and the last three quite short (2-3 pages each). These essays are historical in their approach; although they contain suggestions for further readings, they do not include footnotes or any other type of citations that pinpoint their exact sources.

The longest of the introductory essays, "Chinese Cinema" (pp. 3-30) by Zhiwei Xiao, Assistant Professor of History at Cal State San Marcos, is divided into 14 sub-sections primarily concerned with the history of the development of mainland cinema. It is filled with interesting anecdotes like the first time a film was to be shown in the Forbidden City (1904) and the generator exploded, which Empress Dowager Cixi took as a bad omen and promptly forbade the screening of movies within the precincts of the palace (p.6). It is factually rich and speaks in detail of the film of the early periods, post-war (late '40s) film, and the four periods into which PRC film has been divided.

I find a contradiction in Xiao's analysis of Kuomintang (KMT) policy toward leftist cinema (p.15). On the one hand, he argues that the governmental authorities were surprisingly tolerant, on the other that within a few weeks after the right-wing of the KMT first sent out thug squads on 12 November 1933 to storm Yihua Film Studio and trash its equipment, the leftist film movement was effectively squelched. Firstly, leftwing filmmaking continued well after this, but turned more underground and less direct. Secondly, if governmental authorities had not wanted it to happen, the so-called "white terror" would never have occurred in the first place. On p. 16 Xiao continues that "soft cinema" (a form of apolitical cinema advocated in the 1930s by Liu Na'ou, Mu Shiyong, Huang Jiamo and Huang Tianshi) was a reaction to the excesses of leftist filmmaking. But cannot the retreat into escapism and sensuality also come about as one reaction to totalitarianism? Witness a number of intellectuals under fascism and during in the late stages of Communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Xiao's section 9 ("Wartime film") also wants for a more thorough treatment of the cinema produced under Japanese occupation in Dongbei and in Chinese collaborator studios during World War II. One interesting film, which he treats is "Mulan Congjun" (Mulan joins the army), made in Shanghai in 1939 with a patriotic theme

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which, nevertheless, sparked a riot when it was shown in Chongqing (supposedly because it originated from a "Japanese-controlled" area, but I suspect the riot may have been an orchestrated one because someone in Chongqing thought an implied allegorical reading of the film made the KMT war effort look less-than-inspired). And inasmuch as Shanghai was effectively an "Isolated Island" at the time, the studio was hardly in a "Japanese controlled" area.

Xiao and the other authors make no attempt to discuss the availability of the films or their sources (film archives?). Yingjin Zhang's article "Chinese Film in the West" (pp. 66-69) gives the one exception to this, but only as regards a single film, "Song of China" (1935), which Zhang tells us is available through Facets Multimedia, a video company in Chicago, a city "in the USA", as the text informs us (p. 66). It would have been much more helpful to researchers and scholars if the authors had provided a list of films which have been exported by the PRC and are available abroad on video or cd, and another list which would indicate which films are available only through what archives, libraries and film archives.

In the second introductory essay (pp. 31-46), the Hong Kong-based American television host, actor and film critic Paul Fonoroff emphasizes how much the development of Hong Kong cinema paralleled that of mainland China in the early years (i.e. up until 1949), with the periods in which a great exchange of talents went on between Hong Kong and Shanghai, long the center of mainland filmmaking. But by 1950, according to Fonoroff, with the political turmoil in China and the refugee influx, Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong had in fact surpassed Shanghai as the center of Mandarin filmmaking.

Fonoroff does an excellent job of tracing the evolution of Hong Kong cinema in his ten-part essay, treating the rise to popularity from 1955-1965 of the opera movie, including both Cantonese opera and, in Mandarin cinema, of the northern folk opera style called "huang-mei diao" (lit. "yellow plum melodies"), the 1970s rise of Mandarin cinema, with kungfu, comedy and kungfu comedy and the 1980s return of Cantonese comedy, but he does not attempt to address the reasons that Bruce Lee films such as "Return of the Dragon" and "Enter the Dragon" achieved their "considerable popularity in Europe and North America" (p. 41).

Beginning with the mid-1970s, according to Fonoroff's article, the distinctions between Mandarin and Cantonese cinema disappeared because they used post-dubbing techniques to create Cantonese versions for the Hong Kong and Malaysian markets and Mandarin versions for Taiwan and Singapore. But why did "the percentages of Mandarin releases shrink from 100 percent in 1972 to 20 percent in 1979"? (p.41) Might this not have had to do, at least partially, with re-negotiating the Hong Kong self-identity? Similarly, his treatment of the "New Wave" cinema of the late 1970s and early 1980s is a bit dismissive: "the 'wave' turned out to be a mere

ripple, with many of the young filmmakers absorbed by the commercial movie establishment they had ostensibly sought to reform." (p.42). If that were the case, why did the government still make an effort to blacklist films like Allen Fong's "Fu zi qing" (Father and Son) as late as 1981? Ru-Shou Robert Chen is more accurate with his assessment of the same movement and the "challenge it presented to Taiwan," which in fact he credits with contributing to the birth of New Taiwan Cinema in the early 1980s (see Chen's article, p. 56).

Re. political censorship of film in Hong Kong under the British, Fonoroff says: "In the 1980s the film world discovered that TELA" [the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority] which censored films in Hong Kong "actually had no legal right to do so" (p. 43). But he does not explain how it was possible for it to do so "since the 1950s" (industry connivance?). By contrast, his analysis of the role of the triads in forcing film quality down in the 1990s in order to ensure for quicker profits and a quicker turn-around time, is incisive (p. 45).

The five-part article on "Taiwan Cinema" (pp. 47-62) by Ru-Shou Robert Chen, Associate Professor of Cinema Studies at National Taiwan College of Arts, is well-written stylistically and a bit more analytical than the first two. Aside from the influence of Hong Kong New Wave on the birth of the New Taiwan Cinema movement (p. 56), he also considers the 1975 establishment of the Foundation for the Development of the Motion Picture Industry in the ROC under the Government Information Office to have been of vital importance. Chen tells moving stories about the solidarity between the new filmmakers, such as how Hou Hsiao-hsien financed Edward Yang's movie "Terrorizer" by mortgaging his own house (p. 58).

Describing one aspect of the innovative methods characteristic of the New Taiwan Cinema, he writes:

...those new directors make an effort to develop a new cinematic language that stands apart from the dominant mode of the classical Hollywood narrative. The way they tell a story in their films, if there is indeed a story, tends to be elliptical. Unlike Hollywood, narrative flow in those films is never clearly defined. Sometimes it is multi-directional: more than two story lines are perceived simultaneously, as in "Terrorizer". Most of the time those films do not have what we usually associate with a 'regular' film -- a beginning, a middle, and a climactic ending. They are more like pieces of one's lived experience cut loose and sent drifting along in one's memory. Hou's early works used this type of narrative strategy. (p. 58)

Taiwan directors, at this juncture in history, found it necessary to tell their story and that of their island in a wholly new style, one that in fact came to embody an anti-narrative (at least

anti-to the Hollywood style). But in a way, this has been influential on Hollywood, too. The Mike Leigh film "Topsy Turvy" (1999), which recreates the lives and scenes of Gilbert and Sullivan in Victorian London, uses a similar technique and has played to rave reviews in the US.

Still, there are gaps and unanswered questions in Chen's article as well. In the early period of Taiwan cinema (1901-1945), Chen never makes it clear exactly what language(s) the soundtracks of the talkies were in. Unlike the Hong Kong article, Chen sees the rise of kungfu films in the late 1960s, with their story lines that "did not conflict with the official ideology", as a symptom of "decay" (pp. 52-3). But he does not clarify the meaning of this decay (all show and no social content?). Neither does he examine serious modern film which existed prior to the New Taiwan Cinema movement, such as "Qiu Jue" (Execution in Autumn, circa 1968). Nor does he address the question of KMT censorship of foreign films through cutting or distorting the contents by intentionally mistranslating the subtitles (such as the American film "Chinatown") or the use of absurd commentaries published on certain films, such as "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest", which readers of the Taiwan semi-official press under martial law were told was a tale of the trials and tribulations endured by a nurse in a permissive society.

The rest of the book consists of short entries (averaging approximately 320 words, i.e. 3-4 paragraphs each) arranged alphabetically about films, film-makers and other topics as varied as "action film", "the Cultural Revolution", "melodrama", "modernity". A major strength of these short entries is the way they are cross-referenced and followed by suggestions for further readings. This is indicative of good planning and scholarly value. Some entries, like "representations of intellectuals" and "representations of women", both by Yingjin Zhang, are longer. The latter are cogent and insightful.

The quality of the short entries varies considerably -- some are analytical and others merely recap plots. A good comparison is the entry for "Big Parade" (Da yuebing; 1985) on pp. 93-4 with that for "Stage Sisters" (Wutai jiemei; 1965) on pp. 316-7. The treatment of "Big Parade" is only three paragraphs, but it manages not only to summarize the plot, but to propose a novel comparison with the earlier American film "Full Metal Jacket" (1981) and add several sentences of cogent and carefully considered analysis. Contributor Shuqin Cui observes (p.93):

Ostensibly an account of nationalistic pride, the film raises the question of how loyalty to the state can be reconciled with the individual's need for personal expression...

While these soldiers willingly [but not without incredible hardship] conform to the values and dictates of military life, Lu Chun, an educated man with an

individual mind, voices his confusions over the political rhetoric used to justify self-sacrifice. His is the voice which asks why all possibility for individual expression has been foreclosed.

The film concludes with the honor parade in Tiananmen Square on national day (footage added under the pressure of censorship). Behind the glorious image remains an unsettling skepticism. Over months of brutal training, these soldiers have covered thousands of kilometers on foot, yet in Tiananmen Square they are required to march just ninety-six steps, the work of a single minute.

I find her analysis not only sensitive and accurate, but also stimulating. By contrast, the entry for "Stage Sisters" merely summarizes the plot and says nothing in terms of analysis, nor does it attempt to place "Stage Sisters" within a larger context of Chinese films which immediately preceded and followed it (i.e. the costume dramas of the early 1960s and the revolutionary model operas of the Cultural Revolution), which would show what a break and innovation, as well as a major re-thinking of China's place in the cinematic world that "Stage Sisters" represented.

Similarly, the treatment (p.151) of "Zaochun eryue", mistranslated as "Early Spring in February" (Eryue in Rou Shi's original novella by that title refers to "the second lunar month", not February), while offering a sentence of analysis, skirts many of the major issues surrounding the movie, including the reasons it incurred Communist secret police chief Kang Sheng's wrath, an ironic twist, since Rou Shi, author of the novella on which the screenplay is based (a good adaptation), was a revolutionary martyr murdered by the KMT secret police at Longhua Garrison Headquarters in Shanghai in 1931. The entry also neglects to comment on the origins of the film's wonderful soundtrack and theme song. True, a short entry cannot encompass a full scholarly treatment, but neither can platitudes replace the valuable insights offered in other entries.

Another minor drawback is the way that no Chinese characters appear in the text and films are usually referred to by a title in English translation. There is no index, save for the shorter entries themselves (and these are by no means entirely comprehensive), which leads the reader from the sometimes unstandardized English translations back to the original Chinese title, however, one has been provided to go the other way (from pinyin to characters to English translation).

The encyclopedia's greatest omission lies in the fact that although Zhang pays attention to the critical concept of "transnational cinema" in his own essay (pp. 63-65), the book fails to situate it more clearly in the diaspora, neglecting films like Wayne Wang's "Chan is Missing", Shirley Sun's "Beijing gushi / A Great Wall", and Clara Law's "Floating Life" which are principally Chinese reactions to life in the American and

Australian diasporas, as well as home-coming/going and the ultimate impossibility for diasporic peoples to go "home". These are not simply "Asian American" (or Asian Australian) films, as one of the short entries contends (p. 169). Even if they are, in view of their historic contribution, don't they deserve a place in an Enlightenment undertaking like an encyclopedia? I would urge the editors to consider adding the appropriate section for the next edition of this fine project, to which I look forward.

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