

DIRECTOR Chen Kaige (born 1952),
Yellow Earth (1984)

DIRECTOR Xie Fei (born 1942),
A Girl from Hunan (1986)

DIRECTOR Zhang Yuan (born 1963),
Seventeen Years (1999)

INDUSTRY AND IDEOLOGY: A CENTENNIAL REVIEW OF CHINESE CINEMA

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INCE CHINA'S FIRST MOVIE SHORT, *Conquering Jun*

Mountain (1905), Chinese cinema has gone a long way to establish its status as a significant force in international cinema. Like its counterparts elsewhere, Chinese cinema began with a fascination with visual technology, developed from family businesses to competing studios, survived wars and state interference, and has enriched cinematic arts with inventions. To implement a perspective slightly different from other recent surveys, this centennial review of Chinese cinema pays more attention to developments in industry than in ideology, politics, or arts.

EARLY CINEMA: EXHIBITION AND PRODUCTION, 1890s–1920s

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING ITS INVENTION, foreign showmen introduced cinema to China in the late 1890s, as they rented tea-houses and theaters to project short movies amid variety shows. Old habits of theater attendance such as chatting, eating, and drinking continued in early film exhibition, and it was not until 1908 that Antonio Ramos built the first cinema in Shanghai.

Film production started in China with documentary filmmaking, reportedly with Thomas Edison's photographer in 1898. Chinese production began at a Beijing photography shop. *Conquering Jun Mountain* featured a leading Peking opera actor, who ensured the film's popularity because opera fans loved to

watch their favorite actor and could now afford cheaper movie tickets. Thus the opera movie came into being as a distinguished genre. A more conscientious effort at feature production was made in 1912, when Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu produced for Asia (a company founded by Benjamin Brasky in 1909) *The Difficult Couple*, a comic short ridiculing wedding rituals. The film projected ethnic culture as spectacle and foregrounded an exhibitionist mode linked to Chinese theater and "cinema of attractions" elsewhere.

Zhang and Zheng established Mingxing (Star) in Shanghai in 1922. This was a time when film production was treated largely as speculation: a small company would make one picture and close shop. From one such company came the first Chinese long feature, *Yan Ruisheng* (1921), based on a sensational case in which a courtesan was murdered for money in 1920. The film premiered at the Embassy, a first-run Shanghai cinema normally screening foreign features. To catch up, Mingxing shifted from shorts to features, and with *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (1923) became an industry leader.

Mingxing specialized in family drama, a type of story about the tribulations of life in a changing society that tends to glorify Confucian virtues. Mingxing's emphasis on traditional ideologies thus situated the studio closer to "butterfly literature"—a type of popular urban fiction steeped in conservatism—than to May Fourth literature, the latter known for its antitraditionalism. Although Mingxing recruited butterfly writers, it did not oppose enlightenment. Indeed, Zheng dedicated his career to moral education through entertainment, but he believed that enlightenment must be achieved step by step and remain accessible to the average audience.

Just as family dramas dominated the first half of the 1920s, family operations characterized early studios. Dan Duyu established Shanghai Photoplay in 1920 and employed his relatives. A famous portrait painter, Dan cast Yin Mingzhu, an illustrious socialite, in *Sea Oath* (1921), an urban romance showcasing modern fashions. Yin became a star and married Dan in 1926. Remarkably, Dan acquired film expertise by himself, serving as director, screenwriter, cinematographer, and editor all at once.

Another noted family studio was Tianyi (Unique), founded by the Shao brothers in Shanghai in 1925. Contrary to



Still from *Five Golden Flowers* (1959), directed by Wang Jiayi

Mingxing and others, Tianyi developed its brand name by adapting folktales and legends popular among audiences. What further distinguished Tianyi was its investment in Southeast Asia, signing deals with exhibitors and building its own theater chain—an investment that paid off immediately. *White Snake* (1926) broke all records for Chinese films in Southeast Asia, and such overseas success was crucial to Shanghai studios because the majority of movie theaters in China were owned by foreigners and showed mostly foreign films.

Tianyi's success engendered a fierce competition to produce costume dramas, which was a lucrative business in the mid-1920s due to minimal investment in location and scriptwriting. Minitrends followed one after another, from historical films to martial-arts pictures to films about immortals and demons. Mingxing's martial-arts saga *Burning Red Lotus Temple* (1928–31) reached eighteen episodes in all. For critics, martial-arts pictures still conveyed a sense of justice in imaginary righting of wrongs, but images of immortals and demons were largely escapist. The increased prices of film stock forced small companies to use cheap material and rush their unpolished products to the market, and overproduction gave overseas exhibitors the advantage to cut purchasing prices. All this combined to drive small companies to bankruptcy. From 179 companies in 1927, the number nose-dived to 20 in 1928, and fewer than a dozen were in business by 1930.

In general, film production in the 1920s was market-driven and relatively free from state interference because the Kuomintang (KMT) did not establish its central government in Nanjing until 1927. However, since exhibition was under foreign control and there was no horizontal or vertical integration of the industry, the prospects for Chinese cinema were rather dim. Some businessmen-producers were aware of the situation and attempted to build Chinese exhibition networks, but it required time and money, both in short supply when cinema approached the sound era amid economic depression.

NATIONAL CINEMA: INDUSTRY AND IDEOLOGY, 1930s–1940s

SEVERAL FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES occurred in the early 1930s. First, the KMT government asserted its power by cracking down on martial-arts pictures and strictly policing films' ideological content. Second, a "national cinema" movement brought a new look to the screen and new audiences to theaters. Third, the emergent leftists launched film criticism, maneuvered through cracks in the censorship system, and produced leftist films exposing class exploitation, national crisis, and social evils.

The government's ban on martial-arts pictures was meant to curtail superstition and promote modernity and nationalism. It found an ally in Luo Mingyou, a theater-chain owner who ventured into film production by organizing Lianhua (United Photoplay Service) in 1930. Lianhua reorganized former companies such as Great Wall-Lily and Minxin as its branch studios in Shanghai and Hong Kong. With its slogan to "revive national cinema," Lianhua produced films attractive to urban intellectuals who had been turned off by martial-arts pictures in the late 1920s. Although many were still bathed in Confucian ethics, Lianhua films like *New Woman* (1934) highlighted the spirit of social intervention related to the May Fourth tradition.

While Lianhua concentrated on silent pictures in the early 1930s, Mingxing and Tianyi competed in producing talkies. After helping install sound systems in 139 theaters in Southeast Asia, Tianyi established its Hong Kong studio in 1934 and started producing Cantonese cinema. When Japan invaded central China in 1937, Tianyi terminated its Shanghai operations and moved to Hong Kong, where it eventually rose to prominence as Shaw Brothers in the 1950s.

Unlike market-driven Tianyi, Mingxing followed Lianhua and opened its doors to the leftists, partly because of the vision of mass education shared between leftists and liberal directors. In the early 1930s Mingxing was deeply in debt after martial-arts pictures had been banned, and audiences no longer welcomed the butterfly stories. Through Hong Shen's connection, Xia Yan, Yang Hansheng, and other leftists were invited to contribute screenplays to Mingxing in 1932. The leftists seized this opportunity and expanded their influence on progressive directors like Cheng Bugao, and before long such leftist films as *Spring Silkworms* (1933) brought fresh images to the screen. Zheng Zhengqiu himself directed *Twin Sisters* (1933), a family drama about contrastive fates of the rich and the poor, which had much in common with Cai Chusheng's *Song of the Fishermen* (1934), an acclaimed leftist film from Lianhua.

Two new studios, Diantong and Yihua, were also active in leftist film production. The turn toward leftist ideology alarmed the KMT right wing, which engineered publicized vandalism of Yihua facilities and increased pressure on censorship. After the leftist pullout in 1935, Yihua was taken over by the advocates for



Still from *A Girl from Hunan* (1986), directed by Xie Fei

“soft film”: entertaining comedies that ignored sociopolitical issues and indulged in visual treats. The soft film’s opposition to ideological criticism provoked counterattacks by the leftists in major newspapers, and the former’s vision of an alternative film aesthetic in line with Shanghai cosmopolitanism has since become a negative example in official historiography. The left-

(1943), set in the Opium War and supposedly propagating pro-Japanese ideology. Also promoting such ideology were the films from Manchurian Motion Pictures (Man’ei), a Japanese-controlled studio in northeastern China.

During the war, two KMT studios—Central Film and China Motion Pictures—were relocated to Chongqing, the wartime capital, and produced several patriotic films, but the limited film stock prevented any growth in the hinterland. Before Hong Kong fell to Japan in 1941, a KMT film office there helped a group of Shanghai directors produce a few titles in Mandarin, thus beginning the Mandarin cinema that would flourish in postwar Hong Kong. A small-scale film production team was established in the communist-controlled Yan’an area, which shot documentaries and trained film personnel.

Right after the war, communists transported part of Man’ei equipment out of Changchun and set up Northeast Studio in 1946. Later in the year, the KMT confiscated the rest of Man’ei equipment and set up Changchun Studio, but major postwar KMT facilities were Central Film’s two studios in Shanghai and one in Beijing. Ironically, several films critical of KMT corruption were released by these studios, reflecting the postwar mood of disillusionment, but the majority of Central Film’s releases glorified KMT images. *Code Name Heaven No. 1* (1947), a spy film, sold 150,000 tickets at Empress Theater in Shanghai, compared to the 170,000 tickets *Gone with the Wind* sold when it premiered in Shanghai in 1947. There is no question that Hollywood dom-

By the late 1940s, FILM WAS NO LONGER SEEN AS PURE VISUAL ENTERTAINMENT OR MORAL PREACHING; IT WAS AN ART FORM IN WHICH ARTISTS AND AUDIENCES ALIKE NEGOTIATED SOCIAL ISSUES. IT IS THIS RELATIVELY FREE SPACE OF IMAGINATION THAT WOULD BE ERASED IN THE SUBSEQUENT DECADES.

ists, on the other hand, claimed outstanding films to their credit, such as Wu Yonggang’s *Goddess* (1934), Sun Yu’s *Big Road* (1934), Shen Xiling’s *Crossroads* (1937), and Yuan Muzhi’s *Street Angel* (1937).

Ma-Xu Weibang’s *Singing at Midnight* (1937), marketed as China’s first horror picture, also showed visible leftist influences, but it was Xinhua, a company Zhang Shankun established in 1934, that would rise to preeminence after 1937, when Lianhua and Mingxing had closed shop. During the war against Japan, Zhang followed the prewar Tianyi tradition and produced politically neutral but commercially successful films in Shanghai. Some films, like *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939), subtly conveyed patriotism and were popular. However, the Japanese occupation forces pushed Zhang Shankun to make *Eternity*

inated the market, but Chinese audiences watched more domestic films during the postwar than during the prewar period, which boosted postwar production.

Private companies played a significant role in the postwar boom. Sang Hu’s *Phony Phoenixes* (1947) from Wenhua became a top performer at Grand Theater in Shanghai, selling 165,000 tickets. Wenhua’s artistic quality and humanist compassion were also embodied in Fei Mu’s *Spring in a Small Town* (1948), a psychological film many critics consider one of the best in China. Kunlun, another postwar studio that gathered many prewar leftist artists, specialized in social intervention. *Spring River Flows East* (1947), a melodrama of wartime sufferings, sold 712,874 tickets from October 1947 to January 1948. By depicting the powerless in solidarity against evil power, Kunlun’s other

releases, such as Shen Fu's *Myriad of Lights* (1948) and Zheng Junli's *Crows and Sparrows* (1949), exemplified critical realism traceable to prewar social realism.

Chinese cinema had matured and developed into a national cinema in the 1930s and 1940s. The 1930s saw systematic efforts to stabilize the market; integrate production, distribution, and exhibition; and promote new types of films. Rather than catering to market demand, producers allowed artists to experiment with new genres and styles. The results were impressive, bringing Chinese cinema closer to international developments such as modernism, expressionism, and neorealism, on the one hand, and to traditional Chinese aesthetics on the other. By the late 1940s, film was no longer seen as pure visual entertainment or moral preaching; it was an art form in which artists and audiences alike negotiated social issues. It is this relatively free space of imagination that would be erased in the subsequent decades.

SOCIALIST CINEMA: POLITICS AND ART, 1950s–1970s

IRONICALLY, filmmakers' humanism and realism became politically suspect during the socialist period, after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had driven the KMT to Taiwan in 1949 and attempted to consolidate its power by all means. The CCP confiscated all KMT facilities and managed large state studios like Changchun, Beijing, Shanghai, and August First. The outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 terminated Hollywood's decade-long domination in China, and Soviet and Eastern European cinemas filled the void gradually. The Central Film Bureau was founded in Beijing in 1949, and the CCP censors supervised all films from screenplay to postproduction. Screenwriters were assigned to two national institutes, and their products allocated to studios in a quota system. At the beginning, a dozen private studios such as Kunlun and Wenhua could request screenplays and developed their own, but after Mao Zedong published an editorial in *People's Daily* in 1951 and launched a nationwide campaign criticizing *The Life of Wu Xun* (1950), private studios could barely survive. All of them were nationalized and merged into Shanghai Studio by 1953.

Socialist cinema was devoted to serving workers, peasants, and soldiers, who were to emulate communist heroes and mar-



Still from *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), directed by Yimou Zhang

tyrs on screen. Intellectuals were classified as petit bourgeois and coerced to reform themselves under CCP guidance. Public space and collective spirit replaced private and personal matters, and all characters were fashioned into certain "types" so as to stage ideological struggles. The CCP policed ideological messages and representational modes; any ambiguity would result in severe criticism. One of the worst scenarios was the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957, which followed a relaxation phase known as the "Hundred Flowers." As part of the reforms, the national screenplay institutes were disbanded and studios could recruit screenwriters, although the finished films had to clear censors at the Film Bureau and the Ministry of Culture. Film workers were motivated to air constructive criticism, and many of them targeted bureaucracy

and lack of artistic freedom. A year later, the Anti-Rightist Campaign silenced all dissidents.

The sheer unpredictability of party policy compelled artists to choose such safer genres as revolutionary history, war, opera movies, ethnic minorities, and literary adaptation. *The White-Haired Girl* (1950), a classic text of class struggle, proved immensely popular and reached six million viewers nationwide. *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (1954), an opera movie based on a popular Chinese legend about two lovers reunited in death, exerted an impact on opera movies in Hong Kong. In the 1960s seasoned filmmakers also managed to produce quality films such as *Third Sister Liu* (1960) and *Stage Sisters* (1965).

By 1966, ultraleftist ideology took over, and more than fifty films were officially censored. A record of zero feature productions from 1967 to 1969 was a direct result of the negation of the first seventeen years of socialist cinema during the Cultural Revolution. Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, who had enjoyed publicity as a Shanghai film actress in the mid-1930s, sponsored the filming of eight revolutionary model plays. Released from 1970 onward, these films obeyed Jiang's principle of "three prominences": "Give prominence to positive characters among all the characters, to heroes among the positive characters, to the principal hero among the heroes." Jiang's next step was to remake in color a few black-and-white films she had approved, most of which were war films that partially addressed the exigency of China's growing tension with the Soviet Union. Jiang's third step was to produce new features that attacked her political opponents. Films like *Breaking with Old Ideas* (1975) did not help her that much, however, because after Mao's death in 1976 the CCP liberals arrested Jiang and other members of the "Gang of Four."

In the remainder of the 1970s, films renounced Cultural Revolution atrocities and vented anger.

During the socialist period, politics reigned over art, party ideology penetrated everyday life, and the planned economy eliminated market functions. A single state corporation distributed all films approved by the Film Bureau, theaters showed films as allocated, and the audience had little effect on production. In short, box-office revenues were rarely of anyone's concern, and, like cinema itself, artists were reduced to mere functionaries in the revolutionary machinery.



Still from *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), directed by Chen Kaige

POSTSOCIALIST CINEMA: CULTURE AND HISTORY, 1980s–1990s

THE 1980S BEGAN with the new CCP policy of open doors and economic reform. The relaxation of ideological control resulted in increased artistic freedom and growths in production. From eighty-four in 1980 (compared to forty-four in 1978), the annual features remained consistently around 110 or above from 1981 to 1996, with 166 in 1992 as the highest. Audiences chose films as their preferred form of entertainment in the early 1980s. *The In-Laws* (1981), a rural family drama, reached 600 million audiences nationwide in two years. In 1984 movie attendance stood at 25 billion, and nationwide exhibition revenues were 1.3 billion yuan.

The 1980s saw three generations of filmmakers at work. Those making films in the socialist period, now labeled as the Third Generation, returned to such favorite genres as history and adaptation. Among them, Xie Jin rose to prominence with his controversial melodramas of human suffering like *Hibiscus Town* (1986). Those who studied films but did not direct before 1966—labeled as the Fourth Generation—were most active in the early 1980s. Unlike their predecessors, who specialized in revolutionary heroes and “typical” characters, the middle-aged directors concentrated on human emotions, delighted in everyday experience, and explored different styles. Thematically, films confronted the previously taboo subject of heterosexual love, and female sexuality became a hot topic, as in Xie Fei's *A Girl from Human* (1986). Another noteworthy development was the prominence of women directors in the 1980s. While Zhang Nuanxin's *Sacrificed Youth* (1985) foregrounds female consciousness by exploring femininity in a minority region, Huang Shuqin's *Woman Demon Human* (1987) endorses female subjec-

tivity by depicting the career of an opera actress who plays a male demon.

The filmmakers who brought Chinese cinema to international attention are those graduates from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, better known as the Fifth Generation. Their breakthroughs are cinematic as much as ideological. Just as the landscape in Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984) conveys a sense of cultural tradition, so does Tibetan culture in Tian Zhuangzhuang's *Horse Thief* (1986) compel the viewer to contemplate the meaning of

life and religion. These films, along with others like Wu Ziniu's *Evening Bell* (1988), feature minimal plot, scanty dialogue, natural lighting, and out-of-proportion composition.

The Fifth Generation was faulted for their obsession with modernist aesthetics at the expense of the box office, but after Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1988) won the Golden Bear in Berlin, many directors changed their styles to meet the international demand for ethnic elements, glossy visuals, and polished narrative. No longer avant-garde, these award-winning films include Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and Zhou Xiaowen's *Ermo* (1994). One exception is Tian, who was banned from directing after *The Blue Kite* (1993), a film confronting the traumas of communist revolution.

In the mid-1990s Tian turned to sponsor a new group of directors—labeled as the Sixth Generation—who had graduated in the late 1980s, a time when the state studios could no longer afford experimental films in the midst of economic reform. Fully responsible for their finances, many studios switched to entertainment films, especially martial arts, thrillers, and comedies. But the film market had shrunk miserably since the mid-1980s, and state studios routinely co-produced films with Hong Kong, providing facilities and manpower to generate much-needed cash.

Given this inhospitable situation, the Sixth Generation had two options: either to go underground with no hope of domestic release or to purchase studio labels for their products. In the early 1990s Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan chose the first option and directed *The Days* (1993) and *Beijing Bastards* (1993), respectively. Hailed as examples of “outlawed” filmmaking, films like these were regularly “smuggled” out of China to international film festivals. Other young directors chose the second option and waited for the censors to approve their debuts in the mid-1990s.

The new directors intentionally challenge the aesthetics of the Fifth Generation. Instead of abstract reflection on or exhibitionist display of Chineseness, the Sixth Generation prefers images and motifs expressive of their feelings of alienation, such

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as abortion, alcoholism, drug, sex, violence, as well as rock music, their favored genre. Apart from emphasizing youth subculture, the Sixth Generation pursues screen images they perceive as more “truthful” to everyday life than the previous films. Their search for “truths” culminated in a documentary style concentrating on marginal figures as exemplified in Zhang Yuan’s works like *Seventeen Years* (1999). An even younger group have now arrived with cinematic tour de force: Wang Quan’an’s *Lunar Eclipse* (1999) and Lou Ye’s *The Suzhou River* (2000) both explore cinematic doublings in the urban labyrinth with rich visuals.

CONCLUSION: TRANSNATIONAL CINEMA

IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM, Chinese cinema consists of these major types: alternative film, art film, commercial film, and leitmotiv film. Alternative films are produced outside the studio system and exhibited abroad beyond the knowledge of most Chinese audiences. Art films are increasingly funded by private sources or overseas money, released both in China and elsewhere, and usually intended as much for prestige as for profit. Commercial films are market-driven productions, and the “New Year Picture” is a subcategory for such films released in the holiday season. Since the late 1990s, Feng Xiaogang’s comedies have consistently been successful, so competitive with Hollywood, in fact, that Columbia invested in his *Big Shot’s Funeral* (2001). The leitmotiv films are those subsidized by the state that glorify communist revolution. Recently, leitmotiv films have attracted established art directors, whose participation has enriched cinematic expression in this rigid propaganda category.

In general, the types of films mentioned above feature transnational connections in financing, casting, marketing, narrative, and visual construction. Co-productions have been an effective means of sharing risks and maximizing returns. Of 146 films released in 1995, 35 were co-productions. However, due to the new policy requiring that most of the postproduction work be done in the mainland, the number of co-productions dropped to about 10 in 1996, out of a total of 110. From there the annual productions nose-dived from 88 in 1997 and 82 in 1998, and the 2001 figure falls in the same neighborhood. Cheap pirated VCDs, rundown theaters, expensive tickets, and low production values in domestic films are frequently blamed for declining movie attendance. From 1997 to 1999, 70 percent of Chinese-made films failed to recover their production costs, which aver-

aged around three million yuan. The “giant pictures”—Hollywood blockbusters like *Titanic*, imported to China after October 1994 on a revenue-sharing basis and limited to ten a year—also share the blame. Moreover, as more Hollywood films are poised to enter China now that it has joined the World Trade Organization, the prospects for Chinese cinema are far from rosy.

Nevertheless, in the new millennium, more new talents have emerged, and more private sources seem willing to invest in film projects. Calls for reform in the distribution and exhibition sectors as well as for the loosening of film censorship have become more frequent. In 2002 the state experimented with a new system of competing theater chains at the provincial level. Together with the recently integrated production corporations, these measures indicate the trend of consolidation as a means of safeguarding “national cinema” and confronting the imminent Hollywood dominance in China. In the meantime, Hollywood has chosen co-production as a short-term strategy to test the uncharted waters. With Hollywood’s investment in Chinese commercial fare and Europe’s investment in Chinese “underground” art films, Chinese cinema has indeed outgrown its “national” boundary and has turned truly transnational. **WLT**

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