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Title: The Evolution of Chinese Cinema
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Abstract:

The evolution of Chinese Cinema was a symbolic collection of art that helped shed light on the social and political movements throughout the twentieth century. It was an influential social institution at the time because many of the early Chinese films reflected everyday citizens that endured social and economic issues. It was a way for left-nationalist artists to send a message to the rest of the country about the issues China was facing with western imperialism and what the government of China should do about it. Chinese cinema, I argue, was its form of propaganda, especially during China's golden ages in the 1930s, just before Mao Zedong, the leader of the communist party, took over China. The evolution of China not only sparked nationalistic ideas but also pushed for a new direction regarding women's rights. Early Chinese Actresses paved the way for social movements for women's liberation right after the last monarchical regime of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) that suppressed women's rights. In the late 1920s silent films began to skyrocket with most leading actors being women; essentially reshaping the way women were thought to be of lower status. This paper will evaluate the transitions of social and political unrest throughout the twentieth century in China through the use of films and influential actresses that made Chinese films what they are today.

The 1920's

The flight of Chinese Cinema began in the 1920s, during a huge transitional period in China's political and social systems. In 1912, the Qing dynasty that reigned in China was finally coming to its end. Due to civil unrest, invasions, and the first Sino-Japanese war from 1894 to 1895, the Qing dynasty was severely weakened. The Republic of China (ROC) 1912 became the Chinese government up until 1949 when power transitioned to Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People's Republic of China. These vast transitions of government and social policies throughout the 20th century had greatly influenced Chinese Cinema. As we begin with China under the leadership of the ROC, the transition of cinema will be imminent. One of the first films that debuted in China, was the adopted series, The Romance Western Chamber. According to the Gotheborg Glossary, this story originated from a piece of fiction titled Yingying Zhuan which was turned into a silent film in 1927. The story was created by Wang Shifu of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) that directly came from a romance that occurred during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). "The Story of Yingying is a tragedy about the love, union, and separation between Zhang Sheng and Yingying in the first year of their reign in the Tang Dynasty". The remastered film of this series is a direct reflection of the imperial dynastic rules that have been in place in China for thousands of years. Chinese Cinema in the 1920s was still heavily influenced by the imperial regime and The Romance of the Western Chamber is a great example of that. The Romance of the Western Chamber is about a young scholar Zhang Sheng who went to the capital city to take the highest imperial examination. When he stayed in a temple, he met Yingying, the daughter of the then Prime Minister, and fell in love with her. Jan- Erik Nillson explains that:

"The theme of the drama is an attack on feudal mores, supporting the longing of young people in those days for freedom of marriage, although it follows the

timeworn pattern of a gifted scholar and a beautiful lady falling in love at first sight. According to the orthodox viewpoint of feudal society, love was not supposed to be a basis for marriage, as most marriages were arranged by the parents of the couples, but the happy ending of *The Romance of the Western Chamber* embodies the aspirations of people for more meaningful and happier lives” (Nillson, Gotheborg).

The 1927 silent film became a huge turning point in Chinese cinema as silent films began to spread all across China and it became a way to let the western world know of its values and morals. The film, just like many others, was used to deflect the audiences’ minds away from their reality briefly. During the 1920s, a lot of social unrest and humanitarian crises continued in different parts of China. The crippling famine that began to hurt many lives began to create anti-foreign nationalistic ideologies that will later influence the establishment of the Communist Party of China (CPC). The *Ministry of the Foreign Affairs People's Republic of China* explains how the CPC is greatly influenced by Marxism, and later: Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, and Deng Xiaoping. The CPC would become a pillar for socialist ideas and civil unrest against democratic policies that were negatively affecting civilians. Additionally, in later years, there is a transition in Chinese cinema that begins to reflect these social changes in Chinese society, in which films begin to portray the lives of everyday people and their struggles.

The 1930s

The Golden Ages in Chinese Cinema was not merely just a production of films, but they were a collection of symbolic messages that reflected the lives of everyday civilians and the problems that were happening at the time. Susan Hayward, the author of *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* illustrates how Chinese cinema began to portray resistance to western imperialism especially, the imperialism regime of Japan. Chinese Cinema at first was not thriving in terms of economic prosperity and company success, but in the 1930s, we begin to see politicized films

Hayward quotes: “that of a nationalistic leftist cinema that would eventually become identified with the Communist Party in its fight to liberate China from Japanese Imperialism” (which lasted throughout the 1930s). The invasion of Japan into China in 1931 was the main catalyst for many Chinese nationalist films.

One of China’s major figures in the Chinese Golden age was Ruan Lingyu, a Chinese actress that had China in her grip with her amazing performances on camera. Ruan Lingyu was born in Shanghai in 1910. She was born into a very turbulent time in China, as the Qing Dynasty had reached its final years and political and social unrest from small rebellions all over the country started to occur. Her first film was in 1927 titled, *A Married Couple in Name Only* began her acting career and also where she adopted her stage name. Vivienne Chow’s article, *Ruan Lingyu: The Greta Garbo of China* explained that “throughout her nine-year career, Ruan made 29 films. Some of these titles, such as *A Spray of Plum Blossoms (1931)*, *Little Toys (1933)*, *The Goddess (1934)*, and *New Women (1935)*, are regarded as among the finest films of early Chinese cinema” (Chow: 2017). Her roles represented a new generation of Chinese women liberated from dynastic rule but still struggling to find their place in the republican era. One of her most famous films, *New Woman* grasped the realities of many young women and the struggles they faced. *New Woman* was about:

Her performance in the film luminously captured the modernity of her character yet off-camera, her life was hell. Shanghai was like LA at the time – a boomtown, celebrity-obsessed – and another of her films, *New Women*(1934) captures the tragedy of this. About a woman who commits suicide because she is hounded by the tabloids, its awful irony today is that the same year Ruan did just that” (University of Edinburgh)

Just as Vivian Shen said, “life also imitates art” (Shen:2013) and on March 8th, 1935, Ruan took her own life at the age of 25 years old. Her death shook China as she had become an important

and influential figure. She helped make women in cinema part of a larger progressive struggle that was taking place. Noah Cowan states that both Nationalists and Communists viewed the liberation of women from the barbaric practices of the imperial era as a necessary component of a modern, 20th-century China (Cowan: 2014). As a result, Ruan Lingyu's legacy did not just end at her death. Her death pushed people to reflect not only on how badly their social and economic systems were failing but also sparked questions about women's rights, especially when nearing the communist era of Mao Zedong. China was rapidly urbanizing at the time and harmed many people as peasants were dirt poor, especially in these newly urbanizing cities. Her death helped symbolize those parts of the country that were repressed and falling behind. Though Ruan Lingyu's life was cut short, she influenced many other Chinese actresses that later began to produce films in America and other parts of the world. China left the 1930s in the second Sino-Japanese war that lasted from 1937 to 1945, ending after WWII with Japan's surrender. The Sino-Japanese war had impacted the Chinese that pushed communist ideas further, prompting the communist party under Mao Zedong to rise to power. This, in turn, began to affect the type of films that were created. These films began to have themes that were associated with socialist and communistic propaganda.

The Late 1940s

In 1947, China was introduced to the second golden age of film during a time when both anti-Japanese rhetorics were strong and the support of a communist regime under Mao Zedong began to increase. One film that signified the civil unrest was the 1947 film titled, *Along the Sungari River* directed by Shan Jin. This film took place:

“In Manchuria, a village inn by a river is a regular stop for carters, so it's not surprising that the daughter of the innkeeper has a carter for a sweetheart. But all sweetness and tranquility are shattered by the invasion of the brutal Japanese in

1931. Quinnian and Sunnu end up as slaves in a coal mine but are soon heading up a workers' rebellion to overthrow their Japanese masters” (UC Berkeley).

The anti-Japan rhetoric was well worked into Chinese cinema to grasp the hearts of civilians that had to endure similar struggles compared to these films. As communists came into power, the films reflected that influence, and in 1949, the People’s Republic of China was founded under Mao Zedong, who systematically changed the way movies were produced. Mao Zedong was a Marxist theorist that led China into a communist revolution and from 1949-to 1959 and became the chief of state in China. Through his leadership, the cultural & industrial revolutions were systematically set in place to make China a more socialistic state. Regardless of the horrific impact both movements made, killing millions of Chinese due to famine, and starvation, there was still a lot of public support for Mao Zedong and his ideas. This support is seen throughout the films of this time when everything was seized under government control. The films that people were able to see were heavily guarded by government organizations and Mao even banned almost all American films in China altogether. During this time there were fast and great technological improvements in the production of films being made and the ones that were produced all led to themes of Mao, communism, and social progression under the People’s Republic of China. Yuan Mazhi at the time was one of China’s significant film directors and one of the directors that stayed in mainland China, in support of Mao. Many other directors fled to Hong Kong during Mao Zedong's rule:

“Yuan Mazhi was, for a while, Mao’s movie lieutenant, overseeing the industry’s nationalization between 1949 and 1952, a period of technological advance and a massive increase in the number of cinemas. A Comedy Research Unit was set up in 1955. The famous Beijing Film Academy was established in 1956. The country’s first feature animation – the brilliant *Uproar in Heaven* – was made in 1964” (Confucius Institute)

Under Mao Zedong, the film industry was able to improve, but the films produced were still

censored. During the Great Proletarian Cultural revolution from 1966 up until Mao Zedong died in 1975, a film titled, *Two Stage Sisters* was made in 1964 which was a social-political drama that was “an epic scope by showing these women's lives buffeted by tremendous social and political upheavals” (Marchetti: 1989). This film signified the social changes that were happening in China at the time and also gave representation to women’s rights.

Conclusion

Less politically motivated movies were allowed back into the film industry after Mao Zedong’s regime and the cinematic competition between mainland China and Hong Kong had a large impact on Chinese cinema. Throughout the 20th century, there was a complete evolution of Chinese films that reflected social issues and social-political changes. In the 1920s, China went through a drastic social change in which the last imperial dynasty, the Qing Dynasty, had fallen at the end of the Sino-Japanese war. The silent films that were produced still included themes of imperial China. In the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, we see a drastic change in the Chinese cinema as China became anti-Japan nationalistic before and after the second Sino-Japanese war and the social upheaval that impacted millions of Chinese lives under the Republic of China. With the millions of casualties and humanitarian crises that were happening at the time, communist ideologies began to take root in many Chinese lives, in which the communist party of China gained a significant amount of support. These changes in social ideologies spilled into the cinema and many socialist ideas that reflected the struggles of everyday people made the support of communism a lot stronger. Towards the end of the 20th century, traditional fighting films became a big hit, not just in China but across the world as people began to appreciate China’s deep history, especially in traditional fighting like kung fu. It is seen that China’s cinema greatly reflected the social movements, social and political unrest, and the transition of economic and

social systems throughout the 20th century. The films also shed light on women's rights and the fight for liberation during the cultural revolution.

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