

**PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN
IN
CHINESE CINEMA**

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Table of Contents

Quotations

Introduction

Syllabus

- **Course Description**
- **Course Objectives**
- **Films**
- **Essential Questions**
- **Discussion Questions**

Sample Course Assignment:

- **Comparative Essay**

Selected Sources on Women and Chinese Film

- **Quotations**

"When people in other cultures look at Chinese women through the lens of Western films, they often will see them as more submissive. There is this whole idea of exoticizing Chinese women, with their traditional qipaos and their bound feet... You see innocent women resorting to prostitution to feed their families, going through extreme hardship beginning in 30s-era Shanghai into the 'cultural revolution,' and images of women fighting for revolutionary ideals. From the '80s onwards, these women are shown with a full expression of sexual desire, which is groundbreaking in Chinese culture. These women refused to be victims of their circumstances. Chinese women are presented as being in full control of their actions, their desires, and their thoughts."

La Frances Hui, Film Curator, Asia Society

"Since the early days of film in China, a lot of things have changed, and for women as well... we can see the evolution of the role of women in Chinese society, and how they have themselves contributed to those changes. Chinese women have often been stereotyped in Hollywood films, and I think we can get a clearer picture from Chinese films of how women in China have made contributions to daily life, to the economy and culture. Although Chinese movies are not well known by Western audiences, they might provide a different understanding."

Wu Zhao, Cultural Attaché at China's Consulate General, New York

"I'm not saying that there isn't sexism in some [Chinese] films, but there is a story being told about the role of women, and that story is being told by Chinese. I think that's incredibly important... Whether the film is about motherhood, or romance, it all adds up to a different understanding of women. In many ways, women have not gotten their due in both film and art."

Rachel Cooper, Director of Cultural Programs, Asia Society

• Introduction

In 2006, I attended a seminar at New York University on the topic of “Women’s Global Movements,” which ignited my ongoing interest in the roles women assume in various cultures around the world. Thus, throughout my 2013 Fulbright-Hays Seminars Abroad China trip, I observed and questioned the various roles of women in each of the cities we visited: Beijing, Xi’an, Chongqing, Shanghai and Hong Kong.

I teach at Bennett College, one of only two historically Black colleges for women in the United States. Bennett is an institution where students are encouraged—as its mission statement says—to explore “a variety of viewpoints and [to] deepen their understanding of different cultures.” One of my goals throughout my Fulbright experience was to develop an interdisciplinary course for Bennett students that would explore the struggles and challenges women have faced, and continue to face, in China—a course much like the one outlined in this curriculum project.

For several weeks before leaving for China, I watched a number of Chinese (and China-related) feature films and documentaries. I made an effort to watch a variety of genres as well as films from various periods. Shortly before our departure date, I was pleased to learn that our scholar escort would be Dr. Stanley Rosen. Dr. Rosen has written and lectured extensively on Chinese film, and at the time of our trip he was teaching a course entitled “Politics and Film in the People’s Republic of China” at the University of Southern California, his home institution. During our pre-departure orientation, Dr. Rosen led two movie sessions with our group, and throughout the trip, he engaged us in many conversations related to Chinese cinema.

The course described in this curriculum project, which I have entitled “Portrayals of Women in Chinese Cinema,” merges my interest in global women with my interest in Chinese film. The course will strengthen the current academic offerings within my own institution’s Global Studies program as well as enhance learning options for our students. Additionally, it will provide an excellent opportunity for faculty collaboration. Given the inherent interdisciplinary nature of the course, when it is

piloted—possibly as early as Spring 2014—faculty from various departments will be invited to participate in our discussions (i.e., Women’s Studies, Political Science, History, Visual Arts, and Sociology, for example).

Film scholars often refer to the 1930s as China’s “first golden age” of film. Chinese films from this era often featured women protagonists, and, as one scholar notes, these films were surprisingly realistic, and “women [seemingly] symbolized those parts of the country that were repressed and falling apart.” Female protagonists continued to be prevalent in films made during the so-called “Maoist period” (1949-1976), and this trend has continued with the “5th Generation” and “6th Generation” filmmakers. The changing roles of women, along with the complexities of present-day China (i.e., rural vs. city, a growing middle class, frustration with central government policies, etc.) are strongly reflected in many recent films.

Historically, Chinese filmmakers have not ignored sensuality or sexuality in their portrayals of women, and this is certainly true of recent films. This, along with the inclusion of particular political viewpoints, has often resulted in controversy as well as censorship. Nonetheless, the female protagonists in Chinese cinema have been, and continue to be, strong, independent individuals, who are passionately committed to specific goals and ideals. They often take stands against patriarchal authority (sometimes represented by abusive husbands or lovers), and while some of these protagonists may appear to be tragic figures, their stories are powerful teaching tools that help explain the complicated political, cultural and social landscape that has been, and continues to be, China. Arguably, Chinese cinema has used, and continues to use, the archetype of the strong yet tragic woman to represent the trauma and change that shapes life in this complex country.

PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN IN CHINESE CINEMA

Syllabus

Course Description: This course will explore portrayals of women in Chinese cinema throughout the past 80-odd years. Each film shown will feature at least one prominent female character. Arguably, the female characters in these films reflect the changes China underwent during the 20th C., and the changes it continues to undergo in the 21st C. Students enrolled in this course will gain a greater understanding of Chinese history, politics, culture, and society, and especially the role of women in these areas. Narrative themes and cinema techniques also will be discussed.

Prior to each film's showing, the instructor will lecture or lead a discussion on the historical-political situation being depicted in the film. Additionally, the instructor will discuss the political situation in China at the time the film was made. Faculty from other disciplines may be invited to participate in discussions prior to, and following, a film's showing.

No previous knowledge of China or film studies is required. However, this course is recommended for undergraduates at the junior or senior level.

Course Goals: By the end of this course, students will have developed a greater knowledge and understanding of:

- 1- Chinese history, politics, culture, and society;
- 2- the struggles and challenges Chinese women have faced, and continue to face;
- 3- narrative theme as it relates to film;
- 4- various cinema techniques;
- 5- Chinese cinema from the late 20th C. and early 21st C.

FILMS:

8-10 films will be shown throughout the course, which will run for one semester, i.e., approximately 16 weeks. The films will be chosen from the following list, which, while not comprehensive, includes films which are readily available.

TWIN SISTERS (1934) – directed by Zheng Zhengqiu. Twin siblings Da and Er are separated as infants, then unknowingly reunited when the impoverished Da becomes a servant in her twin's household.

STREET ANGEL (1937) – directed by Yuan Muzhi. Two sisters flee occupied Manchuria for Shanghai, where they are forced into servitude: one as a prostitute, and the other as a chanteuse.

THE SPRING RIVER FLOWS EAST (1947) – directed by Cai Chusheng and Zheng Junli. The fortunes of a working-class family are threatened as they fight to stay together during the War of Resistance against Japan.

SPRING IN A SMALL TOWN (1948) – directed by Fei Mu. A once-prosperous family struggling to get by in post-World War II China is thrown into turmoil by the unexpected arrival of an old friend.

TWO STAGE SISTERS (1964) – directed by Xie Jin. Two female Yue (Shaoxing) Opera practitioners from the same troupe end up taking very different paths in their lives. The story of the film begins in 1935, and ends in 1950.

THE RED DETACHMENT OF WOMEN (1970) – directed by Pan Wenzhan and Fu Jie. A filmed performance of the Chinese ballet of the same name, the story focuses on Wu Qinghua, who escapes from an evil landlord and becomes the leader of a women's militia, under the guidance of Hong Changqing, a Communist Party secretary.

JU DOU (1990) – directed by Zhang Yimou and Yang Fengliang. A tragedy, focusing on the character of Ju Dou, a beautiful young woman who is sold as a wife to Jinshan, an old cloth dyer.

THE STORY OF QIU JU (1992) - directed by Zhang Yimou. A pregnant peasant woman seeks compensation from the Chinese bureaucracy after the village chief kicks her husband in the groin.

THE JOY LUCK CLUB (1993) – directed by Wayne Wang. An American-made film based on the popular novel by Amy Tan about the relationships between Chinese-American women and their Chinese mothers.

RED FIRECRACKER, GREEN FIRECRACKER (1994) – directed by He Ping. A young woman inherits her father's fireworks factory, and is forbidden to marry; however, she falls in love with a painter hired to decorate the factory for Chinese

New Year. Their affair throws her life, and the lives of the factory workers, into turmoil.

TO LIVE (1994) – directed by Zhang Yimou. In this powerful, epic film, a family endures many challenges during the tumultuous decades from the 1940s through the 1970s.

CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON (2000) – directed by Taiwan-born American filmmaker Ang Lee. A popular and award-winning film about two warriors in pursuit of a stolen sword and a notorious fugitive who meet a nobleman's daughter.

BALZAC AND THE LITTLE CHINESE SEAMSTRESS (2002) – directed by Dai Sijie. The story revolves around two young Chinese boys sent to a remote village in Sichuan province for re-education during the Cultural Revolution. They both fell in love with the granddaughter of an old tailor, known to everyone as the "Little Seamstress." The film explores themes of youth, love, and freedom during a dark period in China.

STILL LIFE (2002) – directed by Jia Zhangke. This film takes place in a small town on the Yangtze River, slowly being destroyed by the building of the Three Gorges Dam. The story focuses on two people, a man and a woman, in search of their spouses.

CURSE OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER (2006) – directed by Zhang Yimou. A Chinese epic drama set during the Tang dynasty.

LOST IN BEIJING (2007) – directed by Li Yu. This story of prostitution, blackmail, and rape in modern-day Beijing has faced many censorship problems.

LUST, CAUTION (2007) – directed by Ang Lee. Set mostly in Hong Kong in 1938, and in Shanghai in 1942, this film depicts a group of university students who plot to assassinate a high-ranking special agent using an attractive young woman to lure him into a trap.

LAST TRAIN HOME (2009) – directed by Lixin Fan. This emotionally-charged documentary focuses on one family of migrant workers, providing deep insights into the human cost of China's ascendency to an economic superpower.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

Questions 1-8 will be discussed and considered throughout the course; questions 9-12 will be considered nearer the end of the course.

1. What is the role of government censorship of film in mainland China today?
2. Is it possible for western audiences to make sense of and understand Chinese films without a strong historical and political framework?
3. How are filmmakers in China today responding to the growing capitalism of their nation? How do they reconcile Communism and capitalism?
4. What responsibility do Chinese filmmakers have to accurately portray their nation's history?
5. What is the responsibility of Chinese filmmakers to affect change in China's human rights challenges today?
6. What is *our* responsibility toward Chinese films? Can they help us better understand a culture so different from our own?
7. How do Chinese films compare to western films you have seen?
8. What is lost in translation when watching a Chinese film and relying so heavily on subtitles?
9. What have these films, along with course readings and class discussions, revealed to you about the history, culture, and people of China?
10. How have the filmmakers used imagery in these films to convey meaning?
11. What have you learned about China? Do you want to learn more?
12. Do you know of resources that can help you expand your knowledge of China?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

These questions may be used to prompt discussion and/or low-stakes writing assignments following each film. Brief biographies of the director, screenwriter, and lead cast members will be provided via a list of web resources—which also will include historic photos, videos, audio, reviews, and so forth—prior to the film’s showing.

1. What is your initial reaction to the film? How does it speak to you directly?
2. Which character (or characters) did you identify with? Why?
3. Which parts of the film engaged you? Were there scenes that didn’t engage you? Why or why not?
4. Would you describe the main female character as strong? Why or why not?
5. Describe the relationship of the main female character to the male characters in the film. How do these relationships change or evolve during the film?
6. Describe the relationship of the main female character to the other female characters in the film. How do these relationships change or evolve during the film?
7. How does the time period in which the film is set affect the characters and their choices?
8. How does the geographical setting shape the characters and the story? How would these change if the story took place in a different locale?
9. What symbols are used in the film and what do they represent?

“Portrayals of Women in Chinese Cinema”

Comparative Essay Assignment

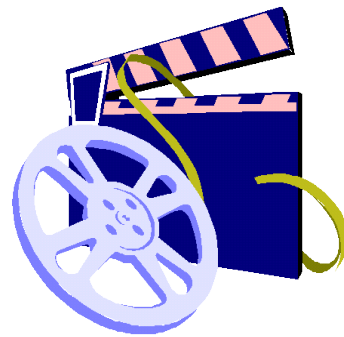
In your comparative essay, you will compare one of the films shown in class with another *film of your choice*—which may or may not be a Chinese film. Your essay should be 1500-1700 words (around 5-6 pages). It should be typed, double-spaced, on standard white paper, with reasonable margins, and in a font such as Times New Roman, Garamond or Courier. A minimum of **four** scholarly sources should be referenced in your essay as well as listed in a separate bibliography in MLA format.

Comparative essays usually describe how things are **similar**. While there may be some references to differences, it is important that you keep this aspect of your discussion to a minimum. Otherwise, your paper will become a “compare and contrast” essay.

Your comparative essay should follow the basic paper structure as other academic writing assignments. Begin with an introductory paragraph that tells the reader about your topic and includes your *thesis statement*. In the body of your paper you will support your thesis by discussing the similarities (and perhaps a few differences) between the two films you are discussing. In your conclusion, you will summarize your thoughts, restate your thesis, and perhaps offer a final thought for the reader to ponder.

It is not necessary to compare each and every element of both films in your paper. Your thesis statement will help you determine the focus of your essay. You might choose to focus on specific characters, for example, or one or more themes that are prevalent in both works.

You will present your paper to the class, and respond to questions from your peers. Creating a PowerPoint to accompany the presentation of your paper is optional, but strongly recommended.



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