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Chinese Revolutionary Cinema: Propaganda, Aesthetics and Internationalism, 1949–1966, by Jessica Ka Yee Chan. I.B. Tauris, 2019, 288 pp.

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In *Chinese Revolutionary Cinema: Propaganda, Aesthetics and Internationalism*, Jessica Ka Yee Chan brings new research and fresh insight to bear on the Seventeen Years, a period still understudied in Anglophone scholarship. Foregrounding the unique processes by which filmmakers of the early People's Republic of China (PRC) produced works that gave expression to revolutionary values, Chan gets to the heart of what makes the period so singular. At the same time, her analysis puts to rest the notion that the Red Films were produced in a context of national isolation. In this, Chan continues the work of scholars like Zhuoyi Wang, Qi Xiaoping, Cai Xiang, Ban Wang and Krista Van Fleit Hang, who have likewise sought to produce a more nuanced portrait of the transnational flows that informed these unique films.

Ultimately Chan's book provides a potent corrective to the historical tendency in Western scholarship to essentialise the period's output as propaganda—a tendency that has largely failed to grow our understanding of the films themselves, or of socialist culture. *Chinese Revolutionary Cinema* refuses to take propaganda as a form for granted, carefully outlining each turn in the new state's quest to create film art that would celebrate and inspire Maoist values. Chan's loose narrative of this process involves not only officials, but writers, playwrights, screenwriters and film theorists of the period, all of whose voices emerge clearly from primary sources (such as speeches, op-eds and polemics). In concert, these voices evoke a particular configuration of literary imaginaries, political policies and aspirations, and existing production practices and resources, which coloured filmmaking during these critical years.

Each of the five chapters serves to further broaden and complicate the various international forces that affected film production in the early years of the PRC. Particular attention is paid to the Soviet and Hollywood paradigms. Chapter One, "Propaganda and Film Aesthetics", doubles as a compact history of the Seventeen Years as a whole, with subheadings for the 1951–1952 Rectification Campaign, the First Five Year Plan, the Hundred Flowers Campaign, the Great Leap Forward and, finally, "Blooming and Contending". This latter section cannily treats 1961 and 1962 and the relaxing of cultural policy and rhetoric during those years. Weihong Bao's injunction, from "A Vibrating Art in the Air" to always consider propaganda and the "radical promise of cinema" as dialectically formed and engaged (rather than as binary) is invoked early on and well-taken throughout (187). The chapter does, however, investigate the concrete problems posed by the

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transition away from the market-responsive model that had characterised the Shanghai film industry prior to 1949; with the uncoupling of film production from consumer demand (even at the level of access to data regarding ticket sales), there was the danger that the public would lose interest in cinema altogether, and bureaucrats occasionally courted such a fate.

Chapter Two, "Literature on Screen: Recasting Classical Hollywood Narration in Family Melodrama", tracks official filmmaking's implicit dialogue with the global industrial hegemon. Here Chan's focus on Xia Yan and his speech, *A Few Questions about Screenwriting* (*Xie dianying juben de jige wenti*), provides a much-needed counterpoint to summary histories that elide the importance of the screenplay as a critical and contested form of *wenyi* (letters and arts). This discussion takes Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh's work as a starting point, noting how Chinese writers of the 1920s had sought to give the screenplay its due as a literary form, and how this, in turn, informed efforts to legitimate the cinema as a form. Even more interesting is Chan's reading of Xia Yan's overall project:

> Xia Yan […] drew from the Chinese literary tradition to establish screenwriting as an art. His theory reimagined Chinese literary conventions to accommodate classical Hollywood narration. At the same time, classical Hollywood narration was recast and explained in Chinese literary terms. The reinstatement of Chinese literary conventions allowed Xia Yan to identify those conventions with classical Hollywood narrative techniques in order to maintain the clarity and comprehensibility of narrative film for a rural mass audience. (57)

The chapter then turns to a study of Xia's screenwriting, beginning with a close reading of the structure of *Spring Silkworms* (Cheng Bugao, 1933) and its story's orientation to contemporary Hollywood screenwriting norms. In the film, the protagonist's family faces the growing scarcity of mulberry leaves and silk factory closures as a consequence of Japanese invasion. Xia Yan builds these challenges into the script as dramatic deadlines that drive the plot and ramp up pathos in a manner typical of Hollywood narration (59). Scholars of modern Chinese literature may value Chan's subheading on May Fourth Critical Realism's place in the process of broad, programmatic efforts to legitimate the cinema (structured around Lu Xun's *New Year's Sacrifice* and its adaptation, first to Shaoxing Opera [*yueju*] and subsequently into the 1956 film of the same name):

> One of the most distinctive features of Lu Xun's critical realism was his use of ironic and ambivalent narrators to highlight the limits of realism in mediating social reality […] the equivocal position of Lu Xun's ineffectual narrator-bystander [in *The New Year's Sacrifice*] throws into doubt the possibility of sympathy on the part of storytellers, listeners and readers. At stake are the usefulness of storytelling and literature in mediating social reality. (66–67)

As the chapter moves on, it broadens into a penetrating history of the process by which the existing tenets of the family melodrama as a genre were extrapolated into a revolutionary form (the creation of the party-as-family trope). After *The New Year's Sacrifice* (Hu Sang, 1956), *Revolutionary Family* (Shui Hua, 1961) and *This Life of Mine* (Shi Hui, 1950) are the key case studies here. Chan makes the perceptive observation that, in accordance with Mao's own ideas about the function of art in a communist society, as set forth in his 1942 address at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, it was precisely the narrative clarity and emphasis on complete resolution (what Chan

characterises as "rhetoricity and positivity") of Hollywood screenplays that was adopted as the solution to the problem of ambiguity and irony in Lu Xun's fiction (70). The predetermined certainty and emphasis on resolution of the Hollywood scenario was retooled for quite different political ends; if its purpose was distinct, however, the technique was recognisable, and neatly replaced the ambivalence that pervaded the very strain of May Fourth Critical Realism effectively canonised by Mao in 1942 (70–1).

Chapter Three examines the complex appropriation of Soviet montage theory (one subheading characterises this appropriation as "reinventing" montage):

> The second step by which Chinese film-makers and cultural authorities reinvented montage was to redefine the term's scope to encompass *all* film editing methods, thus returning to the original meaning of the French word. This discursive move gave Chinese film-makers the freedom to creatively manoeuvre between Hollywood continuity editing and Soviet montage without explicitly endorsing or wholly adopting either. (100)

This chapter also provides a detailed treatment of the way a particular image of characters "gazing" into the distance came to be formulated in relation to Soviet montage—setting up the subsequent and more thorough treatment of the centrality of this gaze to an aesthetic of socialist glamour in China: "The relay of gazes in *Sea Hawk* (1959) points to an off-screen space with a defined diegetic object, presenting the hero and the national flag as the heroine's (and the ideal audience's) twinned objects of desire" (115). In this Chan builds on Stephanie Hemelryk Donald's work on the "socialist realist gaze". Other films used as case studies in this section include *Zhao Yiman* (1950) and, for comparison, Pudovkin's *Storm Over Asia* (1928).

By exploring the precise conditions and programmatic logics that produced this aesthetic, Chapter Four provides a valuable discussion of the socialist star and the particular systems of iconography they gave rise to. This history charts the entrance of Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* into Chinese film production culture. A close attention to (and astute translations of) Chinese terminology from primary sources across the text is invaluable, and here Chan's sensitivity to nuance again pays dividends:

> New socialist terms were coined that redefined the relationship between different cultural constituencies […]. The term "film worker" obliterated existing hierarchies in the film industry and put actors on the same social planes as other workers, as socialist subjects are all workers of various kinds. Importantly, the adoption of the label "film worker", rather than "star", abandoned the privileging of physical beauty, sex appeal, individual fame and materialism usually associated with the Hollywood star system. (129)

Subsequent discussion continues to illuminate the particularities of Chinese socialist glamour, and what was particular about it, via the unique position of the actor in 1950s and 60s China:

> In socialist actors' reminiscences of their acting careers, many described acting as a soulful process, in which actors gave birth to a new spirit with a new identity. The new spirit represented a new socialist subjectivity: film-making and film-viewing were constructed as ideological and aesthetic experiences that moulded actors and spectators alike in new

> socialist subjects. […] In socialist China, acting was constructed as an ideologically and socially transformative process in which actors cultivated both acting skills and socialist values. Accordingly, Stanislavski's system was appropriated as an ethical system of acting, as reflected in the Chinese title "An Actor's Self-Cultivation" (*Yanyuan ziwo xiuyang*). (133–4)

Chan's discussion of Chinese socialist glamour also includes helpful contextualisation of the 1962 socialist star craze (and Chinese socialist star culture in general), drawing on Dong Yang and Michael Chang's work on star discourse in Republican Shanghai cinema.

> Unlike Hollywood star discourse, which is premised on the logic of secrecy and enigma that surrounds an actor's private life (including scandals), socialist star discourse performed an ethical and ideological function in the PRC. […] The cinematic and iconic gazes of heroes and heroines were constructed as the locus of glamour, through which spectators gained access to actors' interiority and therefore to socialist truth. (120)

The fifth and final chapter addresses Chinese and Soviet film journals, situating socialist film culture as part of a broader international phenomenon of the period. Chan finds the socialist nations of the world more outward-looking than generally held, with the exchanges facilitated by film festivals and journals throughout the 1950s and 60s demonstrating this. Moving from Hollywood and Soviet influences to the complex international form of the film journal, this chapter plumbs for insights as to the particular orientation of Chinese cinema to world cinema during the Seventeen Years (as well as for clues into how it understood itself to be positioned).

There are a series of subheadings here describing three important Chinese film journals of the period for reference (*Film Art Translations* [*Dianying yishu yicong*]; *International Cinema*; and *Chinese Cinema* [*Yiwen/Shijie Wenxue*]) (159–61). The chapter also includes a fascinating contextualisation of Chinese film culture into Post-Bandung Afro-Asian-Latin American Solidarity, as well as the (brief) history of the Afro-Asian Film Festival:

> The first Afro-Asian Film Festival accordingly took place in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 1958, followed in 1960 by a second festival held in Cairo. One of the main activities of both festivals was to preview films from various participating countries. The "social imaginary" represented in Chinese film journals, as Tina Mai Chen calls it, was explicitly anti-colonial and anti-imperialist. For example, an article in *International Cinema* featuring the Afro-Asian Film Festival described film festivals as an opportunity for participating countries to learn from the editing, performance, music, and photography of exhibited film, and praised the way "[p]eople in Asia and Africa are marching ahead in the struggle against colonialism and imperialism". (164)

In its closing, *Chinese Revolutionary Cinema* outlines the ideological currents that caused the films of the Seventeen Years to be abruptly subsumed into the Four Olds, labelled "poisonous weeds" and critiqued in thousands of editorials across China (174–5). Chan also provides brief but suggestive notes on the transition, after the almost complete cessation of film production during the Cultural Revolution, to a decidedly unrevolutionary and post-socialist aesthetic (specifically referenced are Chen Kaige and Jia Zhangke, and many others will occur to the reader). In the post-

socialist mode, Chan notes the sudden and conspicuous absence of the revolutionary hero, the formulation of whom had been one of the central preoccupations of the Seventeen Years (175–7).

Overall, Chan's unique history provides something more than an overview of an understudied period; by examining propaganda as a complex mode that necessitated the comingling of writers, artists, performers, bureaucrats and capital, rather than a top-down process by which a mandate produced art, she is able to contribute to a broader understanding of film production under socialism. *Chinese Revolutionary Cinemas* will be of interest to scholars of East Asian Cinema, Chinese Studies, as well as those with an interest in the history of socialist culture.

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