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Issues and Debates

Crossing the threshold: Chinese cinema studies in the twenty-first century

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Abstract

This article proposes three trajectories for future studies on Chinese cinema. It argues, first, for an inclusive, cosmopolitan and comparative approach that critically interrogates the alleged 'Chineseness' of Chinese cinema. Second, in the context of a current bias towards art cinema, it argues to study the more popular, vernacular kind of Chinese cinemas. Third, it proposes a broader framework of analysis, one that includes the production of the cinematic text as well as its reception. It is argued that the 'Chineseness' of Chinese cinema is not just located in the text or its auteur, but also in its cinematic production and reception.

Keywords

Chineseness
 cosmopolitanism
 cultural production
 reception
 vernacular cinema

'Es gibt menschen die sagen "weniger ist mehr", ist doch quatsch, mehr ist mehr!'¹

Georgette Dee

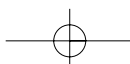
'The threshold is the knot separating two enemy worlds [...] to cross a threshold is to traverse a zone of danger where invisible but real battles are fought out.'

Marcel Griaule, *Dokuments 2*, 1930²

Questioning the future

In a time of intense globalization, when national, ethnic and religious cultures are simultaneously under siege as well as vigorously reinvented, it seems odd to launch a *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*. If, as Rey Chow (1998a: 9) reminds us, the task of contemporary cultural studies is of 'bringing the entire notion of "culture" into crisis', then how can we justify the use of the epithet 'Chinese' in the journal's title? This is the first question I would like to engage with in this essay. Second, what, if we look at the past of the discipline of 'Chinese cinema studies', are the blind spots of analysis? What future trajectories of analysis seem appropriate, what types of studies are needed, especially in the context of current technological developments? I am aware that these are rather presumptuous questions, particularly given my own disciplinary background, which is *not* in film studies. I am working in popular music studies, and its bigger brother, cultural studies, but had my Ph.D. training in sociology and anthropology, disciplines that, particularly in the Netherlands, privilege the empirical above the theoretical, as well as the contextual above the textual. It may hence not come as a

1. 'There are people who claim less is more, utterly nonsense, more is more!' Taken from her CD *Live im Schiller Theater*, 1992.
2. Taken from the brochure belonging to the art exhibition "Undercover Surrealism: Picasso, Miro, Masson and the vision of Georges Bataille", 11 May – 30 July 2006, Hayward Gallery, London, UK.



surprise that I will argue for more interdisciplinary cross-fertilization, in order to reclaim both the empirical as well as the contextual in the field of Chinese cinema studies.

Whose Chineseness?

To speak of Chinese cinema seems only possible if we insist on reading 'Chinese' as constantly put in between quotation marks in order to resist any possible reification and instead liberate 'Chineseness' into a contradictory array of practices, experiences and pasts. This quest for interrogating cultural epithets reminds me of the editorial to the inaugural issue of the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, titled 'Problematizing "Asia"'. There, the editors claimed that 'there is a need to question and critique the rhetorical unities of both the "rise" and of "Asia"' (Chen and Chua 2000: 5). It seems appropriate to ask the reader to embark on a similar project for the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* – and the plural form used for cinema in the journals' title already hints at this. It is not my intention to repeat theoretical arguments on the dangers of any possible reification of culture (Ang 2001; Baumann 1999; Benhabib 2002; Chow 1998a, 1998b; Chun 1996 Lim 2006a). I think it suffices to observe that particularly in a time when 'the rise of China' is very much *en vogue* in popular discourse, when the Chinese authorities opt for nationalism rather than communism as the ideological glue of society, it becomes all the more urgent to be suspicious of any possible articulation of Chineseness.

However, rather than debunking the notion of Chineseness altogether – which seems like a senseless ontological enterprise anyway given its current popularity – the challenge lies, I believe, in unpacking its multiple and often contradictory articulations, to open up a whole domain of possible Chinesenesses as it were. It is important, then, to try to be as inclusive as possible, and develop a keen eye on intercultural movements of Chinese cinemas, and, indeed, insist on its plurality. The diasporic cinema within and outside Asia should undoubtedly be included (e.g. Ang Lee, John Woo), but also 'western' appropriations of 'Chinese' cinema, including *The Matrix* trilogy by the Wachowski brothers and Tarantino's *Kill Bill*. Studies that, for example, unfold and scrutinize the Chineseness of *Brokeback Mountain* may inspire new theorizations on cultural proximity and intercultural communication, just as an analysis of the 'Chinese' elements in the oeuvre of Oliver Stone may do so.

I consequently argue for a cosmopolitan sensitivity in the emerging discipline of Chinese film studies, a quest for a deterritorializing mode of analysis that liberates rather than confines the Chineseness of 'Chinese' cinemas. In employing the idea(l) of cosmopolitanism, I am inspired by the writings of Beck (2002). In his plea for what he coins a methodological cosmopolitanism, he writes: 'Methodological nationalism is about the future implications of a nationally shared past, an imagined past; while methodological cosmopolitanism is about the present implications of a globally shared future, an imagined future' (Beck 2002: 27). In Beck's view, the current implosion of the dichotomy between national and international turns us necessarily into cosmopolitan citizens, due to the irretrievable processes of globalization. However, Beck does not as much criticize the nation state as such, or for the same token the idea of

Chineseness, but he argues for its rethinking. In his view (Beck 2002: 26), 'a cosmopolitan social theory and social science ask about the complicated accommodations, alliances and creative contradictions between the nation-state [or, indeed, 'Chineseness'] and mobile capital, between the hidden cosmopolitanization of nation-state societies and national identities and institutions, between cosmopolitanism and nationalism'.

Future trajectories

My first proposition for the future studies of Chinese cinema thus calls for a cosmopolitan take, one that advocates, or better, necessitates, an inclusive and comparative approach, while at the same time is highly sensitive to the subtle differences within that univocal term 'Chinese', an approach that searches for the possibilities of hyphenation, if not pollution of Chineseness. The comparative approach is not without its dangers. In her most recent book, Rey Chow points at the politics involved in comparative research, and observes an 'asymmetrical distribution of cultural capital and intellectual labor so that cultures of Europe [...] tend to be studied with meticulousness while cultures on the margins of Europe [...] may simply be considered examples of the same geographical areas' (Chow 2006: 77). I would argue for an overcoming of these global cultural imbalances by insisting on a comparative approach *within* the fragmented domain of Chinese film studies. In her reflections on area studies, Chow argues that its 'apparently monolingual, monocultural, or mononational investigations [...] should be understood as full-fledged comparative projects, their precarious and enigmatic enunciations bearing testimony to an interlingual, intercultural, and international historicity that exposes the positivistic limits of the (Western) human sciences' (Chow 2006: 85). Studies of 'Chinese' cinema are, indeed, 'full-fledged comparative projects'. These comparisons may be either temporal or spatial but they do not have to be, as the cosmopolitan can also be traced within a singular text.

Second, when looking at past studies of Chinese cinema I cannot help but observe a bias towards the cultural, the artistic and the auteur, that is, a bias towards the type of cinema that travels so well globally. One can readily locate studies of the work of Zhang Yimou (Chow 1995), Clara Law (Yue 2004), Chen Kaige (McDougall 1991), Tsai Ming-liang (Lim 2006b, chapter 5), Wong Kar-wai (Chow 1999) and Fruit Chan (Cheung 2004), to name but a few. What remains more obscure are the more popular forms of Chinese cinema: the comedies of Stephen Chow, for example, cop movies like the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy, the New Year releases of Feng Xiaogang as well as animation series like Toe Yuen's *McDull*, not to mention a host of other even less known productions which would never be screened outside their local confines.

There are quite a few exceptions that counter this observation, mostly studies that focus on the presumably Chinese genre of martial arts film. For example the edited volume from Meaghan Morris et al., titled *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* that, resonating with my first point, takes a decisively cosmopolitan approach (Morris et al. 2005), as well as studies on Asian Hollywood star Jackie Chan (Fore 1997) and the work of John Woo (Williams 1997), among other studies on martial art cinema (Hunt 2003; Lo 2005; Pang and Wong 2005;

Prashad 2003; Shu 2003). However, though by no means absent, studies on the truly *popular* Chinese cinema are relatively scarce when compared to studies on art-house cinema. It is hence important to include the most popular forms of Chinese cinema, paradoxically because these are the films that attract many audiences and so few film scholars. These texts may open up alternative readings of what constitutes Chinese cinema. They may well be considered the vernacular of Chinese cinema (Hansen 1999), and ultimately compel us to rethink the film studies that 'do' Chinese cinema. Such analyses, I must add, ought to remain sensitive to the danger on the other end, namely that of celebrating the banal – the pitfall of quite some cultural studies' scholarly work (see Morris 1988).

My third and more elaborate point proposes a move away from the textual to the contextual. The field of cinema studies shows a bias towards the textual. Given its disciplinary past – most film studies departments are part of the humanities – this comes as no surprise. However valuable a lucid textual analysis may be, it tends to ignore both the production process of movies – like its underpinning political economy of, for example, production conglomerates and movie festivals – as well as the moment of reception. Moreover, film scholars tend to be dismissive if not ignorant about technological developments, when these in fact strongly impact upon the ways audiences use movies in their everyday lives.

Let me cite a brief example to illustrate how 'Chinese' viewing habits may have a bearing on how we study Chinese cinema. Despite the time I have spent in mainland China, my Chinese friends never asked me to join them to go to the cinema. Instead, they would invite me home to watch DVDs. These evenings of watching DVDs together were as much, or probably even more, a performance of one's economic capital than of one's cultural capital. Big-screen plasma TVs were linked to advanced Dolby surround sound systems. Piles of pirated DVDs provided ample choice, ranging from the latest Hollywood blockbuster to, though quite rarely, Chinese art-house cinema. Their very eclectic consumption pattern is indicative of the upcoming middle classes of China, which signals above all a strong desire to become part of Planet Hollywood. Watching DVDs also entails several technological possibilities denied to cinema projection, such as viewing by chapters not necessarily according to the chronology intended by the director, freezing, slow motioning or fast forwarding chosen images or fragments, or being exposed to a variety of extra-filmic information (interview with the director, production documentary, etc.). When analysing cinema, it is crucial to take these different (technologized) contexts of reception into serious consideration and include them in our scholarly work.

Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is a tribute to cinema, or more precisely, to movie-going. The movie is drenched in a bitter nostalgia for a time when the cinemas were full and audiences could indulge in the collective intimacy of watching a movie together. In one long shot the camera looks into the theatre, filled with empty chairs. One can lament this situation, as Tsai Ming-liang does. Shortly after the shooting of the movie, the Fu-Ho theatre where Tsai's film is set indeed closed down. This may at first sight seem a bizarre twist of fate, when life starts imitating art, further strengthening the assumed irrevocability of the decline of movie-going. Instead, it is more a case of art trying to resuscitate life, since Tsai Ming-liang deliberately

secured the location to shoot the movie with the knowledge that it was going to be demolished. But one can also hold higher hopes, and believe that new multiplex theatres can change the tide. One can ignore these changes, and insist on the power of the cinematic text itself (justifying it to be the only object worthy of study). Or, and this is the direction I think film studies should take, one can try to grasp the changes taking place, analyse them, and try to gauge their impact on the cinematic experience of the twenty-first century. This would require a broader framework of analysis, one that tries to situate the text in its context. It requests a more elaborate theoretical framework, including, for example, not only Gilles Deleuze and Rey Chow but also Pierre Bourdieu and Bruno Latour; it also demands a more encompassing array of methodological tools, combining, for example, ethnography with semiotics. It would require, above all, an attempt to bridge the disciplinary gap between the humanities and the social sciences.

Watching a DVD with a group of friends is fundamentally different from going to the cinema, which makes it all the more remarkable that film studies pays only scant attention to these changes in reception.³ Watching DVDs with friends can be read as a negotiation of a class-related Chinese cultural identity. In the future, further convergence between computer, television and cinema – and China may well be an early adaptor here – will have a profound impact on the way we do film studies. To insist on purely textual analyses of cinema will prove increasingly inadequate, while the context of reception will gain importance. This is not to argue against textual analysis, but instead, current studies need to be complemented by studies of, first, the political economy that produces the text (see Stringer 2003 and Wasko 1994, 2003). For example, film festivals seem to play an increasingly important role in promoting certain directors while ignoring others (De Valck 2006). How does Chinese cinema operate in this global market of art cinema, which mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, which rituals of sacralization produce which types of Chinese cinema?

Second, different modes of reception call for in-depth audience studies. The field of film audience studies is growing steadily over the past decade (see Austin 2002; Gripsrud 1998; Jancovich et al. 2003 and Staiger 2000), but further crossover with television studies, a field with a much longer history in audience research, remains important to develop sound methodological tools (Meers 2006). More ethnographic research will provide further insights in the context in which Chinese cinema is consumed, how it is ingrained in the practices of everyday life. The 'Chineseness' of Chinese cinema is not just located in the text or its auteur, but also in both cinematic production and reception.

To conclude

At a time when cultural epithets like 'Chinese' are increasingly put under threat, if not erasure, a time also when the cinematic experience is profoundly challenged and disrupted, the launch of a *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* may sound like a last cry for help. Having the honour of being part of its editorial board, it may come as no surprise that I would argue exactly the opposite. Chineseness may have been deconstructed in the academia, but we happen to be living in a time when Chineseness sells, both inside and outside China. Rather than deconstructing Chineseness, it

3. The availability of, first, VCR and now DVD also changes the possibilities of analysis, as Thomas Elsaesser explained in his keynote lecture at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in London, April 2005. Whereas in the early cinophile days of film studies an analysis would generally be based on the cinema experience, the video and DVD facilitates multiple viewings of films, potentially distancing the analysis from the actual viewing experience.

may turn out to be more valuable to insist on its plurality – hence the importance to speak of Chinese cinemas. This requires, as I have argued in this essay, a cosmopolitan take on Chinese cinema, a take that is sensitive to both time and place, and that insists on a comparative approach so as to interrogate and subvert the univocality of Chineseness so often assumed in popular (and unfortunately so, also academic) discourse.

Studies of Chinese cinema should not only try to include film adaptations and appropriations outside the ‘Chinese’ realm (such as *The Matrix*), but also to include the most popular, the types of cinema that do not make it to festivals, that do not receive critical acclaim yet attract large audiences. Popular cinema deserves an equal space beside the art-house cinema that now dominates Chinese cinema studies. Echoing Mao Zedong’s hundred flowers appeal, my plea is, simply, for *more* studies: more studies that examines how the festival circuit makes and breaks names; how producers market a movie, and may thereby limit its potential polysemy; how animations present an alternative to Disney; more studies, also, that contemplate on the cultural particularities of the reception of movies, that try to theorize on the uses of cinema by audiences in the formation of their identity in everyday life. How does the DVD mode of reception articulate Chineseness, and what does this tell us about the cinematic experience of the twenty-first century, and its potential futures? I argue, in short, for more intellectual curiosity and less academic disciplinarity.

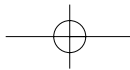
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