


BOOK REVIEW

Imagined China: Research on Chinese Films in the 1980s

By Wang Haizhou. Trans by Jin Haina. Abingdon: Routledge. 246 pages.
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Chen Xuan Gao¹, Yu Xiao¹  and Guangjian Yan²

¹School of Media and Communication, Taylor's University, Subang Jaya, Malaysia and ²School of Fine Arts, Anqing Normal University, Anqing, China

Corresponding author: Yu Xiao; Email: amberxiao1010@163.com

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In the past, interesting books have discussed the influence of politics in Chinese Cinema such as Clark (1987), Pang (2002), Dai (2002), and Zhu and Rosen (2010), to name a few. These books shed light on the pre-communist political arena or the communist revolution and its effects in modern Chinese cinema. However, these works overlooked political changes during the 1980s. Wang Haizhou's *Imagined China: Research on Chinese Films in the 1980s*, fills the gap by focusing mainly on this chaotic moment in the country's history. Just after the Cultural Revolution, which took place in the period 1966–1976, the country experienced a set of radical shifts under the “Reform and Opening-up Policies.” The book, which is formed by five chapters dealing with different stages of China's modernization, looks to expand the current understanding of how these turbulent times are reflected in the Chinese movie industry.

These events of the 1980s, overviewed in the book's introduction, included transformations in the fields of literature, music, arts, and even the film industry. This book brings out the significance of the 80s through the study of film narratives. During this time, the film industry was motivated to reconstruct the image of China to confront further Western (essentialized) narratives imposed by the US and Europe (just after Mao's death).

Cinema represents a social activity that reflects and changes social reality. The author, here, coins the term political subconscious to denote the rise of clues hidden by spiritual trajectories that silently impact politics. The unspeakable trajectories actively gravitate in the social imaginary while shaping how citizens ultimately feel the sense of reality. Methodologically speaking, movies build a bridge between mirror-media images (which means that movies are the representations of what people think and feel) and the political space. Deciphering movies seems to be a fruitful ground for understanding Chinese society during the period.

The first chapter examines the conceptual preconditions of what Wang Haizhou dubbed “China's image.” Although the real China exists, no less true seems to be its image, which has varied over time. Subject to different managerial strategies, this image has constantly narrativized through the hegemony of audiovisual language. In fact, the Communist Party of China (CPC) devoted considerable efforts and time facing serious challenges after Mao's death. During Mao's Regime, thousands of Chinese political dissidents and protesters were imprisoned under allegations of different charges. The challenges were solving the significant problems left in the wake of the Cultural Revolution without harming Mao's image. What is more important, the CPC was subject to the trial of the century because new leaders blamed former power-holders. CPC party envisaged in the film industry a perfect mechanism for citizens to internalize and accept the political changes the country was facing. The movie industry offered a temporal (if not patchy) cure for re-experiencing the traumatic past left by

the Cultural Revolution. Films, at best, organize powerful narratives to prevent the same disaster happens again. Haizhou goes on to write:

“To enable the smooth implementation of Reform and Opening Up, it was necessary to organize the memory of the Cultural Revolution for all people and to make them reach a high degree of consensus on memories of suffering during the period. This task presented a challenge to the art world, especially the film industry, to explore how to reproduce the suffering experienced during the Cultural Revolution in narrative form. This task was not easy and led to disputes” (p. 17).

It is not difficult to resist the impression that the movie industry’s goals were twofold. On one hand, it needed to re-educate people to fully comprehend what happened while offering a type of historical lesson. On another, it paved the way for the rise of a new Communist party aligned with new policies for the decades to come. Here is where the paradox lies; the screen metaphorically transforms victims of the Cultural Revolution into critical viewers while protecting the essence (nature) of the Communist Party. To put the same simply, the industry sublimates citizens’ pain (headed now by intellectual circles) into a much deeper form of cultural entertainment. In this way, the future transforms pain into happiness.

The second chapter revolves around the role played by the movie industry to placate the political turmoil generated by the Cultural Revolution damages. The industry not only catalyzed a radical transformation of the country’s image but also operated in a grim landscape mainly marked by the need to adapt China to the global market economy without ignoring the benefits of a planned economy. In this chapter, Haizhou reminds us how the problem of openness to Western economies should not contradict what people expect from authorities. The film industry fostered a set of campaigns to refurbish (clean) China’s image incorporating Westernized modern ideals while showing the audience that the administrative team (in CPC) was elementarily honest and frugal. Supported by the technological breakthrough, which allowed thousands of Chinese citizens to travel to the US and Europe, film-makers elicit a caustic critique of the current Chinese lifestyles engulfed in a pre-capitalist economy. As a mirror image, these new travelers carved out the need for urgent modernization in China. In this context, the film industry –in this new era- coped with past people’s suffering while boosting a new narrative based on rehabilitation (recovery) that amalgamated contrasting ideals. The industry starts a stark campaign oriented to imagine a future where the Western dreams of the 80s are palpable true for Chinese people avoiding material opulence. In sum, whereas film-makers debated hotly the need for economic prosperity they eulogize the political mainstream values of the CPC. Travels and digital communication occupied a central position during this facet. Exegetes of modernism supported the axiom that the scientific and effective use of time increases economic returns (profits) accelerating the pace of various transformations, so to speak, in the zenith of a real modernization process. This happened because authorities – once its doors had been opened – realized that China was lagging behind other neighboring countries such as the Four Asian Tigers. It is safe to say that the figure of Hong Kong rivaled directly with the rise of a new China. Beyond any discrepancy, China should at least leave behind its feudal past. Movies, which are made in this era, valorized the introduction of machines to transform environments, as well as the figure of sacrifice to get a better future. As the author eloquently notes, the linear mode of thinking in Chinese society behooves us to believe that the concept of tomorrow permeates the cultural imaginary. In the days of modern China, lay people toyed with the belief that divorcing from their feudal heritage would lead them to a new world where reasoning defeated irrational superstition. In other terms, reasoning crystalizes the human ability to conquer (administer) nature.

The third chapter, which is entitled “Reshaping China,” offers a ludic reading of the national authorities who moved to re-create a new (refurbished) image of China. The reform and Opening-up era witnessed how political parties, government leaders, literary arts, and art critics could potentiate representative features of the period. Official authorities invited filmmakers to recreate the conditions towards a new moral character based on solidarity, vibrant economic growth, and

political tolerance. What is more important, this period set the pace for the introduction of different individual freedoms following the eradication of political corruption. Restoring the power of law, associated with the modernization of the individual was the stepping stone of the 80s decade in China. Sooner than later, the Westernized ideals have been left behind while national authorities preferred the ways of pragmatism. Most plausibly, authorities feared the radical shifts Western cultures offered for China; some of them even threatened the survival of the Party. The reform was only desired if necessary.

The fourth chapter is strictly reserved for discussing critically the effects of modernization in intellectual circles. Tellingly, the loyalty of intellectuals to the party was always in question. Under the auspices of the CPC, intellectuals have been historically labeled as “an original sin” which should be re-educated (if not corrected). It is not otiose to say they were often subject to different disciplinary attempts of domestication. However, in Post-revolution China, intellectuals have been revered as “the springs of science” (p. 161). The CPC, widely legitimated by the movie industry, focused on the axiom that knowledge is power, and power is emancipation. This emancipation was not seen as a selfish behavior; rather it contributed to the formation of a strong middle class working for China’s future. At the time, anyway, scholars dwelled in their ivory towers fulfilling their own expectations and theories, as a new leadership class. Their contrasting images oscillated between altruistic persons who do everything without repayment and theorists who work on the back of society.

In the last chapter, Wang argues convincingly that the “Reform and Opening-up Policies” gradually came across with a radical contradiction, Western democracy. Originally, the introduction of literature, film, and arts legitimated the interests of the CPC, but at the time, it advocated for free choice. This sparked a hot debate in cultural spheres. While films played a crucial role in affirming traditional Chinese characters, they opened long-dormant discussions around the repressed political contradictions. Part of these contradictions was traversed by the idea that simple minds – living simple lives – may be tempted by a dark sentiment of individual desire that corrupts society. With the benefits of hindsight, China adopted global trade externally while imposing unilaterally some political restrictions on their citizens.

For these reviewers, this book is situated as an interesting piece that discusses not only the contradictions of CPC and Chinese politics but also the notable influence of the film industry in the reconstruction of China’s image.

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