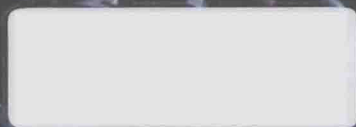




CHINA GUIDE

# A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CHINESE CINEMA 2002-2012

Raymond Zhou



CHINA INTERCONTINENTAL PRESS



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Introduction 1

## Chapter One: Filmmakers 11

|   |    |
|---|----|
| The Power Game.....                                   | 12 |
| ZHANG YIMOU: Finding Common Ground with Spielberg ... | 18 |
| JIANG WEN: The Maverick Filmmaker .....               | 22 |
| FENG XIAOGANG: The Money Maker.....                   | 28 |
| WUERSHAN: The Visual Stylist .....                    | 36 |
| ANG LEE: A Pinch of Tao, a Dash of Zen .....          | 40 |
| JOHNNIE TO: The Gangster Buster .....                 | 49 |
| WANG CHANGTIAN: The Man Who Bankrolled                |    |
| China's Biggest Movie.....                            | 54 |
| Star Power .....                                      | 65 |

## Chapter Two: Movie Types 69

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| The Triumphant Triumvirate.....                        | 70  |
| A Hong Kong Odyssey .....                              | 75  |
| Cannes and the Chinese Mentality.....                  | 79  |
| Golden Horse Searches for New Positioning.....         | 85  |
| JIA ZHANGKE: Attempt to Recreate a Western Model ..... | 89  |
| Winning Foreign Audiences.....                         | 93  |
| A Comedy About Expats.....                             | 98  |
| The Fourth Dimension .....                             | 102 |
| Microfilms: Short Shrift and Long Odds .....           | 106 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Pictures with Long Legs .....                                 | 111 |
| Chapter Three: Tango With Hollywood 115                       |     |
| Reel Increases .....  | 116 |
| Young Guns Shoot It Out.....                                  | 120 |
| Co-Productions .....  | 126 |
| China's Hollywood strategy and Hollywood's China strategy ... | 136 |
| China's Obsession with the Oscars.....                        | 144 |
| Behind the Oscar Obsession .....                              | 153 |
| ANNA MAY WONG: The Star Who Came Before Her Time .....        | 161 |
| QIN SHAOBO: Acrobat Tumbles Into Hollywood .....              | 166 |
| Chapter Four: The Battles of Egos and Interests 169           |     |
| A Good Producer Is Hard to Find .....                         | 170 |
| Killing with Kindness .....                                   | 176 |
| Cut Down to Size .....  | 180 |
| A Slice of Screen.....  | 184 |
| Muddy Waters .....  | 191 |
| A Raid on Pirates .....                                       | 195 |
| Where Are the Good Scripts?.....                              | 200 |
| Upstairs and Downstairs in Aesthetic Meeting .....            | 203 |
| Chapter Five: Sex and Controversies 207                       |     |
| Sex on Chinese Screens .....                                  | 208 |
| <i>Titanic</i> Re-cut.....                                    | 213 |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| RUBY YANG: Safe-Sex Messenger.....                                 | 220 |
| <i>The Flowers of War</i> : A Bit Too Bright for its Own Good..... | 223 |
| ZHANG ZIYI: The Star in the Eye of Storms .....                    | 228 |
| Chapter Six: Martial Arts and Historical Tidbits                   | 249 |
| The Man Who Was Mao's Hero.....                                    | 250 |
| Steering Swordplay .....   | 254 |
| <i>Confucius</i> Loses His Way .....                               | 265 |
| The Lady Vanishes .....  | 269 |
| From Books to Blockbusters.....                                    | 272 |
| Image Is Everything.....   | 275 |
| Afterword  | 277 |
| Appendices   | 281 |
| Appendix A:  |     |
| 100 Notable Chinese-Language Movies (2002-2012).....               | 282 |
| Appendix B:  |     |
| More Lists for Chinese-Language Film Classics.....                 | 321 |
| Appendix C:  |     |
| Major Film Organizations in China .....                            | 330 |
| Acknowledgments  | 332 |
| Index  | 333 |

## Introduction

To understand where Chinese cinema is today and where it is going, it is helpful to know the dramatic trajectory it has undergone. Over a little more than three decades, Chinese cinema has played out like a typical three-act blockbuster. In 1979 the spurt of re-releases and new offerings in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) pushed ticket sales to 29.31 billion admissions, a historic record that is unlikely to be topped – ever. Fifteen years later, audience attendance plummeted to just one percent of that record and movie theaters were converted to furniture stores, among other uses, as audiences stayed home to watch television or pirated videos. Fast-forward to 2012 and China's market for theatrical exhibition for the first time became the second largest in the world, right behind North America, though paid admissions still hovered below two percent of the 1979 record.

Call it the proverbial phoenix flying from the ashes. The rebound is nothing short of a miracle, but ashes still smear wings of the mythical bird.

Suffice it to say that 1979 was an anomaly because audience demand had been choked off for a decade and new platforms of entertainment, such as television and karaoke, had barely existed. Compare it with the US film industry, which faced a similar crunch in the 1950s with the dawn of television, and bounced back with a vengeance. If you go around China and talk to those who should be movie consumers, you'll find out that several factors have conspired to create a deadly force that is constantly bludgeoning the industry from different sides.

## Piracy

Nobody can gauge the exact degree of counterfeiting in China's audio-video business. Estimates vary, but it is safe to say that piracy is rampant. It would be easy to point the finger of blame at the Chinese side, but that would be simplistic. For one thing, battling counterfeits is not only a matter of willingness, but one of effectiveness. Illegal disks are being peddled at street corners and pedestrian overpasses by people who scrape a living out of a few yuan from this business-on-the-run. If law-enforcement agencies round all of them up and send them to jail, it would not induce the building up of a positive image, especially in human-rights-conscious Western minds.

To put it into perspective, many New York streets are also filled with counterfeits, yet some shop owners there believe that local police are lenient because there are too many low-end jobs at risk.

Cutting off the head of the dragon, so to speak, is dicey because counterfeit manufacturers operate in a shady underground. To complicate things, many are said to have a stake in the legal side of the business as well. If someone prints five copies of a disk legally and another five illegally, it would be pretty hard to distinguish them.

Speaking of the source of "all evil," the original copies of most DVDs come from the US. When disks of a summer blockbuster are on sale in China before the movie debuts in American theaters, I can guarantee you that someone with access to a Hollywood studio – most probably not a Chinese – has passed it on intentionally, presumably making a tidy profit in the process.

However, there are two types of "illegal" movies that are generally unavailable either via disks or online streaming: one is hardcore pornography, and the other blatantly anti-Communist movies such as *Red Corner*, *Seven Years in Tibet* or *Kundun*. That hints at the possibility that the Chinese government is able to stamp out movie piracy had it set out to do it.

Again, the fundamental cause lies much deeper: In the old days, movies – and other cultural or entertainment products – were deemed as propaganda material, and as such, should be distributed either free



of charge or with a nominal fee. Even though more and more people have embraced the notion that movies can have commercial value, the non-commercial side has never been relinquished. Only the wording is changed: now instead of “propaganda” it is called “culture”.

The best analogy is probably a corporate pamphlet. You do not sell these pamphlets; you give them out as a means of promoting your business. Most of the government-funded movies – they still account for the majority of annual productions – are made with this rationale. And it can be hard for those who want to thrust a pamphlet into your pocket to understand that pamphlets can be the end, not the means to the end.

Piracy hurts China’s film industry much more than it does Hollywood. What Hollywood loses is marginal revenue – as long as Chinese disks are not shipped overseas. But since most of China’s domestic releases do not have a tangible foreign market, the piracy-plagued home market is all they have. That is why product placement as a revenue-generating tool is so crucial to Chinese filmmakers. But it cannot be a savior because it chases only richly branded filmmakers and franchises.

## Regulatory environment

It would be unfair to overlook the government agencies that regulate the industry. The way they micromanage it is a reminder that films used to be an extremely powerful tool of mass campaign. In the days when a regular film was watched by hundreds of millions of people, it made sense that nothing in the film would offend public sensibilities. Nowadays, while books and periodicals have much more leeway in terms of content, a film, with fewer watchers than readers of some book titles, is still being scrutinized for cultural and social values. Take Stephen Chow’s *Shaolin Soccer*. It was denied release in the mainland market because the religious association and comedic style might have upset the delicate feelings of Buddhist monks.

This line of thinking, when carried to extremes, would completely eliminate the business. In the very least, it will stifle the creativity of

filmmakers. The best way for direction and control is to clearly draw the line of what is allowed and what is not. And many in the business believe that a ratings system would solve some of the problems because it would liberate movies from being evaluated from a child's standards. While generally moving in the direction of liberalization, the absence of a ratings system has also created situations whereby parents have to cover their young children's eyes from utterly unsuitable content.

## Changing habits

Ostensibly, the biggest rival for Chinese cinema is Hollywood. But if you look beyond the movie theater, you'll have a better picture as to what's snatching people away from movies.

In the late 1970s when movie attendance was extremely high, television had not penetrated into most homes; karaoke did not exist and eating out was a luxury only very few could afford. I was talking with a studio executive and he joked that his biggest competitor is the ubiquitous foot massage parlor. Those who frequent such a venue would not mind a 100-yuan movie ticket, but they do not have the time or inclination to sit in the dark for two hours. I've often noticed middle-aged type in a cinema who took a call on his mobile phone and left in the middle of a screening – never to return.

This does not mean every Chinese has eschewed the cinema experience for the comfort of home viewing. According to research, the demographics still with the yen for going out and catching a new release on the big screen are the younger generations, which is more or less in sync with every other film market in the world. The result of the survey is quite ironic: Those who want to go to cinema cannot afford it, and those who can afford it wouldn't care to go.

Despite these constraints, China's film industry is undoubtedly in its strongest position in three decades. It is gradually ridding itself of the shackles of ideology and moving onto a market-oriented course. The private sector is playing an increasingly important role. It also spearheads incursions into non-Chinese territories.

If you forget about the industry's history and treat it as a complete rebirth with the new century, the growth is astounding. With the building of multiplexes in second- and third-tier cities, the core of movie consumers is exploding. But still, the majority of the public would not give up the convenience and low cost of watching movies on their television sets, computers or mobile gadgets. The game is rigged in favor of effects-laden big-budget projects that induce a viewing experience unlikely to be replicated on the small screen.

Meanwhile, people still fight over how to perceive Hollywood, a role model to imitate or an archrival to defeat, at least on the home turf. It may be an irony – but definitely not a coincidence – that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* appeared at the beginning of the new century. It inspired Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, the first blockbuster in mainland China that marks the inception of a new era. Irony because nothing since has come close in replicating the overseas success of Ang Lee's 2000 hit.

It is no longer inconceivable that China's box-office gross may overtake that of North America in another decade. The market may open wider still. An international project may be injected with some Chinese elements to make it more palatable to Chinese viewers. But most of the above-mentioned constraints will not go away. They will persist in one form or another. That means Chinese filmmakers, or Westerners who desire for a slice of the China market, will have to reckon with these obstacles, which will eventually affect their stories and narrative techniques.

Statistics speak louder than rhetoric. Even though some of these numbers are ballpark at best, they unmistakably point to a trend, and that is, China's film industry has just rushed out of the gate. Whether it will be a dash or a marathon cannot be predicted yet. A few years ago, it would be ludicrous to assume China's domestic industry could one day surpass the US in at least box-office terms. Now the goal seems within reach. The fact that per-capita consumption of movies is still extremely low could be interpreted as a positive sign – that the astronomical growth we've seen is just the tip of the iceberg and great days lie ahead.

**China's Movie Market (2002-2012)**

| Year | Box Office<br>Gross<br>(Yuan<br>MM) | %<br>Change | %<br>Contributed<br>by Domestic<br>Films | Number<br>of<br>Cinema<br>Circuits | Number<br>of Movie<br>Theaters | Number<br>of<br>Screens | Number of<br>Admissions<br>(in millions) | No. of<br>Feature<br>Films<br>Produced |
|------|-------------------------------------|-------------|--|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|--|--|
| 2002 | 900                                 | 3.45        |  |                                    | 1,019                          | 1,834                   |  | 100                                    |
| 2003 | 990                                 | 10          |  | 32                                 | 1,045                          | 1,923                   |  | 140                                    |
| 2004 | 1,500                               | 51.52       |  | 33                                 | 1,188                          | 2,396                   |  | 212                                    |
| 2005 | 2,046                               | 36.40       |  | 36                                 | 1,243                          | 2,668                   |  | 260                                    |
| 2006 | 2,620                               | 28.05       |  | 33                                 | 1,326                          | 3,034                   |  | 330                                    |
| 2007 | 3,327                               | 26.98       | 54.13                                    | 34                                 | 1,427                          | 3,527                   | 114                                      | 402                                    |
| 2008 | 4,341                               | 30.48       | 60.01                                    | 34                                 | 1,545                          | 4,097                   | 141                                      | 406                                    |
| 2009 | 6,206                               | 42.96       | 56.46                                    | 37                                 | 1,680                          | 4,723                   | 204                                      | 456                                    |
| 2010 | 10,172                              | 63.91       | 56.37                                    | 38                                 | 1,993                          | 6,256                   | 281                                      | 526                                    |
| 2011 | 13,115                              | 29          | 56.31                                    | 43                                 | 2,796                          | 9,286                   | 368                                      | 558                                    |
| 2012 | 17,073                              | 30.18       | 48.45                                    | 46                                 |                                | 13,118                  | 471                                      | 653                                    |

Sources: China Film Distribution and Exhibition Association, Film Bureau of SARFT

Note: China is not known for reliable statistics and part of the reason is the lack of standard reporting. Even box-office revenue, the mother lode of industry data, varies from report to report. Some seems to be adjusted for inflation, while others, including the one in this book, may not. The number of admissions may sometimes include free ones, which will drastically reduce average ticket price. For this discussion, I have deliberately excluded the government's rural program of sending mobile units to screen movies for farmers and other landlocked residents. For example, for the year 2008 it was reported that there were 7 million such free screenings with a total of 1.6 billion admissions; and for 2012, free screenings amounted to 8.12 million and admissions 1.75 billion. For the sake of consistency and relative authority, no data from press reports are used in the table "China's Movie Market".

The Chinese yuan has been appreciating in value against the US dollar in the past decade. Some of the yuan figures in the main text are converted to the US currency, shown in brackets, as they appeared in my newspaper reports of the time. However, not every number may correspond to a specific date. To get a ballpark conversion, here is the currency exchange rate for January 1, 2002, and December 31, 2012, the cutoff dates of coverage for this book: 100 Chinese yuan could buy 12.07 and 15.83 American dollars respectively on these two days.

### Economic Contribution by China's Film Industry (Year: 2011)

| Production & distribution            | Direct  | Indirect | Induced | Total   |
|--------------------------------------|---------|----------|---------|---------|
| Number of employees                  | 75,000  | 79,000   | 42,000  | 197,000 |
| Contribution to GDP (yuan, millions) | 3,358   | 3,746    | 1,998   | 9,103   |
| Tax (yuan, millions)                 | 705     | 775      | 384     | 1,864   |
| Exhibition                           |         |          |         |         |
| Number of employees                  | 112,000 | 118,000  | 63,000  | 293,000 |
| Contribution to GDP (yuan, millions) | 4,997   | 5,574    | 2,973   | 13,544  |
| Tax (yuan, millions)                 | 1,049   | 1,153    | 572     | 2,733   |

Source: Oxford Economics: The economic contribution of the film and television industries in China.

Note: "Direct" refers to output and employment due to the activities of firms in the film industry. "Indirect" refers to output and employment due to purchases by film businesses from other firms – e.g. providers of market research, electronic machinery, electric power – and purchases by these firms in turn. "Induced" refers to output and employment due to the spending of wage income derived directly or indirectly from activity in the film industry. Sectors benefiting could include other recreational services as well as retailing, food manufacturing, agricultural and clothes manufacturing.

Before we delve into the pros and cons of future progress, it is advisable to walk down the memory lane and take a look at the "decade zero" of Chinese cinema.

### Timeline

- 1896 Less than a year after film screening came into being in Europe, this new form of entertainment is brought into China. An August screening in a Shanghai private home is the first recorded such event in the country.
- 1905 The first domestic film is made in Beijing. It is a sequence of a Peking Opera performance.
- 1930 The film censorship law is implemented.
- 1935 Ruan Lingyu, billed as Lily Yuen in the film credits, the biggest movie star of the silent era and arguably one of the best actresses in China's film history, commits suicide, at the age of 25.
- 1939 *Mulan* becomes a sensation in Japanese-occupied Shanghai, before the Japanese took over the Western Concessions. It is the first of many historical drama films that carry an undertone

of resistance against foreign invasion. The next year, the puppet government tightened its censorship of the industry.

1947-1949 A golden age is born, and some of the classics of the medium hail from this period, such as *Tears of the Yang-Tse* (1947), *Springtime in a Small Town* (1948) and *Crows and Sparrows* (1949).

1949-1952 The film industry is nationalized. Most pre-1949 films and foreign productions are banned from distribution.

1951 *The Story of Wuxun*, made by Kunlun, a pro-Communist studio, was ecstatically received by critics and the public – until Chairman Mao Zedong wrote an article denouncing it.

1964 China's first feature animation *Uproar in Heaven* is made.

1966 All film production is halted, and most 1949-1965 movies – 603 feature films and 8,342 reels of documentaries and newsreels – are now banned. One of the sparks for the “Revolution” was Mao's denunciation of a historical drama film produced in 1948, *Sorrows of the Forbidden City* – again by a pro-Communist filmmaker.

1970-1976 The so-called “Eight Model Peking Operas” are filmed, some more than once, under the strict political and technical instructions of Jiang Qing (Madame Mao). Essentially filmization of stage performances, these movies form the mainstay of Chinese cinema for several years. Most people had no choice but watched them numerous times so that they could recite every line.

1974-1976 During the later years of the Revolution, a dozen highly ideological feature films are produced.

1977 Some of the 1949-1965 movies are revived, a trend that continues for several years.

1979 The floodgate of movie watching as mass entertainment crashes

- open. Attendance of film screenings across the nation sets a historical high of 29.3 billion admissions.
- 1981 *The Sun and the Man*, a.k.a. *Bitter Love*, is officially denounced and banned.
- 1985 A “US Film Week” is held in several cities, with the screenings of *Coal Miner’s Daughter*, *Star Wars*, *The Turning Point*, *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *On Golden Pond*. It was the first time mainland Chinese with no memory of the pre-1949 era saw quality films from Hollywood. In the previous years, a few American movies were shown, but most were mediocre ones that were available at a low flat fee.
- 1988 *Red Sorghum* by Zhang Yimou wins the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival, pointing to the coming-of-age of a new generation of Chinese filmmakers and a new direction for them to gain international recognition.
- 1993 China Film Company no longer monopolizes the distribution of all feature films.
- 1994 A quota of 10 imported films, on a revenue-sharing basis, effectively resuscitates a moribund industry. The first batch includes such hits as *The Fugitive* and *Terminator 2*, which opened the eyes of Chinese audiences to Hollywood blockbusters.
- 1997 SARFT adopts “production permit” system, essentially allowing private companies to enter the film production business – as long as they can secure the permit.
- 1999 China Film Group is established, consolidating previously existing assets that belonged to many State-owned enterprises. Others followed suit in the next few years.
- 2001 With China’s ascension to the World Trade Organization, the import quota doubles from 10 a year to 20.
- 2002 Major cinema chains roll out. The release of Zhang Yimou’s

*Hero*, which grossed 250 million yuan in theatrical revenue, heralds a new era for Chinese cinema – one of higher production values and higher commercial ambitions.

- 2003 *The Matrix Revolutions* premieres in China day and date with its international release. A new regulation turns Hong Kong productions into domestic ones that can bypass the quota system – on the condition they pass censorship in content.
- 2004 SARFT<sup>①</sup>, the regulating agency, defines filmmaking as an industry (rather than a purely propaganda or cultural enterprise).
- 2007 Attendance at movie theaters climbs back past the 100-million-admissions mark, reaching 103 million.
- 2010 Box-office revenue in mainland China reaches the 10-billion-yuan landmark and keeps its galloping speed of growth in the ensuing years.
- 2012 Import quota increases from 20 to 34. *Lost in Thailand* becomes the first Chinese movie to gross over one billion yuan at the box office, but it fails to overtake *Avatar* as the nation's box-office record set two years earlier.

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① SARFT is the acronym for the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. In March 2013, it merged with the General Administration of Press and Publication, or GAPP for short, and became the State Administration of Press Publication, Radio, Film and Television. “The merger is designed to minimize the overlap of duties, increase efficiency, and better prepare the media for new challenges, with greater competitiveness,” said Wang Feng of the State Commission Office for Public Sector Reform, the main drafter of the institutional reform. In the 1980s, SARFT was spun off the Ministry of Culture and it also changed its name in the 1990s. This book will keep the use of SARFT because that was the name of this government agency from 2002 to 2012, the course of coverage by this book.



## Chapter One

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# FILMMAKERS