

CHINA IN THE MOVIES (1978~2006)

Compiled by: Zhong Dafeng, Li Ershi Translated by: Zhu Linyong Language Consultant: Pamela Lord

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French film critic Regis Bergeron once said, What most impresses the West about Chinese cinema is its contemporary realism.

法国电影评论家贝热隆曾经说过, 中国电影给予西方最深刻的印象就是写实性和时代感。

traditional Peking Opera performance by Mei Lanfang



Window and Mirror

There are those that liken film to a window on the multi-faceted human condition; to others it is a mirror that reflects the human soul. Chinese film may be perceived as a window that reveals the Chinese people's state of existence, and a mirror that reflects their dreams and yearnings.

China's 5,000-year civilization encompasses unique traditions in drama and the performing arts. Dramas, based on light and shadow, began being performed in China 800 years ago.

Film was brought to Chinese audiences from



A shadow puppet show



The early film shooting scene

the West soon after the birth of cinematic art. August 1896, the earliest movie shows are believed to have been staged for Shanghai audiences at Xuyuan or on the city

> streets. It was in the year 1905 that Chinese artists first adapted traditional Chinese opera to the silver screen. So the first Chinese film *Dingjun Mountain* came into being.

> A specific scale of movie industry was established in China in the 1920s, when 100 or so feature films were churned out every year. Some types of film were particularly well received by the local audiences. The history of Chinese martial arts (wuxia) film, for instance, dates back to the 1920s.

> Before 1949, Hollywood played a predominant role in the Chinese film market. In order to compete with the Hollywood film studios, the first generation of Chinese filmmakers focused on current social issues as well as producing popular, more commercially oriented martial

Dingjun Mountain

arts movies. For this reason, Chinese film has consistently reflected social reality.

Some of the most acclaimed films of the 1920s in China were those in the family ethics genre. Within traditional Chinese thought, the family unit is representative of the whole of Chinese society; events within one household, therefore, reflect the societal status quo. For this reason, films that focus on family matters are of particular significance to Chinese audiences. Over the past century, the family ethics movie has been predominant in Chinese cinematic art, because it provides the perfect medium through which to reflect changes in social and cultural outlook, for instance, in attitudes to love and marriage, and other developments throughout China's process of modernization.

The 1923 film An Orphan Rescues His Grandpa is about a wealthy man who sends his pregnant daughter-in-



The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple



An Orphan Rescues His Grandpa

> law away, under the influence of his manipulative, golddigging nephew. Years later, his grandson arrives just at the time the unscrupulous nephew is trying to kill his wealthy uncle. This film is a classic example of the emotive family ethics genre. It was a social critique of the prejudice and oppression suffered by women in the traditional society as well as the blind and feverish pursuit of wealth.

> Japanese military aggression in the 1930s heightened the Chinese people's awareness of major national and social issues. Local audiences rallied to support the younger generation of Chinese film artists and their cinematic critiques of the social malaise. As modernization

6

accelerated, Shanghai, the Chinese filmmaking stronghold, became an international metropolis. Chinese films of that period gave a full account of events in both urban and rural life, and China's steady rate of modernization.

The plots of films such as *A Spring River Flows East* generally relate to ethics and morals, and give a multilayered image of society and social problems of the time. *Crossroads* focuses on the dreams and disappointments of jobless Chinese youth; *Street Angels* is a street artists' love story. Both are social satires expressed in a comedic style.

March of the Volunteers was the theme song of the patriotic film Children of Trouble Times, the love story of a Chinese poet that was widely promoted at the time Japanese aggression necessitated a boosting of Chinese morale. This popular song was later selected as the national anthem of the People's Republic of China.

In addition to mirroring national sentiments and the Chinese people's expectations of social change, Chinese film also focuses on fundamental aspects of their lives and emotions. *Scenes of City Life*, for example, is about people who have moved from their rural homes to urban centers, and their bewilderment at the prospect of a new lifestyle which calls for an alteration in mindset. *Fake Phoenix* tells

⁴ Street Angels



¹ A Spring River Flows East

² Crossroads

³ Children of Trouble Times



- 1 Springtime in a Small City
- 2 Fake Phoenix
- 3 The Girl from Shanghai

4 Standup, Sisters

the funny story of a young man and woman who initially try to cheat one another but eventually fall in love.

The sensitively directed Springtime in a Small City vividly portrays the spiritual torment of a middle-aged Chinese woman who is torn between her ailing husband and her first love, also a friend of her husband, when he unexpectedly arrives at their home. It gives deep insight into historical changes in the rich and colorful life of Chinese people, and also a clearer understanding of their mentality and emotions.

Upon the founding of the People's Republic of China, Chinese film played a dual role: on one hand it advocated for the revolutionary cause; on the other hand, it gave a positive portrayal of the changes in personal life, society, and ideology. Issues such as the social status of woman, better means to a livelihood for the Chinese people, urban industrialization, and changes in rural China all found their expression in Chinese film of that period. It expressed changes in the lives of everyday Chinese people, in particular the evolution of its culture and ideology. For instance, *Stand up Sisters* tells of the new life of women who had formerly worked as prostitutes. The main character in *The Girl from Shanghai* is a female engineer that excels herself on a male-dominated construction site

and *Li Shuangshuang* is a powerful depiction of the courage and wisdom of rural women and their social integration.

Films like *Five Golden Flowers* and *Red Blossoms on Tianshan Mountain* celebrate the vigor and creative potential of ethnic Chinese preparing to build a whole new life. Others, such as *Lanlan and Dongdong* and *For 61 Lives* are about the common love and care among people from different social strata. Films of the *An Unfinished Comedy* and *Dream in the Zoo* are satirical critiques of such deplorable social phenomena as bureaucratism and a general disregard for public morals.





1 Li Shuangshuang 2 Red Blossoms on Tianshan Mounta<u>in</u>

The Five Golden Flowers

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