

CHINESE FILM THEORY

A Guide to the New Era

George S. Semsel, Xia Hong, Hou Jianping

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A Guide to the New Era

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For Ye Ye
and the students of the
People's Republic of China

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FOREWORD

China has one-fifth of the world's population; however, its cultural life is limited. Film, a product of modern Western science and technology, came to China while still in its infancy, took root, blossomed, and gave forth fruit in this ancient country. For a long time filmgoing was the major entertainment in China and the film audience numbered as many as 20 billion people annually. Even now, the Chinese film audience far surpasses that of any other country.

From its very beginnings, film revealed more of an international character than other art forms. However, in the past, film exchanges between China and the West went primarily in one direction. During different periods of time, Western films, especially those of France, Italy, Russia, and the United States, poured into China's film market. Similarly, the writings of Western film theoreticians such as Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod I. Pudovkin, Bela Balasz, André Bazin, Seigfried Kracauer, Jean Mitry, and Christian Metz were introduced into China, while conversely, Chinese film and film theory until recently remained completely foreign to the West. At the onset of the 1980s, this one-way exchange began to change. Chinese film, heavily influenced by Eastern culture, has gradually awakened interest in the West, and a few Western scholars have written on the subject. Chinese film theory, however, has remained virgin territory. *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era*, edited by George Semsel, Xia Hong, and Hou Jianping, is the first of its kind.

China, for thousands of years a unified and continuous civilization, maintains an independent cultural system quite different from that of any other. In 1840, after the cannons of the Opium War burst through the closed doors of the country, China began to recognize the challenge of modern industry in the West, and realized that its own civilization lagged far behind. The economic base of the peasantry made it stagnant. Chinese civilization has gone through many twists and turns on its way to modernization. The significant changes taking place in politics, economics, and culture for more than a hundred years now, in scale and in depth have no parallel in Chinese history. However, the modernization of China is not exclusively a Westernization. The cultural tradition of the people and the historical accumulation of their cultural psychology have been handed down tenaciously. All Western concepts, be they political, economic, philosophical, sociological, literary, or aesthetic, to take root in China, inevitably must undergo changes and transformations wrought by the people, albeit to varying degrees, whether this nationalization is carried out consciously or not. Western film and film theory have gone through this process. The development of Chinese film and film theory embodies the Chinese cultural spirit; at the same time it is constrained by the social realities of the country.

Emphasis upon the function of film as a means of social education has always been a major characteristic of Chinese film theory. In its earliest days the representative trends of thought were that film should depict life, educate society, and enlighten the people. Later the emphasis shifted from moral to political education. The concept of film as a tool of political education that dominated the film circles of mainland China for more than half a century can be traced to a cultural tradition that centers on human relations. Chinese philosophy stresses ethics and neglects epistemology or ontology. Chinese aesthetics places emphasis on the unity of beauty and kindness — relating the appreciation of the beautiful with moral and ethical conduct. For centuries, the ideas that “literature expresses ideology” and “art contains morality and ethics” dominated the ancient theories of literature and art. The establishment of film as a tool for political education probably resulted from the culture that formed when changes in Chinese society took the political standard as its essence.

In terms of ontology, film, from its beginning until the late 1970s, was generally regarded as recorded drama, moving images reflected on the screens of China. The term “filmed drama,” frequently used in the early days of film, accurately summarized this concept. In early Western film theory, similar concepts also appeared, but they lost their position

soon after. Such a concept lasted seventy to eighty years in China because of its cultural tradition and social reality. Chinese philosophy centers upon the exploration of the functions and relations of phenomena, while it neglects analyses of substance and structure. It stresses unity and neglects detail. The style of Chinese thinking places emphasis on a command of general and whole ideas as opposed to the scientific spirit that stresses concrete, deep, multilayered and multifaceted analyses.

That ancient popular Chinese novels and dramas excel in the complexities of their plots and in their presentations of emotions certainly helped condition the Chinese to prefer dramatic situations. This prefilmic psychology of appreciation constrains the situation and the concept of Chinese film. The tastes of the masses do not conflict with the concept of film as recorded drama and the purpose of film as political tool. Theoretical studies of Chinese filmscripts focus more on shots than on anything else, for scripts as a whole embody the political and ideological tendencies of film. While it is true that Chinese film theory also studies film structure, the composition of visual images, and camera movement, this is done primarily to make comparisons with the devices of other arts, especially those of drama. Montage heavily influenced Chinese film, but was accepted more as a technique than an ontological factor.

Chinese culture is effective in the spirit of practice, but not at abstract thinking. It encourages artists to inherit from their ancestors, rather than to be creative and to surpass them. The culture, based on political standards, is closer to utilitarianism, eager for quick successes and instant benefits. Consequently, Chinese film theory has distinguished practice-oriented characteristics. The close relationship between Chinese film theory and filmmaking makes it difficult to distinguish film theory from film criticism. The truth is, many film artists are both theoreticians and film critics. Chinese film theory, more often than not, is the summary and distillation of filmmaking practices and, in turn, directly affects how films are made. As a result, it has not developed a strict and methodological way of theoretical thinking, with its dependence mostly on instinctive empirical judgments.

From the early 1930s to the late 1970s the power that dominated the development of Chinese film and film theory was politics. When China faced the armed invasion of imperialist countries and its people were on the dangerous verges of extinction, all cultural activities, including film, centered on the political struggle for survival. This was a natural and reasonable consequence of history. Later, as the resultant revolutionary literature and art progressed into the countryside, it came to be summarized as “literature and art serving politics and the workers,

peasants, and soldiers.” This principle bestowed on Chinese film and film theory new agendas such as kindling ideas of the relation between art and life and between art and the people. But this position, so closely related to the rural base areas of the war period, revealed its limitations and violation of the innate principles of literature and art when peace was achieved throughout the country, especially when mainland China formed its own national apparatus. An example is the suppression of subjectivity in theory and practice, and the abstention from freedom of academic discussion and exploration.

During the 1950s and early 1960s only a few especially influential debates in Chinese film theory appeared; however, the sphere of these debates was limited to such subjects as how film could better serve politics and the common people. At the same time, some penetrating assessments were severely criticized on political grounds. By the mid-1960s the situation reached a ridiculous extreme. While the economies of adjacent regions and countries were making significant progress, China engaged in a comprehensive ten-year-long ideological civil war. The Cultural Revolution was a feudal Fascist dictatorship that simply killed the culture. China entered a dark age similar to the Western Middle Ages. Film theory was buried, and what remained were the political verdicts of the autocracy.

In modern Chinese history, major cultural movements have always intertwined with political movements. In 1979 China entered a new historical era. The efforts to create order out of the political chaos provided a healthy environment for the development and prosperity of Chinese culture. A long-suppressed movement for spiritual liberation swept the entire country with the force of a thunderbolt, touching every realm of the culture. The year 1979 was also a turning point for Chinese film and film theory. The open-door policy unlocked the long-closed gates of the nation. Western culture, including Western film and film theory, came to China in a continuous stream and brought vitality to the movement to liberalize thought in film.

Two main trends made their appearance in the New Era. One is an awakening of the self-consciousness of human beings, a restoration of the enlightenment, esteem, and values of humanity that had been alienated by blind worship and barbarity. The other is the awakening of the self-consciousness of film — film freed from the direct control and restraints of politics so as to recognize and establish itself. Through a reconsideration of politics and culture, film theory adjusted the relationship between film and politics and reestablished the social function of film on a full scale. It extensively studied some of the

common issues of literary and aesthetic theory such as nature and humanity, masses and individual, free will, realism, modernism, and the laws of art. Even more significant is that rather than comparing specific cinematic devices with those of other arts, film theory examined the laws and potentials of film itself and heightened the level of research into film ontology. In the history of Chinese film theory, there had never been such an extensive, profound, and continuous academic debate.

The first target attacked was the concept of the medium as recorded drama that long dominated Chinese film. Proposals to throw away the walking stick of drama and divorce drama and film initiated the debate. Theorists questioned the dramatized structure of Chinese film, the theatrical concepts of space and time in film, and the concept of stage performance in film. This debate was followed by a challenge to the ideas that the script is the ideological and artistic basis of film and film is literature rendered through specific cinematic techniques. Film theory sought to replace the traditional concept of Chinese film with a new concept that fit the trend of contemporary film. Along with these debates, the emphasis of Chinese film theory gradually shifted from the theoretical study of the script to film ontology — the nature of film representation, the portrayal of images, the aesthetic functions of shots, and the sound effects of film. These studies enriched to a large extent the vulnerable spots in Chinese film theory or filled in blanks that had long been empty.

To oppose the artificiality in film wrought by leftist thinking, Bazin's realism, once introduced into China, played an important role in affecting the development of Chinese film theory in the 1980s. New methodologies such as semiotics and psychoanalysis began to be introduced, enlarging the vision of Chinese film theory and enriching its patterns as well. Old issues such as the nationalization of film and the critical inheritance of the Chinese cultural tradition came again into full swing. As an imported art from the West, film contains both the ancient Western aesthetics of imitation and the traditional Chinese aesthetics of ignoring ideology and emotion. The reintroduction of this issue in the 1980s resulted from the confrontation and subsequent merger of Western and Chinese cultures brought on by the open-door policy and was intended to lead Chinese film to discover its own unique path of development.

Chinese film theory and filmmaking in the New Era stimulate and affect each other. The movement of Chinese film in the New Era can be generally observed through the development of film theory. Currently China is changing from an agrarian economy to a commercial economy. This trend has pushed Chinese film toward commercialization and,

consequently, entertainment and genre films have emerged as a current hot topic in the study of Chinese film theory.

This book may not contain all of the highest achievements of Chinese film theory in the New Era. The limited space of this book has prevented the editors from including some of the important longer articles. Nevertheless, this collection clearly and objectively traces the development of Chinese film theory in the New Era and reflects its basic characteristics. Most of the chapters in this book have been highly influential in China, and several have created a furor. The overall collection and the arrangement of the individual chapters are specifically helpful in leading the Western reader to an understanding of contemporary Chinese film theory.

George S. Semsel, one of the few Western scholars who have given much interested attention to Chinese film, has edited an introductory book and written a number of articles about Chinese film. Hou Jianping, a young Chinese film scholar, has been working on the introduction of Western film into China and Chinese film into the West. I came to know them in different ways. Xia Hong is a colleague and my friend. Before he left to study film in the United States, he was managing editor of *Film Art* and worked several years with me at the China Film Association. Xia knows the current situation of Chinese film theory very well and has formulated strong opinions about it. These three people are among the few rare and suitable people qualified to undertake the translation and editing of such a project as this collection. It is courageous and admirable of them to undertake this difficult yet significant task. To date, even in China, no such systematic collection has been published. I believe that the publication of *Chinese Film Theory: A Guide to the New Era* will be a milestone in the history of the exchange of film between the United States and China.

Luo Yijun

INTRODUCTION

China, one of the most productive filmmaking countries in the world, has maintained an average production rate for the last decade of more than 130 films annually. However, film theory in the People's Republic of China, we have to admit, remains far behind not only theoretical studies in the West, but equally far behind the level and quality of filmmaking within China itself. Although a few filmmakers such as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Wu Tianming have become internationally known, not a single theoretician has received international recognition. Consequently when in recent years foreigners began to understand Chinese culture and to study Chinese films like *Yellow Earth* (1984) and *Red Sorghum* (1985), little was known about Chinese film theory. Yet even before the Fifth Generation* began its active explorations of filmmaking, equivalent explorations had already been initiated by scholars and writers committed to the art.

This collection is limited to the New Era, which began in 1979 after the end of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Party Central Committee reestablished the policy to "let a hundred flowers blossom, let

*The Fifth Generation refers to a group of young filmmakers who are mostly graduates of Beijing Film Institute in 1982. The major representatives are Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Zhang Junzhao, and Wu Ziniu. Their major works are *Yellow Earth*, *One and Eight*, *On the Hunting Ground*, and *Red Sorghum*.

a hundred schools of thought contend” (Mao Zedong) and ended on June 3, 1989, when that same government crushed the student demonstration in Tiananmen Square. This time frame does not mean that there was no systematic film theory in China before 1979, nor that a complete and systematic film theory has appeared since that time. Our interest is to reflect an unprecedented era in Chinese film history, an era in which not only the most heated debates and study about film were launched, but also a period in which theoretical research flourished as it never had before. The chapters edited and translated here (with the kind permission of their authors) are among the most representative, influential, and debatable. We did not restrict our selection to only those writings considered to be the very best, but included a broad range of materials by practitioners as well as scholars. What we have provided here is a systematic understanding of the developmental processes of Chinese film theory through the major issues of debate. We hope the book will help the Western scholar to know how the Chinese study and understand film art.

Generally speaking, Chinese film of the early period was heavily influenced by Hollywood, and later, by Russian revolutionary films. After the 1950s Chinese film, for a long time, was the combined product of the Hollywood model and Russian social-realist film theory. Too much emphasis was put on the function of propaganda and film as an educational tool. In comparison to Westerners, Chinese film scholars seldom made a serious exploration of film ontology, especially of such issues as the medium’s specifics and principles.

During the thirty years (1949–1979) following Liberation, there was nothing outstanding taking place in the field of Chinese film theory, though historically, filmmaking in this period was further developed than that of the 1930s and 1940s. There were some limited debates of theoretical issues, but strictly speaking, they cannot be regarded as trends of schools of film. At best, they should be seen as critical commentaries on filmmaking (such as the attack on *Wu Xun*) or limited theoretical phenomena (such as the attack on the article, “The Drum of Film”). Such debates initiated nationwide political and ideological movements, but never established themselves as serious film theory. Nonetheless, during those thirty years there were a few events worthy of mention:

Zhong Dianfei’s article, “The Drum of Film,” published in 1957, announced that we should respect the economic principles of film, though before the “drum” could make itself heard, the author was being criticized.

Ju Baiyin’s “Monologue on Cinematic Innovation,” published in 1962, announced the need to respect the aesthetics of film as well as its

constant innovation, though his call didn't generate any reverberations at the time, and the article turned out to be the author's last monograph. (He was tortured to death during the Cultural Revolution because of this article.)

The "three prominences" of the Gang of Four (give prominence to the positive among all the characters; give prominence to the heroes among the positive; give prominence to the major heroes among the heroes) eventually became the only principles to follow in literature and art during the ridiculous period in which 800 million people watched only eight model dramas.

A few books such as Xia Yan's *The Problems of Screenwriting* and Zhang Junxiang's *About the Special Expressive Means of Film* were published that are regarded as classic works that first established Chinese film theory.

The overthrow of the Gang of Four in 1976 marked the end of the Cultural Revolution. Film, after suffering disastrous ruin for a decade, entered into a period of rehabilitation during the nation's economic and political reform. At that time, the major issue of theoretical study was not theory itself, but how to make the adjustment, both theoretically and ideologically, in a period of transformation: on the one hand, film theory tried to criticize and break through political restrictions and the limitations of the three prominences; on the other hand, it tried to restore and identify with the concept of art before the Cultural Revolution. It is obvious that films produced before 1979 made a great effort to break away from the models, but consciously or unconsciously, they were entrapped in them. Meanwhile, the optimistic attitudes and the restlessness that appeared in film theory circles were only concerned with whether or not the current filmmaking was catching up with the artistic standards of the seventeen-year period (1949–1966) before the Cultural Revolution.

During this period in film circles, as in those of any other art, there were some arduous debates over such issues as the relationship between film and politics, the relationship between art and reality, and discussions about realism, sentimentality, and humanity depicted in film, and other problems of the time. These debates, however, were more concerned with general problems rather than something unique and concrete to film, and the methodologies remained those of tradition, restoration, and stimulation. Yet by reestablishing distinctions between what was right and what was wrong, which had been seriously perverted during the Cultural Revolution, the understanding of these issues became more profound. At the same time, these debates also helped lay a foundation for the prosperity of filmmaking and film theory. Though it is true that

those in film circles made a major effort to achieve this, there were no exciting or real changes, practically or theoretically, taking place during this period.

The year 1979 was a significant year for Chinese film. The December 1978 meeting of the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Communist Party Conference clarified many problems left from the Cultural Revolution as well as subsequent ones. It marked the coming of a new period in which thoughts were being liberated and the open-door policy was being carried out. A most active and prosperous situation for filmmaking and theory was formed and developed under such circumstances.

Two major events took place in film circles in 1979 that could be regarded as signs of transformation. The first was the appearance of two films, *Troubled Laughter* and *Xiao Huar*. The second was the publication of “Throwing Away the Walking Stick of Drama,” by Bai Jingsheng and “The Modernization of Film Language,” by Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo. Films, for the first time in history, experimented with the means and potentials of cinematic representation; and the essays, likewise for the first time, put forth the crucial argument that “film should be film.” All played equally important roles in making the badly needed adjustments and stimulating the development of filmmaking and film research. Furthermore, they initiated a series of debates on issues like the theatricality of film, the literary quality of film, the new concept in film, the nationalization of film, and tradition and innovation of film, which turned this period into a crucial time for the development of the medium — the New Era.

I The Debate on the Theatricality of Film

If “The Modernization of Film Language” by Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo was the major explosive, then Bai Jingsheng’s “Throwing Away the Walking Stick of Drama” was the fuse. At the beginning of his article, Bai reported that for a long time, people generally understood film from the point of view of drama. “It is true that film absorbed a great deal from drama on its way to becoming an art form,” he argued. “It was with the help of drama that film took its first step. However, now that film has become an independent art form, does it have to rely on the walking stick of drama forever?” His answer was very clear: “It is time that we throw away the walking stick of drama.”¹ The significance of his proposal cannot be underestimated, for it was the first time in Chinese film history someone brought the issue into the open.

The first enthusiastic response came from film director Zhang Nuanxin and her husband, film critic Li Tuo. “The Modernization of Film Language” broke the silence of Chinese film theory and brought about a greater activity than had ever existed before. The article addresses two major issues: first, based on research into the development of film since the invention of the Lumiere brothers, they argue that cinematic language constantly changes, with the new continuously superceding the old. Furthermore, the rate of change is faster and more violent than that of any other linguistic form. They point out that the films of Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave broke with the conventions of drama and

boldly experimented with modes of structure unique to film, bringing innovation to its narrative strategies so that by the 1970s, films were basically free from the principles governing dramatic conflict and had become more cinematic.

Second, from the perspective of representational forms, which no one had touched upon before, they analyze why Chinese film has lagged behind the West, pointing out that filmmaking in China is still “based on patterns of drama.” It seems if film lost the support of the “walking stick of drama” it could hardly take another step. Therefore, film in China, instead of honestly, naturally, and vividly reflecting real life, remains little more than “canned drama.” The authors conclude that the artificiality of content, a cliché-ridden film language, and the overuse of dramatization are the major reasons for the falsity. They strongly urge that the language of film be brought up to date, especially now, during the time of the four modernizations. A new circumstance should be created in which the artistic qualities of film, the techniques of representation, film aesthetics, and film language can be openly and forcefully discussed.²

Their opinion shocked film circles of the time and generated an arduous response and debate. The problem of the theatricality of film soon caught the attention of many people and started a long nationwide discussion. The interest of those in theoretical circles turned to the ontology of film, which had never been studied before. Soon after, the well-known theoretician Zhong Dianfei proposed the “divorce of film from drama.” He believed that it was not only the natural consequence of the development of the art to get this “divorce” but also that it was the only way to stimulate the improvement of film art. His argument brought the debate to its maximum intensity.³

This debate lasted about three years and many artists like Shao Mujun, Yuan Wenshu, Huang Shixian, Zhang Junxiang, Zheng Xuelai, Lin Shan, Tan Peisheng, Chen Yutong, and He Ren became involved. Aside from the fact that all were interested in the issue, their opinions varied. Some were for it, some against it. In “Modernization and the Modernism,” Shao Mujun was among the first to make a quick response, claiming that film language evolved gradually through a process of accumulation rather than elimination, and arguing that the move away from drama was incompatible with Marxist principles. “It’s a wrong road and dangerous to vent anger on drama and to draw unconsciously to the nondramatization of the modernists in order to oppose formalism and conceptualism,” he warned.⁴ His concern was quite representative. Yuan Wenshu, deputy chairman of the China Film Association, also claimed in