

Crossings: Asian Cinema and Media Culture

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Chinese Cinema

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and Jing Jing Chang

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Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Jeff Kyong-McClain, Russell Meeuf, and Jing Jing Chang</i>	
Part I. Politics and Dissent in Global Contexts	
1. Seeing (through) the Struggle Sessions: Cinema, Recycling, and Transnational Circulation	19
<i>Belinda Q. He</i>	
2. Screening Politics in Hong Kong	41
<i>Joseph Tse-Hei Lee</i>	
3. “All of Us Are Part of the Monster”: Toxic Sublimity and Ethical Reflexivity in Zhao Liang’s <i>Behemoth</i>	58
<i>Man-Fung Yip</i>	
Part II. Audiences and Reception in Transnational Contexts	
4. From <i>Gone with the Wind</i> to <i>The Spring River Flows East</i> : Melodrama and Historical Imagination in Postwar Chinese Cinema	79
<i>Kenny Kwok Kwan Ng</i>	
5. Spatial Perception: The Aesthetics of <i>Yijing</i> in Transnational Kung Fu Films	97
<i>Xi W. Liu</i>	
6. Global Network, Ecocinema, and Chinese Contexts: <i>Wolf Totem</i> as a Successful Model of Transnational Coproduction	113
<i>Wendy Su</i>	
Part III. Globalization and Chinese Identities	
7. The Sound of Chinese Urban Cinema: Multilingualism and the Re-globalization of Shanghai in the 1990s	131
<i>Lin Feng</i>	

8. Sound, Allusion, and the “Wandering Songstress” in Royston Tan’s Films	152
<i>Alison M. Groppe</i>	
9. Implicit Sexuality: The Representation of the Femme Fatale Figure in <i>Black Coal, Thin Ice</i>	169
<i>Yushi Hou</i>	
Part IV. Film Markets and Financial Reform	
10. The China Film Co., Ltd. and the Stock Market: Financialization with Chinese Characteristics	185
<i>Shiyong Liu</i>	
11. <i>Big Shot’s Funeral</i> : Sino-Foreign Collaboration and Industrial Commercialization	204
<i>Qi Ai</i>	
12. Sticks, Not Carrots: The Discourse of Soft Power in Popular Chinese Cinema	223
<i>Katherine Chu</i>	
Epilogue	242
<i>Po-Shek Fu and Stanley Rosen</i>	
List of Contributors	249
Index	253

Introduction

Jeff Kyong-McClain, Russell Meeuf, and Jing Jing Chang

As this volume took shape, film industry analysts were busy declaring China the largest film market in the world, since box office receipts in the People's Republic of China would soon overtake those in the US.¹ This one metric, of course, cannot tell a nuanced story about the ascendant Chinese film industry in the early twenty-first century, but it certainly fed a popular narrative in the Western press about the increasing power and global reach of the Chinese film industry and China more broadly. The need for Hollywood blockbusters to make money in the growing Chinese market, alongside the increase in Chinese investment in US film production, tells a story in which the Chinese film industry is steadily encroaching upon Hollywood's long-held position as the dominant player in the global film industry.

This narrative, however, simplifies the complex cultural and economic relationships of the global film industry, pitting two monolithic visions of seemingly "national" cinemas ("China" versus "Hollywood") against each other in an epic battle worthy of contemporary global blockbusters. But just as Hollywood is a complex, global industry, in reality the Chinese film industry is multifaceted and diverse, has a long history of engagement with global film industries, and has been influenced by other world cinemas such as Hollywood as much as it has influenced them. Moreover, its recent successes have only come through a long period of negotiation with global market forces as it navigates its identity comprising both semi-private and state-sponsored production companies. To understand the role of China in global cinema today, one must extend a nationalistic lens to tell the nuanced stories of both the Chinese film industry and the interconnected nature of global, commercial filmmaking.

It is worth keeping in mind that the global reach of the contemporary Chinese film industry is part of a much longer history of Chinese engagement with the world. Although Marx and Engels wrote of the European bourgeoisie's necessary role in "batter[ing] down all Chinese walls," suggesting a China hopelessly closed off from

the rest of the world, in fact, the argument can be made that such apparent closure (be it late Qing or Maoist) is more an aberration than the norm.² Indeed, in the case of cinema, residents in Shanghai and Beijing were watching films almost as soon as they first appeared in France, and in no time at all a whole movie-going culture consuming both Chinese and foreign-made films emerged—this oft-noted fact suggests tight connectivity between China and the world.³ Though Mao’s “lean to one side” policy did largely cut off mainland China from global (though not Soviet) cinema, Sinophone cinema still flourished in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan, and Deng Xiaoping’s 1978 policy of “reform and opening up” restored global engagement as the norm in the People’s Republic. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the exact place of China in the world seems somewhat in doubt, due in no small part to the rise of nationalist enthusiasm in all quarters of the globe. Political scientists debate the extent to which Beijing will want to engage the world in the near future, but the apparent ongoing commitment to a global capitalist order, even an American-led one, suggests that one can reasonably expect a continuation of China in the World and the World in China for the foreseeable future.⁴ In light of China’s long history of going global, it is imperative to investigate all aspects of the engagement, including the ways in which Chinese cinema engages global cinema.

This collection, then, explores the many entanglements of Chinese filmmaking with a variety of global influences, forces, and historical contexts. Exploring aesthetics, identities, audiences, industry, and politics, the essays here unpack the multifaceted ways that Chinese filmmaking has been interwoven with a host of local, national, and global histories and contexts. Although we are by no means the first group of scholars to explore the relationship between globalization and Chinese cinema, the essays in this book represent a fresh set of voices and perspectives on these questions. The research presented here, moreover, analyzes a diverse and innovative range of films and phenomena—from the possibilities of an emergent Chinese “ecocinema” and the transnational sampling of historical Chinese documentaries to the uses of language dialects in international coproductions, to name a few examples. In this way, this collection hopes to extend existing debates around Chinese cinema and globalization to new films, filmmakers, industry structures, and transnational influences.

Rethinking Chinese Cinema Historiography

This volume is indebted to the English-language scholarship on Chinese cinema since the pre-1980s.⁵ These works explored the contours of Chinese cinema, asking questions like, What is Chinese cinema? How does Chinese cinema relate to different forms of cultural identities as Chinese or otherwise? How does Chinese cinema interact with other film industries? And how is Chinese cinema impacted by local, national, and global politics such as the Cultural Revolution, the Hong Kong handover, globalization, the Cold War, and other forces during various historical periods?⁶

Early on, the answers to these questions relied on the concept of national cinemas and were informed by Andrew Higson's seminal work.⁷ From this perspective, films from various Chinese production centers were seen as representative of a unified national identity, and particular attention was paid to the cinemas of Greater China, including mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.⁸ These foundational works introduced Western audiences and many Western scholars to the works of auteurs like Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Tian Zhuangzhuang from the Fifth Generation, as well as film movements such as Taiwan New Cinema and the Hong Kong New Wave. This approach tended to view the directors and products of Chinese cinema against the backdrop of Chinese nation-state politics. The national cinema model, in other words, presented at times a homogenous vision of Chinese identity while neglecting the contribution of Chinese language filmmaking in places such as Singapore, Malaya, and others during and after the Cold War.⁹

Since the 1990s, scholars of Chinese cinema (in both English and Chinese) have employed a broader array of methodologies that built on, revised, and at times moved beyond the national cinema paradigm. These methodologies have not only changed the ways that scholars have studied Chinese cinema, but have opened up new ways of understanding what constitutes Chinese cinema itself. Song Hwee Lim, for instance, identifies six different conceptions of Chinese cinemas used by scholars to understand its scope over the past thirty years.¹⁰ The first three concepts use a Chinese national cinema model to demarcate different forms of Chinese cinema: (1) Chinese cinema(s), which focus on mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as well as the Chinese diaspora; (2) Taiwan cinema under Japanese colonial rule; and (3) Hong Kong cinema before and after the 1997 handover. The additional three concepts, however, acknowledge the complex array of cinematic practices that cross or transcend national borders. The fourth model includes transnational Chinese cinemas and Chinese-language cinema, taking into account the border-crossing processes of production, distribution, and reception.¹¹ This model includes the production and reception of films made in the Chinese language within Greater China and beyond, incorporating the production and reception of films of the Chinese diaspora as well as transnational collaborations: for instance, this conception would include films by Singapore director Eric Khoo. The fifth model focuses exclusively on diasporic cinema, including Chinese film productions distributed for overseas Chinese consumption or films made within the Chinese diaspora.¹² And the sixth model is Sinophone cinema, which includes all Chinese-language films produced outside of China.¹³ These overlapping models illustrate the complexity informing the very definition of "Chinese cinema" as a concept and practice.¹⁴

As these different models suggest, scholars' understanding of Chinese cinema since the late 1990s has been most influenced by theories of transnational cinema and a transnational understanding of Sinophone cinema.¹⁵ Sheldon Lu's groundbreaking 1997 publication *Transnational Chinese Cinemas*, for example, has massively influenced the field of Chinese cinema studies.¹⁶ The transnational turn has

yielded studies that move the site of production, distribution, and reception beyond Greater China, situating the study of Chinese “cinemas” in the plural form within the contexts of East Asian and Asian cinema, women’s cinema, action stars and directors, affect and embodiment studies, and Asian and Asian American identities, among many others.¹⁷

Of course, by positioning Chinese cinema in a global or transnational context, such approaches must often reckon with the relationship between Chinese cinema and Hollywood as one of the other globally dominant film industries. In various anthologies addressing global cinema, for example, there is a tendency to pit Hollywood (seen as mainstream) against non-Hollywood (other national cinemas that have “adopted a different aesthetic model of filmmaking from Hollywood”).¹⁸ While attempting to grapple with the complex realities of transnational cinema production, this “Hollywood versus the world” approach to understanding transnational cinema may in turn perpetuate its own monolithic narratives, deploying Hollywood as a singular, global force against which all other cinemas are measured.

Within Chinese film studies, despite an emphasis on the cross-cultural and transnational connections between Chinese cinema and diasporic communities, global film culture is often still seen as synonymous with Hollywood.¹⁹ So while the turn toward a transnational understanding of Chinese cinema has attempted to de-center a homogenous perspective of Greater China and its culture, these approaches must also grapple with the tendency to see Hollywood as the “center” of global film culture against which all other global cinemas are measured, in addition to the tendency to condense a variety of Chinese cultures, languages, and identities into a seemingly unified national identity.²⁰

Scholars of Chinese cinema have thus sought to redefine what constitutes the transnational and its relation to the local, national, and global, affirming Mette Hjort’s call for a more nuanced understanding of transnationalism as a “scalar concept allowing for the recognition of strong or weak forms of transnationality.”²¹ Such work disavows a dichotomous connection between West and East in favor of polylocal, polycentric, relational, and multidirectional perspectives. For example, inspired by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s concept of “polycentric multiculturalism,” the polycentric approach presented by Lucia Nagib, Chris Perriam, and Rajinder Dudrah seeks to challenge and present an alternative “third way” to the “dual model” pitting American Hollywood cinema as mainstream and the rest of world’s film traditions as the periphery.²² Similarly, Yingjin Zhang notes that in the age of “globalizing China,” Chinese cinema is both “polylocal and translocal at different scales,” from local to national and global across production, distribution, exhibition, and reception.²³ Zhang writes that “all localities across scale must be coordinated in an efficient way, and all disparate elements must weave together into a seamless screen product. It is a truism to declare that ‘no film is an island.’”²⁴

These nuanced approaches to transnationalism have engendered a more relational perspective that challenges Hollywood’s position as the homogenizing center

against which Chinese cinema must always be measured. Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong's research on global film culture, for instance, de-centers Euro-American film festivals as arbiters of Chinese cinema. Western audiences certainly came to know of Fifth Generation film directors like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, as well as new Taiwan filmmakers Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-hsien, after their films either won European film festival awards or were nominated at the Oscars. However, Wong reminds us that such filmmakers and other examples of Sinophone cinema also participated in a variety of international festivals that helped spread the influence of Chinese language filmmakers.²⁵

Moreover, in works by Michael Curtin, Wendy Su, and Aynne Kokas, Hollywood is no longer defined as the sole juggernaut of global media.²⁶ In Michael Curtin's *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience*, he presents "alternative accounts of global media" and refutes the idea that "Hollywood hegemony is forever."²⁷ In looking at how multinational media companies conduct their operations to reach the global Chinese audience, Curtin decenters Hollywood as a representative of global culture and global markets. Indeed, the history of Chinese cinema shows that the media center shifts and has not been tied solely to production location, but is transnational and very much connected with transborder processes of production, distribution, circulation, reception, and consumption. Similarly, Su and Kokas look at the encounter between China and Hollywood within the global media market not as one of American cultural imperialism but one where both China and Hollywood engage in negotiation, collaboration, and competition, vying for the hegemon position.²⁸ These studies engage with the relational connections between Chinese theory and Western theory, different media forms, cosmopolitanism, and the links between Chinese cinema and global issues like environmental change.²⁹

Of course, despite these efforts to expand on the national cinema perspective and contend with the transcultural impact of globalization and various film movements, award-winning and even blockbuster films by Zhang Yimou, Ang Lee, or films that have crossed over to Hollywood through the endorsements of gatekeepers such as Quentin Tarantino have become oversaturated within Chinese film studies.³⁰ Studies that focus on films from the "periphery as a relational and shifting concept" or that "uncover the multiplicity of interactions that take place around and beyond the centers of power"—not only within the Chinese state but also the very academic disciplines of Chinese studies and Chinese film historiography—have been few and far in between.³¹ Indeed, more emphasis certainly needs to be placed on Chinese independent documentary films or "sub-state" cinemas, including those made by ethnic minorities.³²

This volume, therefore, moves beyond the singular focus on a particular period, genre, film studio, film auteur, film, political moment, or film movement, seeking out interconnections between Chinese cinema and larger global contexts. In doing so, we have two primary goals.

First, this book revisits the meaning of the global and what constitutes “Chineseness” in and beyond Chinese film culture. We agree with Jeroen de Kloet that “the ‘Chineseness’ of Chinese cinema is not just located in the text or its auteur, but also in both cinematic production and reception.”³³ In particular, we focus on identity politics, global reception, and transnational influences on aesthetics and iconography from the past and present. As noted by Laikwan Pang, the problematization of Chinese national cinema did not always yield a rethinking of Chinese cinema as a field of study. Rather, Pang suggests, the critical positions challenging the paradigm of national Chinese cinema, ironically, only secured the place of such scholarship, institutionalizing Chinese cinema as a “coherent and legitimate academic discipline.”³⁴ On the 10th anniversary of the publication of the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, therefore, Christopher K. Tong selected “scale” as his keyword to revisit the historiography and future trends of Chinese cinema studies, suggesting the need for more nuanced and less nationalistic perspectives on Chinese cinema: “Scale sheds light on the stakes of contemporary life by calling attention to the standards by which we judge an entity to be significant or meaningful.”³⁵

The second objective, therefore, is to explore the different scales and diverse patterns of transnationalism in relation to Chinese cinema in all its pluralities. However, instead of invoking Chinese “cinemas,” this volume retains the singular form. This is because Chinese cinema is not seen merely as the sum of all instances of Chinese film productions in various production and exhibition sites (e.g., mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Chinese diaspora). Rather, this study situates Chinese cinema within a shifting and transmedial global context that takes into consideration the films’ production, circulation, and reception milieus. This volume looks at the local and national in the global, and vice-versa, in all aspects of Chinese cinema as art and aesthetics, social practice and cultural imagination, politics and activism, industry and market—both in Chinese films and as “cited” in world cinema.³⁶

The Chapters

To achieve these goals, this book explores the complex global relationships of Chinese cinema through four primary lenses, although each lens often spills over and informs the others: (1) politics and dissent in global contexts, (2) transnational reception, (3) globalization and Chinese identities, and (4) film markets and financial reform. These lenses allow a more scalar approach to the transnational influences that have yielded a variety of cinematic practices and economic structures in Chinese cinema over time. There is not a single set of global forces that have structured Chinese cinema over the years nor a monolithic vision of “Chinese cinema” itself; rather, there is a diverse set of influences and shifting global structures impacting local, national, and global contexts. The four lenses we deploy here attempt to approach the multifaceted and dynamic concept of Chinese cinema from different angles and perspectives, drawing out a series of complex scales of global

influence. From these different perspectives, the essays in this book illustrate the multifaceted ways that Chinese cinematic practices straddle the intersections of local, national, and global influences.

The first section explores a series of transnational circuits and influences underpinning cinema and political critique of China and the Chinese government. Contrasted with the tightly regulated and controlled mainland Chinese film industry, these essays explore moments of cinematic critique and dissent in which transnational filmmaking, art, and activism intersect with Chinese cinema and politics. In its exploration of a transnational sampling of historical Chinese documentaries, underground films about Hong Kong activism, to coproduced, and environmentally conscious Chinese art cinema, this section interrogates the transnational dynamics of political critique in cinematic practices at the margins of Chinese cinema.

Chapter 1, “Seeing (through) the Struggle Sessions: Cinema, Recycling, and Transnational Circulation,” explores the intersections between cinema and *pidouhui*: sessions of mass denunciation in which those labeled as class enemies were accused and tormented in public. Analyzing the cinematic nature of such political theater along with the global circulation of images of *pidouhui*, Belinda Qian He tracks a variety of *pidouhui* images—both fictional and recycled, “found” footage images—within Chinese media and across national borders. These mediated references to *pidouhui* engage a variety of audiences in debates around historical memory and politics, according to He. From depictions of *pidouhui* in the 2018 Chinese film *Forever Young* (*Wuwen xi dong*, dir. Li Fangfang), to a parody of *pidouhui* in the 1974 French comedy *Chinese in Paris* (*Les Chinois à Paris*, dir. Jean Yanne), to the recycling of historical *pidouhui* footage across a range of documentaries, this chapter interrogates the global sampling and recycling of *pidouhui* imagery in disparate ideological contexts, showing how these cinematic allusions tell us more about their deployment and their audiences than they actually document the history and politics of Mao’s China.

Joseph Tse-Hei Lee continues this discussion of cinema and dissent in Chapter 2, “Screening Politics in Hong Kong,” by analyzing a series of international films focused on the youthful rebellion of the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in the 2010s. From low-budget, independent Hong Kong films such as *Ten Years* (*Shi nian*, dir. Kwok Zune, Fei-Pang Wong, Jevons Au, Kwun-Wai Chow, and Ka-Leung Ng, 2015) to internationally produced documentaries *Lesson in Dissent* (dir. Matthew Torne, 2014) and *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower* (dir. Joe Piscatella, 2017), this chapter demonstrates the power of cinema to articulate not only political critiques of Chinese authoritarianism in Hong Kong but also an emerging vision of Hong Kong identity that is caught between global, national, and local politics. These cinematic texts and the subjects they depict, Lee argues, have shaped a compelling model of local identity and civic engagement for young people in Hong Kong grappling with the city’s colonial past, tumultuous present, and uncertain future.

Chapter 3 also situates critical Chinese cinema practices within a global network of art and activism, in this case Zhao Liang's 2015 film *Behemoth* (*Beixi moshou*) and its relationship to the aesthetics of global "ecocinema." In this final chapter of Part I, "All of Us Are Part of the Monster': Toxic Sublimity and Ethical Reflexivity in Zhao Liang's *Behemoth*," Man-Fung Yip explores the aesthetic and affective functions of *Behemoth*, a documentary that eschews a traditional documentary format to present lyrical, beautifully crafted images of environmental destruction and decay without commentary or extensive narration. Yip offers a detailed analysis of the film's visual imagery and narrative arc that embeds *Behemoth* within a set of global artistic movements and cultural referents, from its use of the "toxic sublime" to its invocation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to articulate the film's political critique. For this French-funded Chinese film that was intended primarily for audiences on the international film festival circuit, its critiques of Chinese and global environmental destruction are entwined in a larger global framework of activist artistic practices.

In the next main section, the book turns its attention to the critical reception of Chinese film and the ways that audiences engage with transnational cinema. The essays in this section explore how various Chinese films exist alongside global cinema and global genres, with a particular emphasis on reception and aesthetics. How have audiences and critics understood Chinese cinema in relation to transnational cinema practices and global film styles?

Chapter 4, "From *Gone with the Wind* to *The Spring River Flows East*: Melodrama and Historical Imagination in Postwar Chinese Cinema," explores the global contexts of melodrama as a transnational storytelling tradition. Analyzing the 1947 film *The Spring River Flows East* (*Yi jiang chun shui xiang dong liu*, dir. Cai Chusheng and Zheng Junli), Kenny Ng compares the critical reception of local, Chinese melodrama with the Chinese reception of *Gone with the Wind* (dir. Victor Fleming, 1939). In this way, Ng shows how Chinese cinema in this period negotiated the leftist dictates of film critics as well as the popular appeal of big-budget, Western, sentimental romances such as *Gone with the Wind*. *The Spring River Flows East*, Ng argues, uses the melodramatic mode to navigate issues of gender, family, and national identity in conversation with Hollywood melodramas. This transnational encounter between Chinese and Hollywood melodramas reveals the inherently cosmopolitan culture of pre-1950 Chinese cinema. Through this encounter, local melodramas such as *The Spring River Flows East* reveal the complex global currents informing Chinese film production and national identity in this period.

Chapter 5 similarly positions Chinese cinema against globally popular film, exploring the sensory reception of transnational cinema rather than its textual or ideological significance. Xi W. Liu's essay, "Spatial Perception: The Aesthetics of *Yijing* in Transnational Kung Fu Films," provocatively asks if there are particular feelings or sensations associated with either national or transnational cinema spectatorship and, if so, how can an analysis of feeling help us understand the global flows of culture? Interrogating the concept of *yijing*—a kind of pre-cognitive,

emotional response that transcends the iconography that may have evoked it—Xi W. Liu analyzes key visual moments from the globally popular Chinese kung fu film *The Grandmaster* (*Yidai zongshi*, dir. Wong Kar-wai, 2013) and the US animated film series *Kung Fu Panda* (dir. Mark Osborne and John Stevenson, 2008), coproduced by DreamWorks and its Chinese branch, Oriental DreamWorks, now Pearl Studio. Exploring how these sequences evoke the feeling of *yijing*, this chapter shows how this feeling vacillates between a form of authentic Chinese aesthetics and a globally disseminated, culturally vague distillation of “Chineseness” for international audiences. Ultimately, this chapter asks us to consider how the sensations of cinema navigate our understanding of transnational culture and aesthetics.

Chapter 6, then, turns its attention to the public reception of international coproductions—which are often critical and commercial failures—by asking what makes for a successful coproduction. Analyzing the Sino-French coproduction *Wolf Totem* (*Lang tuteng*, dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2015), Wendy Su’s essay, “Global Network, Ecocinema, and Chinese Contexts: *Wolf Totem* as a Successful Model of Transnational Coproduction,” shows how this film achieved success across national borders by appealing to global environmental themes that would resonate in transnational contexts, all while telling a culturally specific story about China during the Cultural Revolution. The film’s exploration of human-wolf relationships on the steppe of Mongolia in the 1960s provided a compelling ecological framework for the story that engages with the international environmental movement but is not controversial or critical enough to risk the ire of the Chinese government. Additionally, Su points to the internationally diverse crew overseen by French director Jean-Jacques Annaud and the support given to the film by state authorities in order to bolster its commercial viability. These factors combined to make the massive, eight-year-long production of *Wolf Totem* a financially and culturally successful venture for the partner nations.

Building off these discussions of transnational reception, the third section of the book explores issues of identity and globalization, from the representation of “Chineseness” in global film culture to the production of a global Sinophone culture spanning China, Taiwan, and Singapore and the construction of gender identity in relation to global genre filmmaking.

Chapter 7 initiates this discussion by analyzing cosmopolitanism in 1990s, Shanghai-set, international coproductions. In “The Sound of Chinese Urban Cinema: Multilingualism and the Re-globalization of Shanghai in the 1990s,” Lin Feng traces the representation of urban spaces as sites of ideological contamination in Chinese cinema, with an emphasis on spoken language and the disparagement of regional dialects since the 1960s. In several 1990s Chinese–Hong Kong coproductions set in Shanghai, however, the films attempt to depict Shanghai’s urban regeneration through the nuanced co-existence of different languages and dialects. Feng analyzes the linguistic diversity in these urban films to explore the construction of Shanghai as a site of increased global trade and cosmopolitanism in the 1990s. By

detailing the relationships between language, space, and the shifting relationships between Shanghai and Hong Kong in that period, this chapter reveals the struggles between the local, the national, and the global.

These negotiations are also evoked through language and song in the Chinese-language, Singapore filmmaking of Royston Tan. Exploring Tan's work in Chapter 8, Alison M. Groppe's essay, "Sound, Allusion, and the 'Wandering Songstress' in Royston Tan's Films," analyzes the persistent references to the figure of the songstress across Tan's films, evoking nostalgia for a popular cultural trope in 1940s and 1950s Chinese film and music. The often-tragic figure of the wistful songstress represented a dominant and internationally popular screen icon emanating from Shanghai and Hong Kong cinema in the 1940s and 1950s, producing transnational stars such as Grace Chang (Ge Lan) in the process. Throughout his body of work, Singapore filmmaker Royston Tan references the songs, styles, and narrative tropes from this period of Chinese filmmaking, illustrating the transnational flows that link culture in Singapore, Hong Kong, and China more broadly. Drawing out the nuanced allusions to the songstress figure in Tan's film, Groppe shows how these transnational cultural references help illustrate the dynamics of local cultural politics in Singapore, in the process illuminating the construction of identity via language and dialect in Sinophone Asia.

Issues of gender, of course, are central to these dynamics, and the intersections of gender and global film culture form the background to Chapter 9. In "Implicit Sexuality: The Representation of the Femme Fatale Figure in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*," Yushi Hou takes up the global figure of the "femme fatale"—gleaned from Hollywood film noir but utilized across international filmmaking traditions—to interrogate representations of gender and sexuality in the Chinese neo-noir *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (*Bairi yanhuo*, dir. Diao Yi'nan, 2014). Situating the femme fatale from the film within a Chinese post-socialist cultural context, Hou argues that Chinese neo-noir expresses the powerlessness of the femme fatale—as well as the anti-hero—within contemporary political systems. In particular, by contrasting the Chinese femme fatale's sexuality with the representation of sexuality and power in classical Hollywood and other global film noir, this essay shows how Chinese neo-noir modifies the noir tradition to explore gender and politics within the government-sponsored vision of the "Chinese Dream."

The final section of the book examines the financial transformations in the Chinese film industry that have opened up many of the global influences and transnational complexities of the previous chapters. These chapters explore how various government-led financial reforms in the film industry over the past several decades have impacted industry structures, global collaboration and commercialization, and even the place of cinema in the government's promotion of Chinese interests abroad.

Examining the business practices of the contemporary Chinese film industry, Chapter 10, "The China Film Co., Ltd. and the Stock Market: Financialization

with Chinese Characteristics,” analyzes the relationships between globalization, national identity, and politics with a focus on the financial operations of the industry. In this chapter, Shiyong Liu explores the complex history of the China Film Company, Ltd. (CFC), a subsidiary company created by the massive, state-owned China Film Group Corporation (CFG) in 2010 and publicly traded since 2016. As the Chinese film industry attempted to transition from a propaganda enterprise to a commercially viable entity (one that still reflects the politics and ideology of the state), several failed attempts at an IPO by the state-owned China Film Group Corporation led to a new venture: the China Film Company, Ltd., an enterprise that would assume some of the commercial dealings of the CFG, facilitate the further influx of foreign investment into the expanding Chinese film industry, and operate alongside private commercial media companies such as the Huayi Brothers Media Corporation. Exploring this history leading up to the creation of the CFC in 2010—along with the CFC’s initial struggles to work toward an IPO—Liu illustrates the financial and cultural tensions between the state-owned Chinese film industry and the commercial pressures of globalization, as new cinema ventures must be both globally appealing (especially in competition with Hollywood blockbusters) as well as ideologically appropriate for the Chinese government.

These pressures are also at the heart of Chapter 11. Qi Ai’s essay, “*Big Shot’s Funeral*: Sino-foreign Collaboration and Industrial Commercialization,” draws out the self-reflexive commentary about the commercialization of the Chinese film industry embedded in Feng Xiaogang’s 2001 film *Big Shot’s Funeral* (*Dawan*), a coproduction between Huayi Brothers Media and Columbia Pictures. The film itself is a product of the rapidly shifting economic climate for Chinese cinema throughout the 1990s as the Chinese government sought a variety of approaches to commercialize the industry while maintaining some degree of ideological control and cultural specificity. According to Ai, within the narrative and imagery in the film, Feng Xiaogang layers a series of references to the economics and working conditions of Chinese film personnel as they grapple with the turmoil of international cooperation. Through the film and its negotiation of artistic vision and new market imperatives, Ai explores how commercialization and coproduction impact Chinese cinema.

Financial changes to the Chinese film industry, however, are also part of a larger strategy of international diplomacy in which Chinese cinema helps sell the “Chinese Dream” to domestic and international audiences. Katherine Chu’s essay, “Sticks, Not Carrots: The Discourse of Soft Power in Popular Chinese Cinema,” looks to Chinese geopolitics to contextualize contemporary Chinese film production. Chu analyzes the Chinese government’s attempts to leverage various forms of “soft power” through globally popular Chinese films such as *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhan lang 2*, dir. Wu Jing, 2017). Outlining the history of soft power in Chinese media policy and the key strategies in place to project positive images of China around the world, this chapter explores how the commercialization of the Chinese film

industry must also be understood alongside the Chinese government's promotion of itself and the nation.

Finally, in the epilogue, Po-Shek Fu and Stanley Rosen grapple with two key issues that can be traced through all the chapters of this book: (1) the global negotiations around Chinese and Sinophone identity, and (2) the place of cinema in the projection of Chinese power both domestically and around the world, especially through coproductions and other financial reforms. Linking together the different arguments and examples from across the book, Fu and Rosen synthesize the key contributions of the scholars presented here while pointing the way forward for future research.

Notes

1. For instance, Paul Bond, "China Film Market to Eclipse U.S. Next Year: Study," *Hollywood Reporter*, June 5, 2019, accessed January 23, 2020, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/china-film-market-eclipse-us-next-year-study-1215348>.
2. *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 477. Cf., for instance, Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) on China as a center of world history and economy, or Wang Gungwu, *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) on the movement of Chinese peoples and cultures around the world through the centuries.
3. On that culture in Shanghai, see Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
4. David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Ho-fung Hung, *The China Boom: Why China Will Not Rule the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).
5. The two earliest works on Chinese cinema include Jay Leyda, *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), and Ian Jarvie, *Window on Hong Kong: A Sociological Study of the Hong Kong Film Industry* (Hong Kong: Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 1977).
6. At the forefront of these trends is the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, which has published various issues specializing in such topics as transnational cinema and sound, among others, since its inauguration in 2006.
7. Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema," *Screen* 30, no. 4 (1989): 36–47.
8. See, for instance, Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinemas: Culture and Politics Since 1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), and Chris Berry, ed., *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema* (London: BFI, 1991).
9. See Wai-Siam Hee, *Remapping the Sinophone: The Cultural Production of Chinese-Language Cinema in Singapore and Malaya before and during the Cold War* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).
10. Song Hwee Lim, "Six Chinese Cinemas in Search of a Historiography," in *The Chinese Cinema Book*, ed. Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward (London: BFI, 2011), 35–43.

“All of Us Are Part of the Monster”

Toxic Sublimity and Ethical Reflexivity in Zhao Liang’s *Behemoth*

Man-Fung Yip

Named *Time* magazine’s Person of the Year for 2019, Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg is emblematic of the mainstream recognition bestowed on a burgeoning international movement that seeks to combat the increasingly dire consequences of climate change and other environmental challenges through raising consciousness, influencing policy debates, and triggering political action. In this current age of environmental/climate crisis and activism, films with an ecological or anthropogenic focus have also become a rapidly growing phenomenon worldwide. Miyazaki Hayao’s *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *Spirited Away* (2001), Davis Guggenheim’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel’s *Leviathan* (2012), and Bong Joon-ho’s *Snowpiercer* (2013)—these are but a few examples from the past two decades or so, ones that encompass both fictional features and documentaries, live action and animation, mainstream and experimental films.¹ Chinese cinema, too, has added significantly to this trend. One can point to a growing number of films that exemplify what Sheldon Lu calls “Chinese ecocinema,”² including Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*, 2006), a fiction film about the impact of the Three Gorges Dam project, and Wang Jiuliang’s *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (*Laji weicheng*, 2011) and *Plastic China* (*Suliao wangguo*, 2014), both of which are documentaries centered on victims of industrial contamination.

A recent example of the Chinese ecocinema trend is Zhao Liang’s *Behemoth* (*Beixi moshou*, 2015), an experimental documentary about the ecological and human ravages of coal-mining and iron and steel industries in Inner Mongolia. While the subject matter of the film may not break new ground, its aesthetic approach is anything but conventional: eschewing a clear narrative and traditional documentary devices such as expository voiceover or talking head interviews, the film conveys its meanings primarily through images—notably pictorial shots, at once stunningly beautiful and deeply unnerving, of boundless mining pits, grasslands covered in soot and dust, flaming ironworks, and a pristine but empty ghost city.

There is no question that *Behemoth* is visually spectacular and gorgeous. In an interview, Zhao described his approach as making the ugly beautiful; an approach, it is worth noting, that can already be observed in the director's earlier photographic series *Beijing Green* (*Beijing lü*, 2004–2007) and *Water* (*Shui*, 2004–2008).³ As Paolo Magagnoli points out, what makes these photographic series so fascinating and unique is their aestheticization of pollution: the ways in which they document the environmental degradation in China in strangely beautiful images meshing the natural and artificial together, while making allusions to the important, long-standing Chinese tradition of *shanshui* (“mountain and river”) and flower-and-bird paintings.⁴ However, this aestheticized approach, in the photographic series as well as in *Behemoth*, is not without detractors; their main point of criticism has to do with what is seen as willful indifference to, or even mitigation of, the devastating issues portrayed in the photographs and in the film. On the photographic series, for instance, Michael Hatch offers a fierce critique of their “aestheticized quietude” that purportedly undercuts the urgency and seriousness of the ecological calamity experienced by China.⁵ Similarly, while many critics are captivated by the gorgeous cinematography and the sheer beauty of the images in *Behemoth*, some of them also express a certain uneasiness over the paradoxical juxtaposition of the beautiful and the depressing (“The longer the film lasted, the less I could enjoy the gorgeous pictures [the director] has captured”)⁶ as well as over what is perceived as “unnecessary poetic flourishes” in the film.⁷

Such criticisms, I should add, are not specific to Zhao Liang's works and resonate with a rather widespread view that sees aestheticization and representation of the miserable and the terrifying (pain, grief, poverty, catastrophe, etc.) as inherently incompatible with one another. As Susan Sontag points out perceptively with specific reference to photographs:

Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticized if it seems “aesthetic”; that is, too much like art. The dual powers of photography—to generate documents and to create works of visual art—have produced some remarkable exaggerations about what photographers ought and ought not to do. Lately, the most common exaggeration is one that regards these powers as opposites. Photographs that depict suffering shouldn't be beautiful. . . . In this view, a beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture's status as a document. The photograph gives mixed signals. Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle!⁸

According to Sontag, the propensity toward adding aura and beauty to images of suffering and devastation is on the wane. Rather, it is the opposite tendency of “uglifying,” a more modern operation that seeks to show “something at its worst,” that is regarded as less manipulative and thus more authentic.⁹ Sontag's observations about the shifting standards are generally correct, but has this suspicion of the beautiful

gone too far? Does aestheticization necessarily bleach out a moral response to what is shown? And how would this dynamic between aesthetics and ethics be changed if we move beyond photography to an audiovisual and time-based medium such as the cinema?

In this chapter, I focus on the film *Behemoth* and try to rethink these (and other) questions in the context of global ecocinema and environmentally engaged art practices. Specifically, the chapter is divided into two major sections. The first is devoted to presenting a theory of toxic sublimity that informs not only *Behemoth* but also a number of cinematic and photographic works, including some of the documentaries of Werner Herzog and the large-scale landscape photographs of Edward Burtynsky. What these creations share in common, I argue, is in part their aestheticized yet tension-ridden visual rhetoric, which creates a kind of disturbance in the viewer’s imaginative and cognitive faculty, drawing the viewer into affective, and ultimately ethical, contemplations of ecological devastation. The second part extends the analysis by focusing on the aural and especially structural-narrative aspects of *Behemoth*, which serve in many ways to “anchor” the potential ambiguities of the film’s aestheticized images and to render more overt its eco-critical stance. This is the case, for instance, in the way the film borrows the structure of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (i.e., the journey through Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise), and quotes and adapts the epic poem for its sparse but powerfully haunting voice-over narration. Significantly, as borne out by these allusions to *Divine Comedy*—and by the biblical reference of the film’s eponymous beast as well as the visual strategies it shares with Herzog’s and Burtynsky’s works noted earlier—*Behemoth* evinces a global perspective and propensity that points to its own conditions of possibility, namely those of a low-budget independent documentary funded mainly by French sources and targeted by and large at the international film festival and art-house circuits. Despite its focus on local environmental issues in China, then, the film seeks to speak to a larger international community by situating itself not only in relation to a set of global canonical texts, but also as part of a growing trend in which filmmakers and artists around the world are trying to find new ways to intervene in, and foster dialogue about, the global ecological crisis.

The Toxic Sublime

Born in Dandong in northeastern China, Zhao Liang graduated from the LuXun Academy of Fine Arts in 1992. Since then, he has been working as an independent documentary filmmaker as well as a multimedia artist in photography and video art. As part of China’s burgeoning “New Documentary Movement,”¹⁰ Zhao’s first documentaries offer, in the words of Li Jie, “penetrating observations of state-society relations in contemporary China, showing both their human and dehumanizing aspects.”¹¹ *Crime and Punishment* (*Zui yu fa*, 2007), for instance, explores abusive law enforcement in China by documenting the everyday operations of a police

station in a small town in Liaoning, whereas *Petition* (*Shangfang*, 2009), shot over the course of twelve years, chronicles a community of disgruntled petitioners who come to the capital from all over China to appeal injustices by local officials, but find themselves up against a corrupt judicial system and suffer from all kinds of intimidation and coercion. While continuing this propensity toward acute reflections on social problems and conditions, *Behemoth* represents a major stylistic departure from the director's earlier documentaries. In Bill Nichols' scheme of classification, the change involves a shift away from the observational (the unobtrusive observation of what is in front of the camera) and participatory (an emphasis on the interaction between filmmaker and subject through interviews and other patterns of collaboration or confrontation) modes to the poetic mode, which "stresses visual and acoustic rhythms, patterns, and the overall form of the film."¹² As the director himself admits,

I find the conventional documentary filmmaking and its linear form limiting. It doesn't satisfy what I crave in filmmaking anymore. When people watch a documentary, they tend to have certain expectations. It is constraining. When I work on a video installation for a gallery space, it is relaxing and I feel more at liberty with the material. I wanted to combine the two. So it means experimentation of some kind in the film, and introducing some aesthetic interest from contemporary art, in terms of perception and understanding of art. I do find contemporary art nourishing in this respect. I don't want to limit myself to the documentary perspective.¹³

Given that the aestheticized rendition of pollution and environmental degradation in *Behemoth*, as noted earlier, can be traced to Zhao's earlier photographic series *Beijing Green* and *Water*, the stylistic departure of the film may precisely be seen as the result of a conscious attempt to incorporate elements of contemporary art into his documentary practice. More importantly, just as the visually appealing images do not make the photographic series less an instance of eco-activist art, neither does the stunning pictorial beauty of the film undercut its central eco-critical message. Quite the contrary, indeed, for it can be argued that the beautifying tendency is integral to the critical perspective of both the photographic series and the film, even though a point of distinction has to be made in terms of how this link between aestheticization and reflection/criticism works in each case. For Magagnoli, it is "irony" that expresses the critical stance of the photographic series:

[T]he purpose of Zhao's self-consciously composed images was to direct the attention of audiences towards the utter neglect and destruction of Beijing's environment. What defines the edge of Zhao's ironic pictures is . . . the *inappropriateness* of the artist's visual language. . . . Zhao's images deploy a set of conventions borrowed from the context of fine art to depict a significant issue, Beijing's pollution, that would have demanded a more sober and didactic approach. The cynical detachment of *Water* and *Beijing Green* . . . was symptomatic of the purposeful intention to stir and even offend the viewer. . . . Zhao's peculiar brand of irony . . . is less the

Global Network, Ecocinema, and Chinese Contexts

Wolf Totem as a Successful Model of Transnational Coproduction

Wendy Su

Transnational coproduction has become a very trendy and remarkable phenomenon in China's film industry. *Coproduction* refers to a partnership between two or more different national production entities aimed at pooling resources while taking advantage of tax incentives, funding opportunities, locations, and popular talent in order to better compete in international markets. Coproduced movies have not only become major contributors to domestic box office revenue and the backbone of China's film industry, but they have also enabled foreign studios, especially Hollywood, to bypass the tight quota limit on film imports in China. In 2015, international coproductions approved by China outnumbered the sum of all coproductions launched in China in the prior three years, and Hollywood was China's biggest partner in these coproductions.¹ A record high eighty-nine shooting permits were issued by China's film administration in 2016 for coproductions, an increase of 11 percent over the 2015 figure.² By the end of 2017, coproduction treaties had been signed between China and twenty other countries.³

Coproduction is not something new. From its inception, the film industry has been inherently transnational, involving collaboration among various countries. Postwar cinema especially relied on transnational and transregional collaboration, and the trend has become increasingly prominent since the 1990s, driven by booming cultural industries in Asia. Coproductions have also been supported by China's unstoppable ascendance as the world's largest film market and one of the top film producers, backed by its rapidly increasing economic power and constantly growing middle class. Under China's quota system, only thirty-four foreign movies are allowed to be imported into China on the revenue-sharing basis every year, and the revenue-sharing system enables producers of these foreign imports to earn 25 percent of the total revenue. However, a coproduction is exempt from the quota limit and can be released in China as a domestically made movie, which can earn

the studio as much as 43 percent of the total revenue. This significant profit difference encourages foreign studios to obtain coproduction status for their movies.

Coproduction is also greatly supported by the Chinese state and is part of its long-practiced strategy of “going to sea by borrowing a boat” initiated at the turn of the twenty-first century. China hopes to draw on foreign resources to transform its domestic film industry, export Chinese culture, and enhance its soft power in the world. Miao Xiaotian, president of the China Film Co-Production Corporation, speaking at the 2015 US-China Film Summit, said that what China desires from the coproduction process is for Chinese movies to be seen by the world to gain influence and reputation.⁴

While “international collaboration is normal practice for filmmakers and financiers through formal coproduction agreement or business partnerships,”⁵ and coproduction is an effective operating mode for film producers to pool resources and talents, avoid quota limit and taxes, and share markets, these “border-erasing free-trade economics” nevertheless butt up against “border-defining cultural initiatives under the unstable sign of the nation.”⁶ Coproduction thus has an inherent tension between its pursuit of economic benefits and of seeking international appeal across national borders. This is especially true if coproducers are from entirely different cultures and hold quite disparate value systems, ethics, or customs. Miao Xiaotian once concluded that “the biggest obstacle facing coproductions is a cultural barrier.”⁷ James Pang, CEO of China’s Kylin Network Movie and Culture Media Co. Ltd., contends that coproduction is a form of cultural “kidnapping” or the imposition of one’s own culture and value system on another partner.⁸

Although Sino-foreign coproductions have become an integral part of global film production and consumption networks, the cultural barriers facing coproduction as a practice have meant that very few Sino-foreign coproductions have acquired both critical acclaim and box office success in China and the partner country, as demonstrated by the unsatisfactory market performance of *The Great Wall* (*Changcheng*, 2016), a Sino-US coproduction directed by China’s famous director Zhang Yimou. One film that did acquire critical acclaim, however, is *Wolf Totem* (*Lang tuteng*, dir. Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2015), a Sino-French coproduction.

This chapter takes *Wolf Totem* as a case study, analyzing its cross-cultural aesthetics as well as its global network of production, circulation, and consumption. *Wolf Totem* achieved impressive box office successes in both Chinese and European film markets, generating 700 million yuan (approximately US\$1.07 million) within a month of its release and \$125.6 million globally. The \$125.6 million revenue included \$110 million from China and \$8 million from France, given that the director is a renowned French director. The film, however, earned only \$210,591 in the US. As such, the film’s international revenue outside North America accounted for 99.8 percent of total box office receipts, whereas China accounted for 88% of the total box office.⁹ The movie is about the experience of China’s “sent-down” generation in Inner Mongolia during the Cultural Revolution era, highlighting the relationships

among human beings, animals, and nature. The film experiments with a plausible way to do coroductions—a universally acceptable theme in a China context, and thus opens up the space for aesthetic and artistic success if not box office success in North America.

Drawing on the emergent field of “ecocinema” studies that examines cinema from a broad ecological perspective,¹⁰ this chapter argues that the artistic success of *Wolf Totem* lies in its incorporation of the transnational theme of environmentalism in a specific Chinese historical context. I will decipher the factors contributing to the success of this transnational coproduction, including its universally appealing theme of ecological consciousness and environmental protection, a touching story deeply rooted in China’s Cultural Revolution, and a director-centered model with a high degree of professionalism and division of labor in global networks of production and distribution. I argue that the film grounds its ecological consciousness in a historically specific Chinese setting, thus embedding its transnational theme in a local Chinese context. Standing at the meeting point of transnationalism and national politics, this movie is both Chinese and global. I, therefore, suggest in this chapter that *Wolf Totem* may have paved a path for future Sino-foreign coproductions.

Coproduction and Confining Cultural Factors

Because of the inherent tension in film coproductions between the cultural specificity of filmmakers and the cultural universality needed to appeal to international audiences,¹¹ previous researchers have proposed the notions of “cultural proximity”¹² and “cultural discount”¹³ to try to explain the reasons behind the success or failure of a coproduction.

Cultural proximity refers to “the tendency to prefer media products from one’s own culture or the most similar possible culture,”¹⁴ for the obvious reason of easy apprehension, mutual understanding, and cross-border appeal. This notion can be used to explain why there are more coproductions among European countries such as Britain, France, Italy, and Spain, who enjoy geographic proximity and cultural similarity. More Asian coproductions among Japan, China, and Korea may also testify to this notion.

However, cultural proximity cannot guarantee the success of a coproduction in different national and cultural contexts and cannot explain why, in the same country, some coproduced movies or imported programs are successful while others aren’t. As Koichi Iwabuchi argues, cultural proximity is “an ahistorical and totalizing way of conceiving culture” and risks seeing culture as a set of static and essentialized attributes that would automatically attract audiences.¹⁵ Iwabuchi maintained that “cultural proximity” should be understood as a dynamic process of “becoming culturally proximate” when “audiences identify cultural similarities in a specific programme and context.”¹⁶

I would further argue that cultural and geographic proximity cannot erase cultural differences, historical conflicts, and nationalistic sentiment; this concept may only apply to certain cross-border productions and has its limitations. For example, among a number of China-Korea coproductions, only two movies, *A Wedding Invitation* (*Fenshou heyue*, dir. Oh Ki-hwan, 2013) and *20 Once Again* (*Chongfan ershisui*, dir. Chen Zhengdao, 2015), achieved relative commercial success, mainly in the Chinese market, despite the seeming “cultural proximity” between China and Korea. Similarly, Chinese remakes of Japanese original titles face the difficulty of transplanting authentic Japanese cultural elements into the Chinese context. For example, *What a Wonderful Family* (*Mafan jiazhu*, dir. Huang Lei, 2017), a movie of family conflicts and relationships based on Yoji Yamada’s novel, suffered both box office failure and criticism. Critics complained that the film merely copied the Japanese version without a sufficient localizing process. The major conflict between the old couple—in which the wife demands a divorce for being neglected by her husband and spends her time learning how to write—does not fit well into the Chinese context in which women are more often independent working mothers. Historical memories and political conflicts also often come into play, as in the case of Lu Chuan’s 2009 movie *Nanjing! Nanjing!*, which most Japanese theatres refused to screen. The Japanese actors who participated in this Sino-Japanese coproduction were severely lambasted in Japan.¹⁷

The counterpart to theories of cultural proximity is the concept of cultural discount, which refers to a reduction in the value or appeal of cultural imports crossing national borders. Imported films’ appeal to the audiences of other countries tends to decrease due to audiences’ insufficient background information as well as cultural and linguistic barriers.

Language is considered a critical factor in measuring cultural discount, as audiences do not enjoy dubbed foreign films and do not prefer reading translated subtitles. As a pioneer in Sino-US coproductions, Janet Yang observed that American audiences “have been spoiled and are provincial and rarely embrace foreign-language films.” Overall, “there is simply a lack of familiarity and exposure to Chinese cultural icons. The Western education system has not given filmmakers or audiences a strong basis for understanding the core Chinese visual and dramatic language.”¹⁸

However, some genres—action, crime/detective/thriller, and science fiction—have lower degrees of cultural resistance.¹⁹ For example, the Chinese remake of the Japanese movie *The Devotion of Suspect X* (*Xianyiren X de xianshen*, dir. Su Youpeng, 2017), a thriller based on Keigo Higashino’s novel, garnered more than 400 million yuan at the box office and was critically acclaimed, among all other unsuccessful adaptations and remakes. Its success can be attributed to the genre. The plot, full of suspenseful twists and turns, completely caught the attention of viewers. The thriller genre itself is a selling point because the context and cultural differences can either be largely neglected or localized without major revisions. The

Implicit Sexuality

The Representation of the Femme Fatale Figure in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*

Yushi Hou

The Chinese neo-noir *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (*Bairi yanhuo*, 2014), directed by Diao Yīnan, won Best Picture at the 64th Berlin International Film Festival on February 15, 2014¹ and then exceeded 100 million yuan at the box office after being released in late March of 2014;² it was praised by a *Variety* film review as a “powerful, carefully controlled detective thriller.”³ The success of the film piqued the interest of the Chinese film administration and made film scholars take note of its stylistic noir outlook.⁴ Although there is fruitful Chinese-language scholarship about this representative Chinese neo-noir as a “turning point of Chinese film industrialization” that makes a contribution to the diversity of contemporary Chinese cinema by integrating authorship into the genre system,⁵ my research engages with the femme fatale figure, a social-historical archetype in Western culture, and its transnational transplantation in contemporary Chinese neo-noir. I situate this noticeable and appealing generic character in the context of global film noir, which has not yet been substantively addressed by film academia. Moreover, East Asian film noir enriches the spectacle of global noir filmmaking and raises many scholarly discussions about film industries, aesthetics, and culture; concerning the potentiality of the mainland Chinese film market, it is worthwhile to place recent Chinese mainland neo-noirs as a genre into these broad discussions, to rethink the profound linkage between national specificity and the origin of classic film noir in the social, historical, and cultural contexts of postwar America through a comparative research method.

My research focuses on the individual femme fatale in *Black Coal, Thin Ice* not only because this character is played by Taiwanese actress Kwei Lun-mei—who exemplifies a sense of alienation in the urban setting of northeast China and signifies the flows of transnational stardom—but also because the femme fatale pertains to the completeness and identifiability of this genre, since women are not often presented as murderers in mainland Chinese crime thrillers or East Asian film noirs. More typically, women are superficially alluring and passively involved in crime

cases in such narratives, despite women being portrayed as law-breakers more often in Chinese crime thrillers. Thus, by comparing this film with the iconography of the seductive femme fatale in classic Hollywood, this chapter analyzes the implicit sexuality of this female character who interacts with the absence of the male's erotic gaze and reconciles with the loss of love, marriage, and family in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*. This implicit sexuality uses male impotence as a metaphor for the harsh realities of the film's post-socialist milieu. I argue that masculine anxieties in Chinese neo-noir originate from an oppressive political system and a patriarchal society rather than emanating from the fatal woman, and the typical femme fatale figure in Chinese neo-noir, with its pessimistic gender politics, refers to the destruction of domestic ideology—the disillusionment of the “Chinese Dream” slogan in the post-socialist cultural context.

The Concept of the Femme Fatale

The femme fatale, a seductive, mysterious, and deadly woman, is regarded as a film noir icon. Primarily driven by money, she entices the male protagonist with her sexuality in hopes of achieving her selfish desires. In classic Hollywood film noir, femme fatales are usually equal to male protagonists rather than subordinate to men; they cannot be restrained in any relationship nor disturbed by emotion. In terms of the femme fatale's iconography, Janey Place outlines the scope of her sexualized image as “long hair (blond or dark), make-up, jewelry, cigarette” and “long, lovely legs”; she also emphasizes that the cigarette, with its “wispy trails of smoke,” is a symbol of the femme fatale's “unnatural phallic power.”⁶ Since smoking is generally regarded as a masculine action, the image of a sexy woman with a smoky cigarette underlines her potential power, which might threaten the patriarchal order.⁷ Also, the femme fatale often shows her beautiful legs in her first appearance, and she is often the primary focus of the composition in the foreground. Corresponding to this image, Place mentions that “the original transgression of the dangerous lady of film noir is ambition expressed metaphorically in her freedom of movement and visual dominance.”⁸ The femme fatale visually dominates the camera movement, lighting, framing, and shooting angle, which threateningly embodies an out-of-control sense for the male protagonist. As she is a beautiful and mysterious woman who often “gaze[s] at her own reflection in the mirror, ignoring the man she will use to achieve her goals,” the camera focuses on her and moves to follow her, signaling her independence, ambition, and her “self-absorbed narcissism.”⁹

The rise of the femme fatale in classic film noir is associated with socio-cultural changes in the postwar cultural contexts of the United States. Those ambitious and unsatisfied femme fatale figures reflect a burgeoning feminism in postwar society, especially as former housewives played an important role in the workplace during wartime; women's social status had soared because of their social and economic

contributions, although the reintegration of men into the postwar economy yielded a tension between the new possibilities for women and the traditional gender order.

As Hanson illustrates, “seductive” means both “alluring” and “distracting,” and the seductive individuality of the femme fatale transgresses traditional gender roles, producing a symptomatic anxiety in a male-centered society.¹⁰ Due to the absence of normal families and steady marriages in film noir, these “exciting, childless whores”—in opposition to “boring, potentially childbearing sweethearts”¹¹—menace traditional family structures and conservative values, and disenchant the American Dream related to family and national unity.

Simultaneously, the popularity of the femme fatale on screen evokes a set of male anxieties in the postwar period. Working women were requested to subordinate to men’s career ambitions and competitiveness because “postwar retrenchment involved shifting women out of their work or back into lower paid positions.”¹² Thus, the femme fatale in film noir dramatizes postwar male anxieties in the face of proficient and forceful working women not only breaking gendered stereotypes but also threatening the economic standing of men. As a result, femme fatales visualize a masculinity crisis in the postwar cultural context, and the emergence of the femme fatale in classic film noir leads to female audiences’ self-awareness and self-identification, reflecting the far-reaching impacts of the postwar feminist movement.

Such gender conflicts and masculinity crisis of postwar society are expressed in the sexual tension between the antihero and the femme fatale on screen. These femme fatales are opposites, either “the phallic femme or the feminine woman,”¹³ because they challenge stereotypes about ideal coupling, families, and home in the American Dream that was constructed by mainstream media. The femme fatale’s sexually appealing and perverse power does not derive from male support—she dresses like a glamorous woman but thinks and acts like a cold-blooded man. These deadly women never present their expectations for romantic love and a happy marriage until the end of the film, and then they “either died, reformed, or turned out not to be a femme fatale after all.”¹⁴

In postmodern film noir and recent neo-noirs, femme fatales are more inclined to accept advanced higher education. Lindop examines the concept of pre-millennial femme fatales in neo-noir and points out that these “intelligent, educated, self-inventive and active” femme fatales might be a metaphor about the “contradictions and tensions that are indicative of postfeminist discourse” after the second wave of feminist activism.¹⁵ The well-educated femme fatales on screen are “perfectly at home in the corporate realm and other typically male dominated spaces,” while they “kill for thrills, reject conventional relationships and boast complete mastery over their victims.”¹⁶

It is not easy to sum up the common features of the new femme fatales within the diversity of global neo-noir—as Tasker writes, “the noir woman has become a sign of a different kind in neo-noir”¹⁷ on screen—but the contemporary femme

fatale figure is still worth exploring further. Based on the critical discourses around the femme fatale and her history, Helen Hanson states, “Fatal female figures, the ways in which they are placed within genres, narrative strategies and regimes of representation, and the ways in which they are part of an ongoing dialogue with popular incarnations of female identity in different contexts will continue to be a fertile area of debate.”¹⁸

Implicit Sexuality

The femme fatale is a transnational character that arose in classic Hollywood but has been taken up in global neo-noir in a variety of contexts. Corresponding to film noir tropes, the heroine of *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, Wu Zhizhen, who seduces men and must be punished in the end, seems to be a cold-blooded femme fatale who prompts a series of deaths. However, her appearance, mannerisms, and motives in the story are not consistent with the classic Hollywood femme fatale. Her sexuality tends to be implicit rather than explicit, and she is more often presented as a victim of poverty who needs to be protected or punished in order to resuscitate the male protagonist’s manhood. These generic complexities—her image, history, and contexts—demonstrate a series of cultural conflicts in contemporary Chinese neo-noir.

The deadly woman in *Black Coal, Thin Ice*, exemplifies the specificity of the femme fatale in East Asian popular culture, or, more precisely, in contemporary Chinese post-socialist cultural contexts. She is placed in a more nuanced narrative context in which money is only one of the protagonists’ impulses fueling their criminal behavior.

The film takes place in Harbin, a provincial capital city in northeast China, and starts in the summer of 1999. The hero, Zhang Zili, is a just-divorced policeman who had previously worked a grisly murder case. The victim was Liang Zhijun, a scale operator in a provincial coal mine weighing station. The murderer cut Liang’s body into small pieces to destroy the evidence, and his body parts were found on coal piles across the province over the course of a single day. After five years unsuccessfully working the case, Zhang has been transferred to a factory to work as their security guard. He has not remarried and has become an alcoholic. One day he hears from his previous colleagues that Wu Zhizhen, the widow of Liang, has had two boyfriends after the death of her husband, and they were both murdered. Zhang begins working the case again with his former colleagues by pretending to pursue Wu romantically.

In the course of the investigation, the police suspect that Liang might still be alive and that he may be the real murderer, killing all of his wife’s lovers out of jealousy. With Wu’s cooperation, Liang is shot and killed by the police during their attempts to arrest him. The serial murder case is seemingly closed.

However, Zhang still believes that the 1999 murder is connected to Wu. During his investigation, he learns from Wu’s boss at the dry-cleaning business that she had

Sticks, Not Carrots

The Discourse of Soft Power in Popular Chinese Cinema

Katherine Chu

The Chinese box office broke its all-time yearly record in 2019, with local films accounting for eight of the top ten movies, generating 64.1 percent of total box office revenue.¹ Earlier that year, China's first big-budget, outer-space, sci-fi epic, *The Wandering Earth* (*Liulang diqiu*, dir. Frant Gwo, 2019), earned a remarkable \$699.8 million worldwide.² That record did not last long. In the summer, it was surpassed by the incredible performance of the Chinese animated film *Nezha* (*Nezha zhi motong jiangshi*, dir. Yu Yang, 2019), which earned \$710 million. In the following year, the early autumn of 2020—which included a clutch of patriotic movies with releases intended to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the People's Republic's founding—turned into the blockbuster season for the Chinese film industry. The top-grossing films were *My People, My Country* (*Wo he wo de zuguo*, dir. Ning Hao, Xu Zheng, Guan Hu, Chen Kaige, Zhang Yibai, Wen Muye, Xue Xiaolu, 2019), *The Captain* (*Zhongguo jizhang*, dir. Andrew Lau, 2019), and *The Climbers* (*Pandengzhe*, dir. Daniel Lee, 2019). In the spring of 2021—the peak season for Chinese cinema screens—*Hi, Mom* (*Ni hao, Li Huangying*, dir. Jia Ling, 2021) and *Detective Chinatown 3* (*Tangren jie tan'an 3*, dir. Chen Sicheng, 2021) both soared past the \$600 million mark during their second week in theaters. From sales in just the Chinese market alone, both titles have not only become the second- and third-biggest grossers for any movie released in China behind *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhan lang 2*, dir. Wu Jing, 2017)—which earned \$870.3 million—but have now far surpassed the world's highest-grossing film in 2020: China's *The Eight Hundred* (*Babai*, dir. Guan Hu, 2020), which earned \$468 million.

Hollywood used to dominate China's film market, but since the mid-2000s, its share has decreased due to protectionist policies combined with the improved quality of Chinese blockbusters. In 2020, domestic films accounted for 83.7 percent of China's total box office revenue, with only 16.3 percent generated by foreign movies, down from 35.9 percent in 2019. Of the top ten films of 2020 at the box

office, all were domestic-made films.³ Underneath the success of high-grossing Chinese films lies a force that could affect everything from perceptions of nationality to the shape of foreign policy and transnational narratives: in his first speech as General Secretary, Xi Jinping launched a new mission; under his leadership, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would lead China's return as a global power. Choosing to establish a conceptual idea—rather than an economic target or policy—is significant. His Chinese Dream also set the stage for elevating ideological work to a level perhaps not ever seen in Chinese history.

There has also been a remarkable shift in China's propaganda policies. Since the mid-2000s, the Party has launched a Grand External Propaganda Campaign, or Big Foreign Propaganda (*Da Wai Xuan*), by pouring billions of dollars into publicity agencies, including print media (e.g., by inserting *China Daily* into a newspaper such as the *Washington Post* for as much as \$250,000 an issue), broadcasting (e.g., CGTN broadcasts in six languages), and social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube),⁴ all while the film industry promotes a positive view of China and its place in global politics and culture. Strategies such as “Chinese Culture Going Global” in 2011,⁵ the Chinese Dream in 2012, “Telling Chinese Stories” in 2014,⁶ and “generate positive energy” in 2017⁷ all aimed to enhance the appeal and influence of Chinese culture globally through multiple channels, levels, and forms. China's miraculous economic growth supported the transformation from Deng Xiaoping's low-profile and “hide-our-capacities” approach of power projection to a more assertive role at global and regional levels. China spread its footprints worldwide, but Beijing's leadership also vigorously promoted Chinese language and culture as a cultural soft-power tool. As of January 2018, it had established more than 500 Confucius Institutes worldwide since the first Confucius Institute was opened in Seoul, South Korea, in 2004. Interestingly, the official Chinese discourse on soft power began in 2007 as a political strategy mainly to simmer domestic discontent in order to safeguard, sustain, and prolong the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime's longevity. Nevertheless, Chinese leaders also recognized the value of soft power to provide an alternative model to the Western liberal order and ultimately reshape the entire global information environment.

With this in mind, this chapter examines the potency of China's notion of soft power and applies it to the Chinese film industry in particular. While tracing the genesis of reform within the Chinese film industry from a historical perspective, this chapter first discusses the term “soft power,” coined by Joseph S. Nye in 1992. Second, the chapter investigates how the Chinese government institutionalized its film industry in dealing with domestic audiences and, to a lesser extent, its foreign audiences. In this regard, this chapter will examine a host of questions. For instance, why did the Beijing government embrace and promote soft power through the film industry? Does it work? What were the overriding reasons behind the film industry's reform as an integral component of China's soft-power diplomacy?

Central to Xi's three-hour opening speech at the 19th Party Congress in 2017 is the great rejuvenation plan he drafted for the country. Xi Jinping not only wants to modernize the military into a world-class army by 2050, but he also wants to use China's cultural products to show the world that China is not only a "strong country" or "great power," but that it will move closer to the center of the world stage.⁸ However, even China's economy and the military will dominate globally; many countries do not want to emulate its political system. China's government structure remains the weakest part in its score of soft power.⁹

Theoretical Underpinnings of Soft Power in the Context of China

In the field of foreign policy, actions based on practical, self-interested principles rather than moral or ideological concerns are called "realpolitik." In his 1990 Foreign Policy essay, international relations theorist Joseph Nye argues that this type of policy has become too costly and intangible to deal with the world order after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He wrote, "[W]hen one country gets other countries to *want* what it wants [that] might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of *ordering* others to do what it wants."¹⁰

Nye's soft power was translated into Chinese in 1992, sparking interest and discussion among Chinese scholars.¹¹ It was not until 2007, at the 17th Party Congress, however—when President Hu Jintao linked China's rejuvenation with the country's ability to project soft power—that soft power became a more standard component of Chinese foreign policy.¹² At that time, Hu was hoping to explore the concept of soft power by showing the world his country's achievements in all aspects, not only the economic and military achievements but also those of its political structure and cultural heritage. One of the Chinese soft-power goals in the early days was to dilute the influence of the US's soft power in China. The Chinese government aimed at preventing the promotion of Western values, such as democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech to subvert the Communist Party's rule.

Primarily, the goals of soft power in the Chinese context relate to national security. The concept of security to China heavily emphasizes preemption. Internal security is not as simple as forcefully ending civil unrest, while external security is not limited to managing relations with the US. Instead, internal and external security entails managing the CCP and its power, protecting the CCP from delegitimization. Security, therefore, is focused on protecting the Party's position in power. In practice, managing security threats is not limited to enhancing the police force and the PLA's (People's Liberation Army) capabilities. The ideological realm is heavily influential. As such, crisis prevention is crucial for soft-power initiatives. Xi Jinping once noted: "We must put the prevention of risks in a prominent position. [We must] nip [risks] in the bud and be concerned about what has yet to come to pass."¹³ Failure to effectively prevent threats could mean that the Party failed to prevent a

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Index

- 12 Lotus (*Shi'er lianhua*), 153, 158–59, 161–63, 244
- 15, 155–56, 165nn23–25, 166n29, 168n68
- 1942 (*Yi jiu si er*), 246
- 1966, *My Time in the Red Guards* (*Yijiu liuliu wo de Hongweibing shidai*), 22
- 20 Once Again (*Chongfan ershisui*), 116
- 3688 (*Xiangru feifei*), 153, 162–63
- 881, 153, 158–63, 166n43
- 9550 Project (*Jiuwu wuling gongcheng*), 204, 207, 211, 220n1
- Ah Gan, 142
- Air Hostess* (*Kongzhong xiaojie*), 154
- All-Consuming Love* (*Chang xiang si*), 153–54
- Amazing China* (*Lihaille, Wode guo*), 230–31, 234, 240n44, 245, 247n2
- Annaud, Jean-Jacques, 9, 114, 118, 122–24
- Au, Jevons, 7, 41, 44, 46, 226
- Ba Jin, 26, 38n27
- Badham, John, 152
- Bai Yang, 82, 85, 87
- Basatneh, Ala'a, 49
- Battle on Shangganling Mountain* (*Shangganling*), 234
- Bear, The*, 122
- Beautiful New World* (*Meili xin shijie*), 132
- Beauvais, Robert, 25
- Behemoth* (*Beixi moshou*), 8, 58–62, 64–73, 74nn6–7, 74n10, 75n25, 76n30, 243
- Beijing Besieged by Waste* (*Laji weicheng*), 58
- Beresford, Bruce, 23
- Bertolucci, Bernardo, 23, 205, 209–211, 221n24
- Best Years of Our Lives, The*, 80
- Big Li, Little Li, and Old Li* (*Da Li Xiao Li he Lao Li*), 136
- Big Shot's Funeral* (*Dawan*), 11, 204, 206–13, 215–19, 220nn10–13, 221nn20–21, 221n26, 246, 248n9
- Bin Wang, 234
- Birth of New China, The* (*Kaiguo dadian*), 231–32
- Black Coal, Thin Ice* (*Bairi yanhuo*), 10, 169–70, 172, 174 fig. 9.1, 174 fig. 9.2, 177–78, 181nn3–4
- Blood Monument* (*Xue bei*), 30, 31 fig. 1.2
- Blue Kite, The* (*Lan fengzheng*), 22
- Bong Joon-ho, 58
- Brilliant China* (*Huihuang Zhongguo*), 231, 234, 240n43, 240n45
- Burning of the Imperial Palace, The* (*Huo shao yuanming yuan*), 133
- Burtynsky, Edward, 60, 63–64, 67, 69, 75n29
- Butterfly Lovers* (*Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai*), 245
- Cai Chusheng, 8, 79, 91, 94n5
- Captain, The* (*Zhongguo jizhang*), 223, 241n55
- Caro, Niki, 195
- Castaing-Taylor, Lucien, 58
- Cell Phone* (*Shouji*), 216, 218

- Chai Jing, 119, 125
- Chan, Jackie, 13n17, 98, 99, 107, 110n8
- Chan, Peter, 197, 241n55
- Chang Cheh, 133
- Chang Chen, 100
- Chang, Grace (Ge Lan), 10, 154–57, 161, 166nn38–39
- Cheang, Pou-soi, 197
- Chen Kaige, 3, 5, 19, 119, 207, 213, 223, 231, 241n55, 245
- Chen Sicheng, 223
- Chen Zhengdao, 116
- Chen Zhuosheng, 137
- China Film Group Corporation (CFGC), 11, 121–22, 185–93, 196–97, 199, 200nn17–18, 201n48, 202n64
- Chinese Civil War. *See* Civil War
- Chinese in Paris (Les Chinois à Paris)*, 7, 25–28
- Chineseness, 6, 9, 86, 100, 198–99, 242
- Chor Yuen, 137
- Chow, Agnes, 42
- Chow, Kwun-Wai, 7, 41, 44, 46, 226, 243
- Chow, Stephen, 197
- City Saxophone (Dushi sakesifeng)*, 138
- Civil War, 31, 81, 137, 153, 231
- Climbers, The (Pandengzhe)*, 223
- Cold War, 2–3, 12n9, 13n20, 21, 33–35, 35n8, 41–43, 55n6, 55nn15–16, 55n18, 228, 249–51
- COVID pandemic (COVID-19 pandemic), 54, 234
- Crime and Punishment (Zui yu fa)*, 60, 74n11
- Crows and Sparrows (Wuya yu maque)*, 135, 139–40
- Cultural Revolution, 2, 9, 20–25, 27, 30–33, 35n7, 37nn16–18, 37n29, 38nn28–29, 39n36, 114–15, 118, 120–21, 125, 149n13, 179–80, 188, 247
- Day Dream (Bairi meng)*, 137
- Deng Xiaoping, 2, 131, 133, 138, 147, 188, 190, 224, 231
- Detective Chinatown 3 (Tangren jie tan'an 3)*, 223
- Devils on the Doorstep (Guizi lai le)*, 207
- Devotion of Suspect X, The (Xianyiren X de xianshen)*, 116
- Diao Yi'an, 10, 169
- Ding Ran, 136
- Dividing Wall, The (Yi ban zhi ge)*, 137
- Divine Comedy*, 8, 60, 68, 72–73, 243
- documentary/documentaries, 2, 5, 7–8, 14n32, 22, 28–32, 34, 36n12, 36n14, 38n29, 39n36, 39n40–42, 41, 48, 50–51, 53–54, 55n11, 57n39, 58, 60–62, 70, 73, 74n10, 74n12, 75n21, 75n29, 85, 92, 119, 126, 136, 205, 210, 226, 230–31, 243
- Dong Xiwen, 235
- Dream of the Red Chamber (Hongloumeng)*, 81
- ecocinema, 2, 8–9, 14n21, 14n29, 58, 60, 73, 73n1, 74n2, 113, 115, 118–21, 126n10, 127n27
- Edwards, Gareth, 226, 246
- Eight Hundred, The (Babai)*, 223, 226, 231–33, 235, 240nn46–47
- Eight Thousand li of Clouds and Moon, The (Ba qian li lu yun he yue)*, 82
- Emperor and the Assassin, The (Jingke ci qinwang)*, 207
- Family Tie (Kaoshi yi jia qin)*, 142
- Fan Ming, 119
- Fang Peilin, 153
- Farewell, My Concubine (Bawang bie ji)*, 19, 22, 32
- Fei Mu, 95n14, 244
- Female Barber (Nü lifashi)*, 137
- Feng Xiaogang, 11, 196, 204–219, 220n2–3, 221n15, 221n20, 221n22, 221n25, 221nn27–29, 221nn31–32, 222n38, 246
- Fifth Generation, 3, 5, 119
- Fleming, Victor, 8, 79
- Flowers of War, The (Jinling shisan)*, 233, 246

- Fong Fei-Fei, 162–63, 167n65
Forever Fever (That's the Way I Like It), 152
Forever Young (Wuwen xi dong), 7, 24, 25, 32, 37n20, 37n22
Founding of a Republic, The (Jianguo daye), 232
Four Chefs and a Feast (Chunfeng deyi meilongzhen), 133–34, 143, 145–46, 244
- Gao Heng, 30
 Ge Xin, 136
 Gerasimov, Sergei, 29
 Girard, François, 23
Go for Broke (Heng shu heng), 142
Godzilla, 226
 Goei, Glen, 152
Gone with the Wind, 8, 79–82, 84, 93, 95n9
Grandfather (Ah Kong), 152, 156–57
Grandmaster, The (Yidai zongshi), 9, 98–101, 105–6, 109, 111n20, 111n33
Great Land Reform (Weida de tudi gaige), 30, 34
Great Shanghai 1937 (Da Shanghai 1937), 133
Great Wall, The (Changcheng), 114, 117, 127n23, 194, 200n9
 Griffith, D. W., 88
 Guan Hu, 223, 233, 245
 Guggenheim, Davis, 58
 Gwo, Frant, 197, 223
- Han Sanping, 195, 198, 231
 He Lüting, 26, 38n26
 He Zhaozhang, 153
Hi, Mom (Ni hao, Li Huangying), 223
Hibiscus Town (Furong zhen), 22
Hidden Sword, The (Daobei cangshen), 226
Hock Hiap Leong, 152, 155–56
Hole, The (Dong), 154–57, 165n16, 166n39
House of 72 Tenants, The (Qishi'er jia fangke), 137, 149n13
 Hu Jie, 22
 Hu Jintao, 225
Huang Baomei, 137
 Huang Jianxin, 231, 235
- Huang Lei, 116
 Huang Zuolin, 137
 Huayi Brothers, 11, 187, 189, 196, 202nn65–66, 205, 207–17, 219, 221n14, 221n25
- In the Mood for Love (Huayang nianhua)*, 154, 155
Inconvenient Truth, An, 58
Inside the Red Brick Wall (Lida weicheng), 226
Ip Man series, 99
- Jia Ling, 223
 Jia Zhangke, 58, 119, 132
 Jiang Wen, 207, 213, 246
 Jiang Yunchuan, 30
Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower, 7, 41, 48–49
- Khoo, Eric, 3, 159
Kung Fu Panda, 9, 98–101, 107–9, 111nn14–16
 Kwei Lun-mei, 169
 Kwok, Zune, 7, 41, 44–45, 226, 243
- Laborer's Love (Laogong zhi aiqing)*, 134
 Lam, Dante, 235–36, 241n55
 Lam, Nora, 41, 51, 243
Landlord Is Publicly Criticized, A, 30
Last Emperor, The, 23, 205, 209, 211, 221n24
 Lau, Andrew, 223, 236 241n55
Leap (Duoguan), 197, 241n55
 Lee Kwok-lap, 133–34, 139, 141–43, 146, 243–44
 Lee, Ang, 5, 13n17, 13n20, 14, 122, 154, 221n19, 227
 Lee, Bruce, 98–100, 110n8, 152
 Lee, Daniel, 223
 leitmotif (*zhuxuanlü*). *See* main melody
Lesson in Dissent, 7, 41, 48, 56n34
Let's Speak Mandarin (Dajia lai shuo Putonghua), 136
 Leung Chiu-wai, Tony, 100
 Leung, Edward, 42, 51, 53–54, 57n39, 243
Leviathan, 58

- Li Fangfang, 7, 24, 37n20
 Li Han-hsiang, 133
 Li Pingqian, 137
 Li Qiankuan, 231–32, 235
 Li Zhensheng, 26–27, 37n19, 38nn28–29
 Li, Jet, 98
 Liu Dahong, 22
Living a Miserable Life (Guozhe langbei bukan de rizi), 207
Lost in the Fumes (Dihou tiangao), 41, 51, 53, 57n39, 243
Love Over Blue Chips (Gu a gu), 142
Love Without End (Bu liao qing), 162, 167n63
Lover, The, 122
 Lu Chuan, 166
 Lu Ren, 137
 Luo Mingyou, 244
Lust, Caution (Se jie), 154–55
- main melody, 131, 134, 138–39, 146, 188, 197–98, 202n71, 235
Mambo Girl (Manbo nulang), 154, 157
Mao in Colour: A Study in Tyranny, 28–30, 31 fig. 1.2, 34, 39n35
Mao Tsetung and the Cultural Revolution (Mo-taku-to to bunka daikakumei), 30, 31 fig. 1.2
Mao Zedong 1949 (Juesheng shike), 235
 Mao Zedong, 2, 7, 21, 28, 35n5, 35n7, 47, 120, 125, 232, 233
Mao's Last Dancer, 23
Master of All (Tongtian shifu), 137
Matrix, The, 98, 107
 Medvedkin, Aleksandr, 30
Mermaid (Meirenyu), 197
 Miao Xiaotian, 114, 126n1
 Miyazaki Hayao, 58
Mr. Six (Lao paoer), 233
Mulan, 195
My Intimate Partner (Nan xiong nan di), 137
My People, My Country (Wo he wo de zuguo), 223, 231–33, 236, 245, 247n4
- Nanjing! Nanjing!*, 116
Nanpu Bridge, The (Qing sa pujiang), 138
New China, The, 29–30
New Story of Du Xiaoxi, The (A hun xin zhuan), 138
Nezha (Nezha zhi motong jiangshi), 223
 Ng, Ka-Leung, 7, 41, 44, 47, 226, 243
Night over China, A (Noch nad Kitaem), 30, 31 fig. 1.2
 Ning Hao, 213, 223, 245
- Oh Ki-hwan, 116
Old Well (Laojing), 119
Operation Red Sea (Honghai xingdong), 235–36, 241n55
 Osborne, Mark, 9, 98
 Oshima, Nagisa, 30
- Pan Min, 231
 Paravel, Véréna, 58
Petition (Shangfang), 61, 74n11
 Piscatella, Joe, 7, 41, 49
Plastic China (Suliao wangguo), 58
 Pompidou, Georges, 28, 38n34
Princess Mononoke, 58
- Qi Guanshan, 30
 Qin Jian, 137
- Rebirth of China, The (Vtoroe rozhdenie Podnebesnoj)*, 31–33, 39n43
Red Detachment of Women, The (Hongse niangzi jun), 38n30, 234
Red Violin, The (Le violon rouge), 23
 Ren Zhongyi, 27, 38n29
Rogue One: A Star Wars Story, 246, 248n10
Romance in Philately (You yuan), 138
- Sang Hu, 138, 245
Sanmao Learning Business (Sanmao xue shengyi), 136
Saturday Night Fever, 152
Searching for Lin Zhao's Soul (Xunzhao Lin Zhao de linghun), 22
 Second Sino-Japanese War, 104, 144

- Sentinels Under the Neon Lights* (Nihongdeng xia de shaobing), 136, 140
- Sha Meng, 234
- Shan Lin, 234
- Shanghai Fever* (Gu feng), 133–34, 139–47, 150n24, 151n29, 243–44
- Shaolin Temple* (Shaolin si), 133
- Shi Dongshan, 82
- Shi Qicheng, 138
- Shi Runjiu, 132
- Shi Xiaohua, 138
- Shower* (Xizao), 132
- Snake in the Eagle's Shadow* (Shexing Diaoshou), 107
- Snowpiercer*, 58
- Song of China, The* (Tianlun), 245
- Song of the Songstress* (Genü zhi ge), 153
- Songstress of the World* (Tianya genü), 153
- Sons, 155
- Sorry Baby* (Meiwan meiliao), 207, 208, 214
- Speak Mandarin Campaign, 159, 163, 166–67n44
- Spirited Away*, 58
- Spring of Huangjueping, The* (Huangjueping zhi chun), 22
- Spring River Flows East, The* (Yi jiang chun shui xiang dong liu), 8, 79–84, 86, 88–94, 95n12, 95nn15–16, 96n35
- Stevenson, John, 9, 98
- Still Life* (Sanxia haoren), 58, 119
- Street Angel* (Malu tianshi), 153
- Su Youpeng, 116
- Such Parents* (Ruci dieniang), 136
- Sunrise Over Tiananmen Square*, 22
- Sunset Boulevard*, 206
- Tan, Royston (Chen Ziqian), 10, 152, 155–56, 163–64, 166n42, 167n58, 244
- Tao Jin, 82
- Tao Qin, 162
- Ten Years* (Shi nian), 7, 41, 44–45, 47–48, 53–54, 56n19, 56nn27–29, 226, 238nn15–16, 243–44
- Though I Am Gone* (Wo sui siqu), 22
- Tian Zhuangzhuang, 3, 22
- Tiananmen Square Incident, 46, 52–53, 229
- To Live* (Huozhe), 22
- Today, I Rest* (Jintian wo xiuxi), 137
- Torne, Matthew, 7, 41, 48–50, 56n34
- Tsai Ming-liang, 153–57, 165n16, 166n36, 166n38
- Tsui Hark, 148n6, 236, 241n55
- Two Brothers*, 122
- Umbrella Movement, 7, 41, 44, 46, 48, 49, 51, 53–54, 55n1, 56n23, 57nn37–38, 243
- Under the Dome* (Qiongdong zhi xia), 119, 126
- Victory of the Chinese People, The* (Pobeda kitayskogo naroda), 31
- Wachowski, Lana, 98
- Wachowski, Lily, 98
- Wandering Earth, The* (Liulang diqiu), 197, 223, 235, 237n2
- Wang Guangli, 142
- Wang Jiuliang, 58
- Wang Ping, 136
- Wang Shui-bo, 22
- Wang Tianlin, 155
- Wang Weiyi, 138, 149n13
- Way Down East*, 88, 96n32
- Wayward Cloud, The* (Tian bian yi duo yun), 155, 165n16
- Wedding Invitation, A* (Fenshou heyue), 116
- Wei Tie, 230, 245
- Wen Muye, 223, 245
- What a Wonderful Family* (Mafan jiazu), 116
- White-Haired Girl, The* (Baimao nü), 234
- Wild, Wild Rose* (Ye meigui zhi lian), 155, 157, 162
- Wilder, Billy, 206
- Wolf Totem* (Lang tuteng), 9, 113–15, 118–26, 127n26, 127n34, 127n36, 128nn38–47, 246, 247, 248n11
- Wolf Warrior 2* (Zhan lang 2), 11, 197, 223, 235–36, 245

- Wong Kar-wai, 9, 98–99, 111n13, 148n6,
 154
 Wong, Fei-Pang, 7, 41, 44, 45, 226, 243
 Wong, Joshua, 42, 48–51, 53–54
 World War II (WWII), 27, 153, 231
World Without Thieves, A (Tianxie wuzei),
 216, 219
 Wu Cun, 153
 Wu Jing, 11, 197, 223, 235, 245
 Wu Tianming, 119
 Wu Wenguang, 22, 74n10
 Wyler, William, 80

 Xi Jinping, 37n16, 178, 182n22, 194, 224,
 225, 227–33, 235–36, 237n6, 237n8,
 239n40, 240n42, 247n3, 251
 Xia Yan, 79–82, 84, 94n1
 Xiao Guiyun, 231–32
 Xie Jin, 22, 136, 234
 Xu Haofeng, 226
 Xu Zheng, 223, 245
 Xue Xiaolu, 223, 245

 Yanne, Jean, 7, 25–28, 38n31, 38n34
 Ye Hua, 30
 Yee, Derek, 162
Yellow Earth (Huang tudi), 119
 Yen, Donnie, 98–99, 110n9, 246
 Yi Wen, 154
 Yu Yang, 223
 Yuan Muzhi, 153
 Yuen Woo-ping, 107

 Zhang Chunqiao, 26
 Zhang Min, 142
 Zhang Shichuan, 134
 Zhang Tianci, 136
 Zhang Xiaotao, 22
 Zhang Xinyan, 133
 Zhang Yang, 132
 Zhang Yibai, 223, 245
 Zhang Yimou, 3, 5, 22, 114, 122, 194–95,
 201n56, 212, 233, 246
 Zhang Ziyi, 100
 Zhao Liang, 8, 58–60, 69, 71, 74nn3–6,
 74nn10–11, 75n13, 75n25, 243
 Zheng Junli, 8, 79, 89, 96n34
 Zhou Xuan, 153–54, 161, 165n15
 Zhu Shilin, 137