Chinese Cinema Essay, Research Paper

Term Paper Chinese Cinema

The history of film is an important one today. Many people in our society today may see film as simply a form of entertainment, but it is indeed more than that. Film is a medium of expression that is unlike no other. It can tell many tales of many different types of people throughout history. Film is also a good reflection of culture. The art of film can often be seen imitating life and telling the story of a nation and their peoples. China is one such country with a celebrated history of film.

Chinese cinema is often divided into six generations. The term generations is used to make it easier to group the different phases of Chinese film history, but they are not completely different from one another. A particular generation may share something in common with the previous generation, while also passing something onto the next generation. In a sense, the history of Chinese film can be said to have gone through a sort of evolution from its beginnings to the present.

The first and second generations of film began during the 1890 s and continued through the beginning part of the early 1900 s. These two generations of Chinese film are often seen as the pioneers for Chinese cinema. Many of these films consisted of operatic shorts and short comic skits. Eventually the Chinese would go on to make full length film features. The first film length Chinese film ever made was created in 1921 and was entitled Yan Ruishe. Some years later a new trend in film began. Many dancers ad stage performers began to move from the stage to the screen. This may have seemed like a good fit at the time, but many of the dancers-turned-actors were not successful. One actress who was successful was Ruan Lingyu. Unfortunately she committed suicide in 1935. Stephanie Donald tells us that in her suicide note, she was in despair at gossip about her private life (4). It s interesting to see that even in the early stages of film in China, there were the same types of problems that celebrities often face in modern day Hollywood. It seems that any culture tends to have a fascination with the lives of the celebrities of their time.

The third generation of Chinese film shows an evolution with regards to the way the camera is used and how the films are edited. These changes mirror the camera tyle of Hollywood of the time. According to Donald some of these techniques are, two- to three-head dialogue sequences to introduce and develop story lines, jump cuts, and cuts on action to keep several narrative strands in place without losing momentum or suspense, and dream sequences or flashbacks (5). Two figures who best represent the third generation of Chinese film are Sang Hu and Shui Hua. Some of Sang s films include Joys and Sorrows of Middle Age and A Make-Believe Couple. The latter movie focuses on a woman s hairdresser looking for a wealthy wife and a young single mother looking for a wealthy husband. The film is a comedy, which has many tones of Hollywood running through it. Shui Hai s best-known work is The White-haired Girl, made by 1950 and Land, made in 1954. Shui s film s often had very political themes. For example the movie, Land, deals with the story of land reform in the 1930 s. Both Sang and Shui manage to deliver strong films, while staying with the policitcal constraints of their period.

The fourth generation of Chinese filmmakers is made up of men who were trained before the Cultural Revolution. Although they were trained long ago, many of these filmmakers have not made their first feature films until the last 20 years. Xie Jin is one of the more prominent names of the fourth generation of film. Some of his achievements include twenty-one films, several filmmaking awards, and a career that has spanned three decades. Donald describes his film as, melodramatic epics of personal suffering, and particularly successful examples of the wound (shang hen) genre, stories of individual tragedy and eventual triumph that deal with the experiences of the Cultural Revolution in cathartic and personalized narratives (7). Although Xie Jin has enjoyed a certain level of success, Xie and his fellow filmmakers of the fourth generation are often overlooked because of the fifth generation. The irony is that the fourth generation is often seen as having paved the way for the fifth generation. The benefactor of this student-teacher relationship is clearly the fifth generation because of the exposure they have received.

The fifth generation of Chinese filmmakers refers to the first group of students to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy since the Academy reopened after the Cultural Revolution. The most prominent of the fifth generation of filmmakers is Chen Kaige who has made such films as Yellow Earth, Farewell My Concubine, and The Blue Kite. The fifth generation of filmmakers also has its share of women involved. One of these female filmmakers is Peng Xiaolian who has made such films as Me and My Classmates and A Family Portrait. Peng is considered to be one of the better filmmakers of her generation, but is often overlooked in favor of her male counterparts.

Politics have shaped nearly every generation of Chinese film. In fact most of the major studios that have been active since the 1950 s have had to submit every treatment and screenplay to the China Film, Broadcaast and Television Bureau (CFTB) before beginning the project. Films that went through problems during the next stage would often be shelved or printed in small amounts. Times of political uncertainty often saw a higher degree of censorship. The Cultural Revolution was one of these times. At this time many filmmakers were kicked out of their studios and sent to what were basically labor camps. This result was a relatively few number of films made during this time period. Films that were made had to be made to conform to the views of Maoist rule. This doesn t mean that the films of the period went unrecognized. In fact many of the films of the 1960 s and 1970 s had sizeable audiences. These films forced to conform because of politics also had traces of politics running through them. In fact many of these traces can be seen in the films of this era by the color red. The color red signifies the communist rule of Mao during the time. Although, Mao and his weaf have plong since passed there are still traces of communism and the color red in Chinese film today. Many of the films that do not conform to the red theme are described as yellow . An increase in the number of yellow-themed films has led to a increase in retrospective censorship. This means censorship of films that have already been released. This censorship can often mean major cuts in the film or not even being distributed at all.

In today s times, censorship has not stopped China from being a major force in the international film industry. This is largely due to the popularity of the Chinese genre of film labeled Hong Kong Cinema. In fact Hong Kong Cinema has become quite a cult phenomenon in the West. This popularity has resulted in a large release of films that has often outnumbered Western releases and helped China become second in the world when it comes to the export of films. Hong Kong s films are often seen as a source of pride for the Chinese. They enjoy Honk Kong cinema so much in fact, that Hong Kong is one of the few places in the world where American films are not dominant in box office receipts on a regular basis. Even popular American films such as Raiders of the Lost Ark and Who Framed Roger Rabbit were outgrossed by other films in Hong Kong.

Many people may wonder how such a small city-state of China could make such an impact on the film industry. Much of the answer can be found in the demands of the films. The people want to see these films and Bordwell even goes as far as to say it s, arguably the world s most energetic, imaginitive popular cinema (1).

The most popular acclaimed director of Hong Kong Cinema is John Woo. Although Woo grew up around poverty and gangs, he was still able to go to high school and college because of donations from a local church. He started his film career as a production assistant for Zhang Che, an action director at the time. It is said that Woo learned a lot from Zhang and soon Woo was making his own films. One of Woo s first big film s was A Better Tomorrow. This gangster film enjoyed much success and helped launch the career of Chow Yun Fat. Woo soon followed up this film with other films such as The Killer and Hard Boiled. Woo s success has even spread to Western culture with his hits Face/Off, Broken Arrow, and Mission: Impossible 2. Woo s brand of action film directing is one that is unmatched In Hong Kong cinema or in the world for that matter.

As far as actors are concerned, Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan are the most famous men in Hong Kong cinema. As a child, Bruce Lee appeared in a number of films. As a youth he also began to study the martial arts and as a young man left Hong Kong to go to college in America. While in America he was able to win a part in the television series, The Green Hornet. Soon afterwards he filmed two pictures that were known in America as Fists of Fury and The Chinese Connection. The success of these two films led to a deal which allowed Lee to produce, wrie, and direct his own film. This led Lee s creation of The Return of the Dragon and an effort he coproduced entitled Enter the Dragon. Unfortunately, while working on his next project, entitled Game of Death, Lee passed away although the circumstances are unknown. Bordwell calls Lee, the first Hong Kong Star to achieve worldwide reknown and says that he, helped popularize Chinese martial arts.

Another person to help escalate the popularity of Chinese martial arts is Jackie Chan. At the age of six Chan began to attend an institute which taught him to singing, dancing, martial arts, and acrobatics. Soon after he was able to find work in the film industry and even worked on a few Bruce Lee projects. Chan began as a stunt player, but eventually was able to work his way up as one of Bruce Lee s clones. Chan s career began to take off after filming Snake in the Eagle s Shadow. As his career began to take off Chan seemed destined to be the successor to be Bruce Lee s throne. Chan s problem was how to assume this position without becoming the direct clone of Lee. Chan accomplished this by playing the opposite of Lee’s image. While Lee was often viewed as the hero, Chan likes to be viewed as the underdog. This theme runs in a lot of his films. Chan often plays a raw talent who learns whatever it takes to win the situation he is in. Another thing that seperated Lee and Chan were their acrobatics. Lee never made it a point to learn acrobatics so he often used a double if any leaps or tumbles were required. On the other hand Chan is a master at acrobatics an always performs his own stunts. This is something that he is very popular for in Western culture. Chan truly enjoys performing his own stunts and has even said I live for pain. Even when I was young I loved pain. This can often be seen in the outtakes that are commonly shown during the final credits of his films.

Although these two stars are very different, Lee and Chan both embody the spirit of Hong Kong. These two symbolize the cinema of their nation s time and it is from them that their people draw a source of pride. Lee and Chan have given Chinese film a face that the rest of the world won t easily forget.

The recent success of Chinese cinema in Western culture seems to indicate that they will only get better. Films such as Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, directed by Ang Lee, have helped get Chinese cinema the recognition it deserves. The actors and directors of China have done a superb job of making quality films, but we must not forget that the people and culture of China are what influence the films. Without that influence Chinese cinema would quite possibly be just another story.