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China redux: The central frontiers of the modern nation in Chinese cinema

Zhang, J.

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This dissertation advances a new interpretation on the national formation of modern China through the lens of Chinese cinema. Primarily, this project explores how cinema—a modern invention imported from the West—has shaped China’s sociopolitical transition from a dynastic empire to a nation-state. It is argued that, the concurrence of motion picture’s arrival and nation-state’s advent in China at the turn of the twentieth century, is not to be considered as isolated events, but rather as a dialectical dynamism in which the imagined community of modern China has largely relied on cinema for its symbolic construction, and yet encountered constant resistance from cinematic representation.

Viewing the formation of the Chinese nation-state from a cinematic perspective, this study centers around the conflicts between marginal figures and central categories in Chinese films. In approaching this unresolved dilemma, Jiyu Zhang dedicates his study to mapping out a dialectical relationship between China’s internal and external tensions. Through an extensive investigation of cinematic embodiment, Zhang hones in on four groups of characters that he terms the “central frontiers” of modern China’s cultural imaginary: children, women, ethnic minorities, and diaspora.

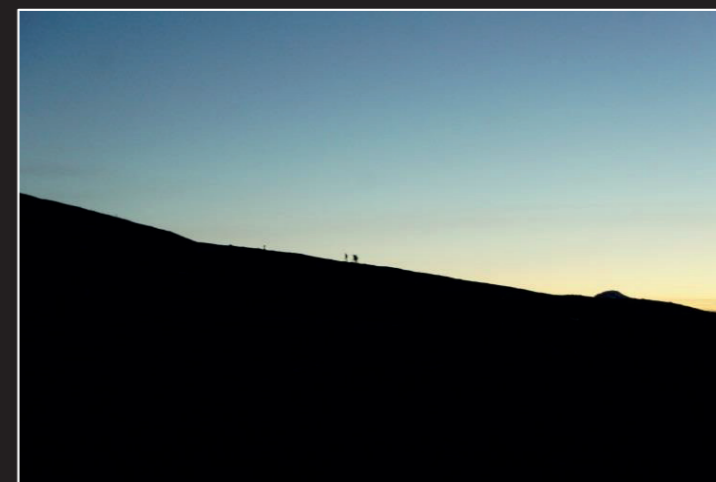
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CHINA REDUX

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