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

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Summary

Focusing on the historical, national, and geopolitical dimensions of Chinese films, this study foregrounds Chinese cinema's unique position with respect to interpretations of modern China. Viewing the formation of the Chinese nation-state from a cinematic perspective, this project designates Chinese cinema as a form of cinematic modernity. Furthermore, my theoretical contribution revolves around the tensions between marginal figures and central categories in Chinese films. These tensions, I propose, point to a fundamental condition of China's modern transition, namely Western imperialism, which induced a wholesale reconfiguration of social relations amid political upheavals and epistemic shifts. In the wake of foreign interventions, China morphed into a modern nation-state through waves of mass mobilization involving people from all walks of life.

In the course of modernization, those who had long been repressed by the imperial order of premodern China were now assigned new and vital roles—chiefly to enact and embody structural reforms to the state system. Now that the nation has been installed, however, individuals are once again coerced into a new form of collective identification. As much as it is supposed to embody the unity of a homogeneous community, the individual is again coming to signify a site of resistance against enforced ideologies. In approaching this unresolved dilemma, this study is dedicated to mapping out a dialectical relationship between China's internal conflicts and external tensions. Through an extensive investigation of cinematic embodiment, I hone in on four groups of characters that I term the “central frontiers” of modern China's cultural imaginary: children, women, ethnic minorities, and diaspora. Often situated at a distance from the cultural, social, and geographical center, these characters are charged with symbolic significance. As such, they are designated to embody a national ethos. At the same time, though, these figures are often shown expressing discontent. Although each chapter focuses on a particular type of protagonist, what I intend to show overall is how these categories intersect with one another, so that a single character might be viewed as part of the larger ideological state apparatus, whose operation turns out not as effective as expected.

In the first chapter I situate depictions of childhood in relation to cross-cultural and trans-medial exchanges. Comparing the initial Bildungsroman (a literary genre concerning a young protagonist's coming-of-age) that emerged in tandem with European bourgeois society with equivalents in Chinese film, I emphasize how the

intrinsic values of the Chinese Bildungsroman differ from European examples. In Chinese cinema, coming-of-age stories are packed with political allegories and social satires of the communist state. An epitome of modern Chinese culture, the genre of the Chinese Bildungsroman embodies China's emergent national identity as it has negotiated external and internal conflicts. I focus particularly on two contemporary Chinese films (along with the novels on which they were respectively based): Jiang Wen's *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) and Zhang Yuan's *Little Red Flowers* (2006).

The second chapter examines how representations of Chinese women have served to symbolize the Chinese nation. My analysis is premised on a distinction between Chinese and Western notions of "woman," which departs from universalizing gender discourses originating from the West. Moreover, against the backdrop of the social, political, and epistemological transformation of China, this chapter shows how narratives of femininity, in particular the idea of Chinese Woman, mediate between the individual and the nation, convention and conversion, China and the West. My discussion centers on two Chinese-speaking films, *Song of Youth* (1959) and *Lust, Caution* (2007). The first derives from the first decade of China's Socialist Era; the second from the period marked by the dramatic upsurge of economic globalization in the new millennium.

In the third chapter I interrogate the ways in which the tension between the Sinocentric nation-state and ethnic minority groups plays out in contemporary Chinese cinema. Analyzing the dialectical relations between the center and the periphery, I reflect briefly on how cinematic representation has been used to propagate a shared belief of the Chinese nation among ethnic minority communities. In tracing different permutations of representational approaches, this chapter shows how portrayals of ethnic minorities are often neither accurate nor diverse. To this end, I examine two films featuring Tibetan people in contemporary China: Pema Tsenden's *Tharlo* (2015) and Zhang Yang's *Paths of the Soul* (2015).

The fourth and last chapter attends to the Chinese diaspora, a community that is often seen as politically questionable on account of their geographical distance and proficiency in the "mother tongue". Continuing my critical discussion of the idea that the modern nation is articulated in Chinese languages, my analysis focuses largely on different definitions of the problematic concept of *guojia* in Chinese language and culture. Investigating forms of ideological interpellation at work in cinematic representations, I draw attention to the ways in which the political, national, and cultural identity of modern China is resisted and negotiated in different cultural

contexts. In exploring these themes, I analyze three Chinese films: *The Herdsman* (1982), *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996), and *Mountains May Depart* (2015).

In conclusion, in considering the historical, national, and geopolitical dimensions of Chinese cinema, this study claims neither that China's central frontiers are restricted to one particular period of Chinese history, nor that the tension between marginal social figures and national narratives pertains to Chinese cinema alone. Rather, I seek to explore how drastic social and cultural changes translate into collective violence at a symbolic level. In a world that is increasingly divided among nations, races, and cultures, this study reminds us of how power is exerted ever so surreptitiously through images, sounds, and words. Looking back, the construction of nationhood played a central role in redeeming China from a series of crises from nineteenth through twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, it has been converted into regimes of governance that often resort to brute force. In this regard, I hope that the figures at the fore of this study might inspire readers and viewers.