

ASIAN EDUCATIONAL MEDIA SERVICE PROUDLY PRESENTS

TEACHING CHINESE HISTORY THROUGH FILM

Historical films – films set in an earlier period than their own – blur the line between primary and secondary sources. They are documents of the time in which they were made and also a genre of history. Historical film is a different genre from the academic historian's monograph or footnoted article but is "history" nonetheless. We should be careful, however. As "popular history" films condense, distort, and filter events, and rely more on emotion than clearly constructed argument. They generally tell only one story and do not dwell on alternatives. The sentimentality, anachronism, and simplification of a good story sell more tickets and popcorn than analysis of systems, structures, uncertainty, and contingency. But films can be valid representations of the past interpreted for the present. Chinese films are primary sources about how some Chinese perceive issues and they reflect serious (but not always obvious) debates more often than Hollywood films do. We can access films more directly and see what Chinese audiences saw with less selection and translation than other sources, at least if we can read the subtitles fast enough. And many of the films we discuss are just great films – compelling, startling, and memorable.

- **China's History: Foundation or Millstone?**

Reformers in the 19th century wanted to build on Confucian tradition to seek wealth and power, but New Culture iconoclasts dumped Confucianism as feudal and imported science and democracy from the West. Mao's revolutionary agenda promised Liberation from the twin evils of feudalism and imperialism to build a wealthy and powerful nation without reliance on outside powers. Were the Great Leap, the Famine, and Cultural Revolution mistakes or an inevitable consequence of Mao's strategy? Did Mao's Revolution create a strong and wealthy nation?

- **Beijing 2008 – The Grand United March to the Present: *Opening Ceremonies* (Zhang Yimou)**

Chinese welcomed the Beijing Olympics as the end of centuries of humiliation and the acceptance of China's rise. The appearance of Confucius, Buddha, and Yao Ming as heroes in the opening ceremonies reflect a newly confident acceptance of Chinese tradition and global interaction. This spirit moved beyond the New Culture view that tradition had to be destroyed in order to build a nation as well as leaving behind the Maoist emphasis on isolation and self-reliance.

- **Mao: The People Make History: *Red Flag Canal* (40 minute; 1970)**

When mountain villagers built Red Flag Canal to bring water to their impoverished fields, they became Cultural Revolution heroes for representing Mao's strategy of self-reliance to conquer nature, building China from the village up, not from the capital down, and depending on local initiative, not professionals or bureaucrats.

- **Revolution and "Survival": *To Live* (Zhang Yimou, 1996)**

Zhang's film reflects post-1989 questions and strategies. The title in Chinese – *Huozhe* – can mean either "to live" or "to survive." Like Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1996) and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* (1992), this commanding and beautifully shot film chronicles a family from the 1940s through the 1980s. Although no villains are indicted, the two children in Zhang's film each are killed by Maoist policies. These three "Fifth Generation" films each imply that the 1949 Revolution was not a sharp break with the past but the survival of feudal patriarchy, political frustration, and cultural dead end. The families are heroes because they survive.

- **Who's the Hero: The Emperor, the Assassin, or Those Who Preserve Culture? *Hero* (Zhang Yimou 2004)**

Zhang's beautiful martial arts film is one of three great films depicting assassination attempts on Qin Shihuangdi (First Emperor of China), to whom Mao Zedong often compared himself as founder of a dynasty which used violence to unify the country for the benefit of the people. The other films are Chen Kaige's *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1999) and Zhou Xiaowen's *The Emperor's Shadow* (1996). Is the film critical, merely patriotic, or fascist?

Mao Zedong and His Friends and Rivals On Chinese History and Revolution

Mao was conflicted: proud of China's history and of his ability to write poetry in classical Chinese forms, but full of hate for the "traditional" Confucian culture which by the early 20th century had left China weak, divided, and poor. In the 1920s, Revolution seemed the only tool capable of forging a modern nation and destroying everything old – "feudalism" and the landlord class. But in the 1930s, defending the nation against Japanese imperialism meant uniting all patriots regardless of class. Mao wrote his poem "Snow" in 1937 but did not make it public until 1945, after the surrender of Japan, at the start of the Civil War which brought him to power in 1949. It is a vision of China as a nation with long roots in time, neglecting the fact that the territory of the modern Chinese nation was assembled by the Manchus to form the Qing Empire. In the right column are scattered observations as problems and strategies changed.

SNOW

This is the scene in that northern land;
A hundred leagues are sealed with ice,
A thousand leagues of whirling snow.
On either side of the Great Wall
One vastness is all you see.
From end to end of the great river
The rushing torrent is frozen and lost.
The mountains dance like silver snakes,
The highlands roll like waxen elephants,
As if they sought to vie with heaven in their height.
And on a sunny day
You will see a red dress thrown over the white,
Enchantingly lovely!

Such great beauty like this in all our landscape
Has caused unnumbered heroes to bow in homage.
But alas, Qin Shihuangdi and Han Wudi
Were rather lacking in culture.
Rather lacking in literary talent were
Tang Taizu and Song Taizu,
and Chinghis Khan,
The favorite Son of Heaven for a day,
Knew only how to bend his bow and shoot great vultures.

Now they are all past and gone.
To find heroes in the grand manner
We must look here in the present.

Mao Tse-tung (1937) 1945

In a very short time..., several hundred million peasants will rise like a mighty storm, like a hurricane, a force so violent that no power, however great, will be able to hold it back. They will ... rush forward along the road to liberation. They will sweep all the imperialists, warlords, corrupt officials, local bullies and evil gentry into their graves....

A revolution is not a dinner party."

Mao Zedong, 1927

Power grows from the barrel of a gun.

Mao 1937

China has stood up.

Mao 1949

Bombard the headquarters....

To rebel is justified...

No destruction, no construction [i.e. There can be no construction without destruction, or, "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs."]

Red Guards quotes from early Mao, 1966

It doesn't matter if a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.. .

Get rich first.

Poverty is not socialism.

Deng Xiaoping 1978

What is democracy? Nike shoes and time to talk with my girlfriend.

Tiananmen demonstrator, 1989

Democracy is chaos (*luan*). ..

It doesn't matter how many we kill as long as the economy grows...

Deng 1989