DISCOVERING CHINA THROUGH FILM (COMM 301)

Course: COMM 301  
Term: Spring 2016  
Instructor: Karen Ma  
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Course Description:
This survey course will provide an overview and examination of major Chinese films since 1976, using these films as a means to help students better engage and understand the history, politics, society and economy of China in different decades of the twentieth century and beyond.

China has traveled along a convoluted course of modernization, which has often been marked by revolution and reforms. During this period, cultural producers in China have been buffeted by artistic and political imperatives; affected by the competing forces of tradition and modernism; and sought to resist and incorporate foreign (predominantly Western) influences. Thus, this course is also a case study of how the Chinese people have encountered modernity and continue to cope with its consequences.

The focus of the course will be on films made in mainland China by different generations of filmmakers from the 1980s (what is sometimes called the post-socialist period) to the present day, normally grouped under the rubric of the fifth-and-the-sixth generations of filmmakers, and those of the most recent generation. The course is arranged chronologically, but critical writing on films is thematically assigned. These may include historical and societal contexts of film productions; cinematic topics and themes (modernity, globalization, revolution, gender relationships, urbanization); the specific visual and narrative style of each film; the strategies of filmmakers in coping with state censorship, and cinematic critiques of Maoism and post-Maoist Chinese.

No previous knowledge of Chinese or any background on China is required. All films selected for the course have either English subtitles or printed scripts to follow.

Course Objectives:  
Through screening, reading, discussion, lectures and quizzes, students will:
1) Identify dominant themes in recent films and examine what they say about China and being Chinese during a period of some of the most rapid social and economic changes in history

2) Make connections between Chinese movies of the 20th and 21st centuries and examine their historical and social context

3) Develop critical skills and an appreciation for modern and contemporary Chinese films and culture

4) Gain familiarity with the Chinese movie industry and its major players and processes through the present day

Method of Presentation:
Three-hour classes once a week (Meeting every Wednesday at 1:30-4:15pm). Lectures with discussion, often with screening of full-length films in class (partial screening of films that are longer than 90 min). The first 120 minutes of each class are devoted to lectures and class-screenings, and/or some visual materials. The remaining 45 minutes are allocated for class discussion, facilitated by the instructor. This format may change as the semester proceeds.

Course Requirements and Form of Assessment:
Students must attend all classes and screenings as well as complete all required reading material. In addition to short reaction papers, there will be one mid-term exam, which will be based on the films screened and the reading material. Each student will also be required to take a final exam, which will test students' critical understanding of materials covered in class. Students are expected to take full advantage of the TBC library for both the required and supplementary reading material. Students should note that as with all courses at TBC, papers submitted late would not be accepted.

Final exam will make up 50% of the final mark; midterm 20%, reaction notes to assigned reading/screenings and pop quizzes 20%; and class participation (including post-screening discussions and sharing questions/thoughts on the film of assignment) will comprise the remaining 10%.

The assessment will be done according to the following scale:

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Attendance Policy
Only valid medical or family emergencies qualify as an excusable absence, and documentation of the same must be presented to the instructor no later than the next class meeting. All other absences are considered to be unexcused. Clearly,
unexcused absences will affect your grade, especially in the realm of class participation. Arriving more than 10 minutes late for any three classes will cumulatively count as one unexcused absence, while arriving 30 minutes late for any class will count as an unexcused absence. Any absence, whether excused or not, will require catch-up reading.

**Intellectual Honesty:**

Please see the following link, and read the text carefully: [http://www.luc.edu/cas/pdfs/CAS_Academic_Integrity_Statement_December_07.pdf](http://www.luc.edu/cas/pdfs/CAS_Academic_Integrity_Statement_December_07.pdf).

Cheating on exams and plagiarism in papers are not tolerated. A student who is caught cheating will get an "F" for the paper, assignment, or the exam. The student will be dismissed from the class. All cases of cheating will be reported to the TBC office, and forwarded to a student’s home university.

**The following are required clips/DVDs for this class. Please purchase them before arriving in Beijing: (except for William’s series, all are available on Amazon, as well as through other sources):**

2. Tian Zhuanzhuan’s “Blue Kite”; (140 min)
3. Zhang Yimou’s “Raise the Red Lantern,” (125 min)
4. Wang Xiaoshuai’s “Beijing Bicycle” (113 min)
5. Jia Zhangke’s “Pickpocket Xiao Wu,” (108 min)
6. Feng Xiaogang’s “A World Without Thieves” (100 min)

**Required texts (To be purchased before arriving in Beijing):**


**Books on Reserve at the Library:**

Course Schedule

**Week One, January 21st**

**INTRO TO MODERN CHINESE HISTORY / FILM LANGUAGE**

**In-class screening:** Sue Williams’ *China: A Century of Revolution: The Mao Years*—a film series by Ambrica. (Intro to syllabus, expectations, geography, major historical events of Chinese history between 1949 and 1976)

*Questions for discussion:*
1) What are the main historical events of China between 1949 and 1976?
2) What are the characteristics of this historical documentary?

*Reading:*

**Week Two, January 28th**

**INTRO TO MODERN CHINESE HISTORY / FILM LANGUAGE (2)**

**In-class screening:** Sue Williams’ *China: A Century of Revolution: Born Under the Red Flag.* (Major historical events after 1976; and intro to film language in Chinese contexts.)

*Questions for discussion:*
1) What are the main historical events of China between 1976 and 1997?
2) Contrast and compare this documentary with other documentaries that you have seen.

*Reading:*
- Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* pp. 104-112
- [http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm) (MAO’S Yan’an Talk about literature and the art in ‘42)

**Week Three, February 4th**
TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION (The 3rd generation)

In-class screening: Xie Jin, *Hibiscus Town*

*Questions for discussion:*
1) How would you describe the Cultural Revolution to a western audience unfamiliar with Chinese history?
2) During the Cultural Revolution, what kinds of people are rewarded, and what kinds of people are punished?
3) How does Xie make use of symbolism and sounds to describe the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution?

*Reading:*
**Week Four, February 11th**

ROOTS, COLORS AND THE REWRITE OF REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY (The 5th Generation)

**In-class screening:** Chen Kaige, *Yellow Earth (85 min)*;  
**Take-home assignment:** View Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *Blue Kite (140 min)* at home and write a 2 page reaction to the film.

**Questions for discussion: Yellow Earth:**  
1) What can we learn about the CCP and the PLA from the film “Yellow Earth?”  
2) What can we learn about the life in the countryside?  
3) Analyze the cinematic technique of this movie—why is the movie mostly silent? What does the color yellow symbolize in the movie?  
4) “Yellow Earth” is said to have a non-Western, alternative filmic style. Do you agree or disagree? Please explain.

**Questions for your response paper: Blue Kite.**  
1) Who’s the narrator of the film, and what’s the backdrop of the story?  
2) Why do you think the Chinese censor bureau banned the film “Blue Kite”?  
3) What do you think is the film director’s message in this film?  
4) What does the kite symbolize in the film?

**Reading**  
- Rey Chow, “Silent is the Ancient Plain,” *Primitive Passions*, pp. 79-107; (on reserve at library)

**Week Five, March 4th**

MEMORY, ETHNICITY AND REVERSE ORIENTALISM? (The fifth generation 2)

**In-class screening (partial screening):** Zhang Yimou, *Raise the Red Lantern* (125 min)

**Questions for discussion Raise the Red Lantern:**  
1) What are the man-woman relationships like in feudal China? How is this portrayed in the film?  
2) There’s a very strong ethnic element in Zhang’s films. What are
some of the examples?
3) Who’s the “master” of the house? Why is it that we never see him on screen?
4) What sort of character is Songlian? She arrives at the doorsteps of her “master” as a semi-educated woman. How does she evolve as an individual in the process, while fighting for the favors of the master?

Reading:
- Zhang, Chinese National Cinema pp. 292-296;
- “New City Films: Beyond Yellow-Earth Experiences of Postsocialism,” Celluloid China, pp. 277-282
- Rey Chow, "The force of surfaces: Defiance in Zhang Yimou’s Films", Rey Chow, Primitive Passions, 143-171; (on reserve at library)
- http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E0CE1D8163FF933A15750C0A964958260

Week Six, March 11th
(TBD)
A visit to Beijing Film Academy
Visit Departments of Directing, Sound Recording, Animation and Acting;
Interview students and famous film artists with issues of your concerns;

Or have a film producer/script writer (e.g. Vivian Wu; Yan Geling; Jen Hutzler/Diao Yi’nan—(Black Coal Thin Ice) well versed in English, to come speak to students. (TBD)

Reading for the following week:
- TBD (reading related to field trip or a guest speaker)

Week Seven, March 18th
Midterm Examination

Week Eight, April 1st

CHINESE MOVIE GOES UNDERGROUND: THE BEGINNING OF THE 6TH GENERATION

In-class screening: Zhang Yuan, Beijing Bastards, 88 min (Chinese cityscape: rock music, amnesia and the revolution).
Take-home assignment: Watch Wang Xiaoshuai’s Beijing Bicycle at home and write a 2 page reaction to the film.
Questions for discussion--Beijing Bastards.
1) How would you describe the style of this film? Would you characterize it as fiction or documentary?
2) Why was this film banned by the Chinese authorities?
3) Who are the protagonists of this film? How would you describe them?
4) What issues is Zhang Yuan is trying to address in this film? Is he successful in his attempts?

Questions for your reaction paper—Beijing Bicycle.
1) How would you describe the protagonists of this film—what part of society are they from?
2) Why do you think Wang Xiaoshuai focuses on this group of people? How are they related to the current Chinese society?
3) Do you see a common theme between this movie and “Beijing Bastards?” Why or why not?

Reading:

Week Nine, April 8th

MY CAMERA DOESN’T LIE—THE COMING OF AGE OF THE 6TH GENERATION.

In-class screening: Li Yang’s Blind Shaft, 92 min (Exploring existing problems in modernization)

Questions for discussion—Blind Shaft.
1) What are the hallmarks of films created by the 6th generation filmmakers? How are they different from works by the 5th generation filmmakers?
2) Who are the protagonists of this film? Are they sympathetic characters? Why or why not?
3) What do you think this film is really about? What ultimately causes the demise of the protagonists?
4) What larger social issue is Li Yang trying to address in this film? How is the issue related to the world beyond China?
5) “Blind Shaft” is described as a “banned” film. But is this an accurate description? Why or why not.

Reading:


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**Week Ten, April 15th**

**THE HERE AND NOW, CAPTURING A TRANSFORMING REALITY— the cinema of Jia Zhangke’s**

**In-class screening (partial screening):** Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* (108 min)

*Questions for discussion—Xiao Wu.*

1) *Xiao Wu* is a film about a pickpocket, but it’s also a film about relationships. What do you think the filmmaker is trying to say in the film?

2) *Xiao Wu’s* friend *Xiao Yong* is quite different from *Xiao Wu*. Compare and contrast the two characters. What do the two characters say about today’s Chinese society?

3) Some critics describe “*Xiao Wu*” as being filmed in a “realist” style with a “certain crude appearance”. Do you agree? Please elaborate. How is this approach different from the 5th generation filmmakers’ works?

**Reading for the following week:**


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**Week Eleven, April 22nd**

**TRIUMPS OF THE ‘LITTLE CHARACTERS’—SOCIAL CRITICISM IN A COMMERCIALIZED WORLD**

**In-class screening:** Feng Xiaogang ‘s *Big Shot’s Funeral*, 100 min.
Take-home assignment: View Feng Xiaogang’s *A World Without Thieves* and write a 2 page reaction to the film.

Questions for discussion—Big Shot’s Funeral.
1) Feng is famous for creating the Little Characters in almost all of his films. What kind of personal traits/virtues do these characters tend to have?
2) Feng also pokes fun at the authority in this film. How does he do that?
3) “Big Shot’s Funeral is a satire, a social commentary. What exactly is Feng trying to say?
4) Is it possible to be socially critical and still remain commercially successful as a film director in China today? How?

Questions to consider for your reaction paper—A World Without Thieves
1) “A World Without Thieves” is different from “Big Shot’s Funeral” in that the Little Characters no longer take center stage. Who then, are the protagonists in this film?
2) Feng makes these seeming new heroes “suffer” in the film. What exactly are they suffering from?
3) What is Feng trying to say in this film?

Reading:
- Rui Zhang, *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang*, pp. 103-157. (on reserve at library)
- “New Year Film as Chinese Blockbuster,” Ying Zhu and Stanley Rosen ed., *Art, Politics, and Commerce Chinese Cinema*, pp. 195-207 (on reserve at library)

**Week Twelve, April 29th**
Course Summary/Reviews
(Last day to hand in paper/notes)
Reading: TBD

**Week Thirteen, May 6th (Final Week)**
Final Exam