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A Short History of Film and Censorship in Mainland China

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China has had a tumultuous history throughout the 20th century, and that tumult is clearly seen in their film history. From films promoting leftist ideology towards a propaganda machine employed by the government, the films of China have always been under strict government guidelines but the current state of film in China is incredibly profitable as well as sustainable in the long term. In spite of decades of censorship and regulation placed upon Chinese cinema by the government, the film industry has grown into an impressive economic juggernaut that has begun to compete in international markets.

Chinese film history began in the 1920s when the first of six different periods or “generations” began to create films (LnC). The First Generation, including filmmakers from the first stages of the developing film industry, were the pioneers of Chinese cinema in the 1920s. They made films about social reform, and nearly all of the films made in this era were concerned with the lives of common people. Examples of these types of films include Cheng Bugao’s 1933 film *Spring Silk Worm* and Wu Yon Gang’s 1934 film *The Goddess*. These and films of the second generation show the clear influence of foreign cinemas such as Soviet formalism and later Italian neo-realism.

The Second Generation spans the 1930’s and the 1940’s, a period when many leftist filmmakers started to dominate the output of films. These filmmakers made social realist films, continuing with the trend of depicting the lives of the common person and lower class individuals. The biggest movie of this era was called *Street Angel*, directed by Yuan Muzhi. The film is about two sisters fleeing the war in East China to go to Shanghai. They’re adopted by a couple who force them into different forms of



Poster for *Street Angel*

prostitution. The film was praised for its depiction of lower class and downtrodden Chinese civilians. Stylistically there are similarities between *Street Angel* and Soviet films of the time. One of the shots in the opening credits seems to give a nod to *Battleship Potemkin*, showcasing quick cuts in the film of lion statues, an allusion to the lion statues from the famous ‘Odessa Steps’ scene in *Potekmin*.

Additionally, *Street Angel* is filmed on location in the city, depicting the hard lives of individuals amongst the lower class. Any glimmer of hope to escape their pain is always fleeting, forcing the viewer to never forget the difficulty of their situation. For instance, in one scene, one of the sisters is cleaning the apartment and singing through the window with a man, her lover, across the alley. The moment of optimism is quickly brought back to depressing reality when the door is busted open and the girl is violently taken away by force.

The Third Generation was comprised mostly of propaganda films and “heavily loaded political melodramas” (LnC). They were important to the government, but few films made strictly for the purposes of entertainment were produced during this time. The Fourth Generation of filmmakers were professionally trained in the craft of filmmaking, but they had to wait until the post-Mao era of the 1970’s to begin creating films not overseen by the propaganda arm of the government. Similar to the Third

Generation, Fourth Generation filmmakers focused on melodramas and the films they made reinforced the positions of the state.

In the 1980's the Fifth Generation emerged. They were the first post-Mao film school graduates from the Beijing Film Academy (LnC). A popular film of this

generation – and praised as one of the most important films that has been made in China – is *Yellow Earth*, directed by Chen Kaige and released in 1984. This film was about a communist soldier who is sent out to the country to collect folk songs for the Communist Army. These songs are supposed to instill hope and happiness but the soldier finds that the folk songs that do exist are depressing and about hardship. The movie isn't direct in its criticism of the Communist Party but is widely remembered for its political subtext. The final scene of the film exemplifies this generation and shows this point clearly. A group of

peasants gather to perform an ancient rain dance, symbolizing the desperation of the people in need of support while the ruling Communist party remains unable or unwilling to actually provide for its people. For these citizens, it is more likely that they will be able to secure water from mystical rituals than they will from their own government.

The Sixth Generation developed in the late 1990's. These filmmakers are known for learning their craft primarily from watching pirated foreign films and reading



Poster for *Yellow Earth*

literature on Western film theory. These directors worked outside of the government's control by getting foreign funding for their films but were still required to submit their scripts and films for censorship screening. If the films did not pass the screening process, then they would be considered illegal in the eyes of the state. Not only did this prevent distribution of certain films, there was also the possibility of the filmmakers being banned from making films altogether (Thompson and Bordwell 640).

Censorship played a large role in filmmaking and most creative media in China throughout the Fifth and Sixth Generations of film. Despite China's efforts to get "soft power," the influential power gained through enticement and coercion, in this case, through the use of cinema – the government's strict (and sometimes seemingly random) censorship has made gaining international traction difficult for Chinese filmmakers. This issue stems from several areas. First, the

censorship comes from two governing bodies,

SARFT (the State Administration of Radio, Film

and Television) and GAPP (the General

Administration of Press and Publication). A film

doesn't have to be approved by both of these

governing bodies to be approved for production or

distribution, which can lead to a scenario where SARFT bans the film from international

distribution but GAPP approves the film to be distributed on store shelves or on the

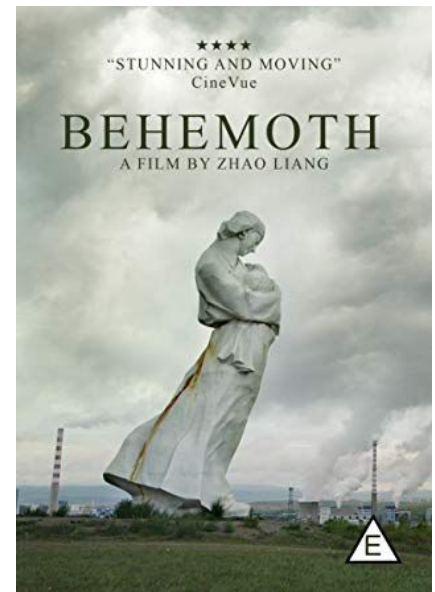
internet (Zhou 241). Banned films have a certain allure overseas and some cinephiles

seek out certain films strictly because they are banned. Because of this, some films that



don't make it through the censorship approval but are still released to DVD domestically can use their own banned status as a promotional tactic abroad (LnC). Some films are also allowed by the government to be screened in international film festivals, while at the same time they are banned on the mainland. There is a belief that SARFT authorities allow festival circulation to promote a positive image for the sake of good public relations (Veg 67).

Even with the possibility for loopholes, censorship of film in China is still a major problem. If a film doesn't fall within what's called the "general category" (which occurs when the film is a co-production with an international production company, depicts revolutionary topics, or contains ethnic, religious, military or judicial issues), entire scripts have to go through censorship approval. If the film does fall within that category, only a short synopsis is required (Zhou 246). Other topics considered to be off limits include supernatural elements, such as ghosts, magic, time travel, or having a piece of the story that is not based in scientific fact (Pang 243). This means that science fiction films are largely off limits, despite the fact that Chinese audiences absolutely love Hollywood science fiction imports with box office sales of imports either equaling or going beyond what the films earned in the US (Berra 179). There is clear economic incentive to allow the production of sci-fi films, having the potential to boost cinema profits considerably. But the political censorship policies remain nonetheless.



Poster for Behemoth

Two films exemplify the modern forms of Chinese censorship and its harm on the creativity of filmmakers as well as the distribution of Chinese films. The first is *Behemoth*, directed by Zhao Liang and released in 2017. This movie is a dark observation of the coal mines and the lives of the miners working there. The only dialogue in the film is lifted directly from *Dante's Inferno*. The film juxtaposes images of the lush countryside alongside the desolate wasteland occupying the coal mine. It definitely calls into question the morality of the mines, their necessity, and thereby the government's decisions to rely on it as an industry, acting as an environmental call to action. The film's message could never be distributed in China due to the strict censorship policies, so the primary audience for the film (Chinese citizens) have never been able to view the film. It's won awards at festivals internationally, but it can't be promoted in China due to the censorship.

The other film is *Touch of Sin*, directed by Jia Zhanke and released in 2013. The film takes place in the form of four different stories from four normal individuals who, after the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back, engage in ultra-violent



Poster for *Behemoth*

tendencies towards the people around them. The four characters all pursue a goal of murdering “bad men” in order to fight back against injustices. The

characters are presented as good individuals who can no longer stand for the level of

crime and corruption around them. Despite the fact that it won best screenplay at the Cannes film festival, the Chinese government banned all media coverage of the film within the country, completely silencing not only the film, but the director as well (Beam 2013).

It is clear that strict censorship debilitates creativity and restricts what Chinese cinema audiences can watch. Despite this censorship, film production in China is at an all-time high. In the year 2012 alone, China produced roughly 800 feature films, second in number only to India for that number released within the year. (Zhou 242). While they are successfully competing with Hollywood, the US film industry still holds sway over what Chinese audiences consume. So much so that between June 10th and July 10th, there is a “domestic film protection month,” an unofficial policy that restricts the screening of any non-Chinese films in the country in order to protect box office sales of domestic films. Without this unofficial practice in place, Hollywood blockbusters would overwhelm the domestic successes that do exist (Zhou, 245).

Censorship has always played a crucial part in the development of the Chinese film industry, and is still an integral part of how films are produced and released in the country. There is clearly frustration by the Chinese people with some of these laws evident in the massive bootlegging market in China. And it is clear there have been a number of avenues pursued by filmmakers and distributors to either circumvent censorship laws or find ways to lessen their impact. As the film industry grows at an exponential rate, Chinese cinema is becoming an international player in the film market.

The only question is whether or not the regulations and restrictions affecting film content will also affect the box office.

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