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Book Review

The history of film in China. [Review of *Cinema in China prior to WWI: A case study of West-Eastern culture transfer* by Meimei Xu]. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020. 290 pp.

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By exploring the still-nascent field of film history in modern China, this book has joined the ranks of monographs such as Poshek Fu's *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas* (2003); Paul G. Pickowicz's *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy* (2011); and Weihong Bao's *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (2015). Unlike most of these works, the book focuses on the period prior to the First World War (1914–1918) rather than the mid-twentieth century, the latter of which was characterised by colonialism, occupation, and war. According to the book, during the final two decades of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), China was a passive recipient of foreign cinema. Film exhibitions and itinerant shows spread across the country, particularly in the pseudo-colonies of foreign concessions and international settlements. Wars, specifically foreign victories and foreign imperialism, created a heavy foreign presence in parts of China, and foreign cameramen recorded war scenes and shot war films on Chinese soil, which catalysed the development of cinema in the country. Film entrepreneurs of various nationalities entered China, monopolised the motion picture business, and helped build an incipient film industry.

This book has made a few key contributions to the existing scholarship on film history in modern China. Rejecting, albeit indirectly, the prevalent idea that modern cinema in China began in cosmopolitan Shanghai in the 1920s, the book highlights the late Qing era as a period of significance

for Chinese cinema. It further divides the period into five parts for study, each constituting a chapter: magic lantern (1843–1897), itinerant exhibitors (1897–1899), cameramen (1900–1905), incipient film industry (1906–1911), and Chinese film production (1912–1914). The book chooses to end its study with the First World War because, accordingly, the rise of Chinese patriotism after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, based on prior developments during the late Qing period, shaped cinema into a tool for educating the Chinese people. By then, port cities such as Hankou, Hong Kong, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Tianjin boasted one or two permanent cinemas, and foreign filmmakers produced films in China for Chinese audiences. As this book suggests, magic lantern exhibitions deployed by British explorers and Methodist missionaries in illustrated lectures to potential converts paved the way for Chinese cinema. Unlike most monographs on the subject, the book draws attention to the magic lantern and suggests, via film studies scholar Charles Musser, that the magic lantern was not a "primitive optical toy" but an "indispensable preparation for the coming [Chinese] cinema" (p. 38). In perhaps its most original and important chapter on the magic lantern, the book analyses how half a century of "lantern practices" (c. 1843–1897) laid the foundation for Chinese cinema to develop in the twentieth century by providing "knowledge, exemplary spreading patterns, and practical functional models" (p. 39). As the magic lantern assumed the three major functions of education, entertainment, and "miscellany," it became associated with Western learning and coexisted with other forms of entertainment in China. Generally known as "shadow play" (*yingxi* 影戲), magic lanterns developed alongside the growing number of foreign concessions and the influence of Western learning. This book argues that cinema in China was an advanced modification of the magic lantern and that for the Chinese during the late Qing period, the only difference between cinema and the magic lantern was that the former was mechanically powered and electrically lightened. By the time itinerant exhibitors entered the scene, cinema already had "one foot in the shadow of magic lantern and the other at the starting point of a new mass media" (p. 98). With the introduction of kinetoscopes, the magic lantern was transformed into cinematography, revealing the salience of foreign technology for modern Chinese cinema.

The second chapter discusses cinematograph exhibitions by itinerant, revenue-oriented professional showmen who toured cities such as Beijing, Hankou, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Tianjin. This book highlights the work of Maurice Charvet and Welby Cook, who offered cinematograph and animatoscope exhibitions, respectively. The Tianhua teahouse, where many of their exhibitions were held, played out its role as a public space for business and culture and helped introduce film art and technology to Chinese audiences. The third chapter examines the impact of war on the development of cinema in China. Although the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) disrupted cinematograph exhibitions across China, a "Boxer fever" emerged in the West and Boxer films were in demand. Cinema was considered by Western audiences to be an effective medium for communicating reality, and scores of cameramen were

dispatched to China to record war scenes. The Russo-Japanese War helped sustain the practice, and Western cameramen continued to capture war and scenic views (to accompany the war scenes) on film. At the same time, however, Boxer "rebels" and the Chinese people as a whole were dehumanised. Often portrayed as buffoons and fiends who enticed white women into their vice-ridden opium dens, the Chinese people were a target of ridicule for Western audiences. Western filmmakers realised cinema's propagandistic potential, and cinema developed into a mass medium in both China and the West. Backed by Western war victories, these profit-oriented filmmakers came to monopolise the Chinese film market, focusing on exhibitions and helping to establish a quasi-film industry in China.

The fourth chapter, contextualised in the final years of the Qing dynasty, saw cinema emerge as a dominant form of entertainment. Film exhibitions resumed after the Russo-Japanese War, and with the establishment of new foreign concessions in the port cities, foreign populations increased, raising the demand for popular entertainment. Film entrepreneurs who had started their businesses as travelling showmen inadvertently helped build a film industry in China. The first permanent cinema and cinema chains were founded during this period, and foreign film companies branched out into the Chinese market, the most prominent of which was Pathé Chine, a French firm that promptly enacted a comprehensive rental system and monopolised film distribution across China. The section on Pathé Chine should interest readers specialising in business and institutional histories; the chapter has quite admirably deployed newspaper sources to great effect in teasing out nuances in the firm's growth in cosmopolitan Shanghai, a microcosm of the future Republican China. Closely connected to the French consular and hence to colonial power, Pathé Chine participated in charity events, supported famine relief efforts, and reported on social affairs. Although it faced challenges such as piracy and copyright infringements, Pathé Chine successfully supplied foreign films to Chinese audiences in Shanghai. In a spate of publicity campaigns, Pathé Chine managed to convince the curious Chinese to step into motion picture theatres. That said, the cinematograph theatre business displayed an obvious regional imbalance, and picture theatres were confined to treaty ports; those living in the hinterlands were barely aware of the films that were popular in Shanghai. In the case of Ramos Amusement Company, which built a cinema chain contemporaneous with Pathé Chine's rental system, permanent theatres could be found only in the port cities of Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Shantou, and Xiamen, and the people in North China were relatively less exposed to and interested in foreign films. Contrary to the arguments of key works on modern China's film industry, this book features Hong Kong as a centre of film distribution prior to the mid-twentieth century, when the exodus of Shanghai filmmakers fleeing the Chinese Civil War (1945–1949) helped develop Hong Kong into the Hollywood of the East. According to the book, Hong Kong was already a conduit of film exchange between South China and Southeast Asia thanks to the pre-existing colonial networks in the region.

The fifth chapter, which explores the early years of Republican China, investigates the indigenisation and nationalisation of cinema in China. Chinese intellectuals began to deplore what they perceived as Western decadence in films and demanded strict censorship to cultivate morality and patriotism. The silver lining was that they started to perceive cinema less as a tool of imperialism and more as a medium of instruction. To fill a lacuna in late Qing and early Republican Chinese intellectuals' views on cinema, the chapter discusses how reformers, revolutionaries, and constitutionalists deployed films to fulfil their educational and political agendas. Regardless of their affiliations, in subsequent decades, they eventually replaced foreign enterprises and filmmakers to become a dominant force in the film production business.

The concluding chapter nicely summarises the key themes and contributions of the book, but all other chapters lack conclusions that would allow readers to make full sense of the analyses presented in them. Parts of the book are bogged down by irrelevant details, rendering it more descriptive than analytical. This is perhaps due to the author's limited engagement with key secondary literature on the subject; for example, the above-mentioned classic monographs by Poshek Fu, Paul G. Pickowicz, and Weihong Bao have not been cited. The book could also benefit from more careful proofreading, which might eliminate some obvious grammatical and typological errors. Finally, experts on film studies might dispute the author's interpretation and translation of *yingxi*. While *yingxi* was a popular Chinese term used for motion pictures between 1897 and 1910, by translating *yingxi* as "shadow play" and conflating it with "magic lantern," this book risks oversimplifying the historical context and inaccurately presuming a link between early cinema and traditional art forms such as Peking opera and shadow puppetry, as Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, editor of (2018), has suggested. The book's key argument of relating early Chinese cinema to the magic lantern is thus bold and yet controversial, and it misses an opportunity to clarify the link in terms of exhibition, production, and reception. Due to the rich system of cinematographic nomenclature that existed during the late Qing and early Republican periods, the early reception of cinema was more fluid than what has been prescribed by the concept of *yingxi*, and the book has not critically assessed such a possibility for its readers.

Nevertheless, for uncovering the multifaceted nature of film exhibitions as serving the main functions of fundraising, missionary work, and the enjoyment of theatre space, this well-researched and richly documented book is an engaging study that will appeal to students and scholars of Chinese studies in general and film studies in particular. For bringing attention to an underexplored period of early Chinese cinema, the book deserves a wide readership.

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