

Imagining Chinese Cinemas in the 21st Century: Launch Event, One Day Conference & Postgraduate Workshop

Report by Joe Hickinbottom

From 9th–11th July, the University of Exeter hosted the inaugural event of the ‘Chinese Cinemas in the 21st Century: Production, Consumption, Imagination’ research project, funded by a Leverhulme Trust International Network grant and led by Exeter’s Song Hwee Lim. Organised by network partners based in Universities from across the world, including in the UK, Australia, Singapore, the Netherlands, Taiwan and the US, the project aims to explore the role played by cultural products (and film in particular) in the construction of both China’s self-image and others’ perception of the region’s culture on local, national, regional and global levels. Consisting of a launch event, a one day conference and a postgraduate workshop, these three days were to focus specifically on one of the project’s main concerns: the function of *imagination* in the production and consumption of Chinese cinemas in the new millennium.

With a dynamic and convivial atmosphere from the start, the proceedings kicked off on the first day with a well-attended, thought-provoking keynote address by the distinguished Rey Chow. After a welcome to the conference and a brief introduction to the project by Song, Rey delivered a stimulating and somewhat challenging paper (deceptively subtitled ‘Some Basic Questions’) examining the interplay between “foreign observers” and “native informants” in the (pseudo)documentary work of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Chung Kuo – Cina* (1972) and Jia Zhangke’s *I Wish I Knew* (2010). That this event was opened by Rey’s declaration of the significance of the documentary genre in the study of modern Chinese cinemas would prove to be fitting, prematurely revealing as it did one of the major threads that were to develop over the three days.

Indeed, a number of papers from both established scholars and postgraduate students dealt with the documentary form in a variety of ways. Sabrina Yu's exploration of independent documentaries focusing on the Three Gorges area of mainland China (including *Dong* (2006) from Jia Zhangke, a filmmaker who would become ubiquitous throughout this event) investigated the representation and transmission of local reality that can be facilitated by the genre's textual potentials. In his close reading of *How is Your Fish Today?* (Xiaolu Guo, 2006), John Berra assessed the film as an example of meta-fiction through his study of its dialectical shift from documentary to narrative, examining the auto-reflexivity of its merging of the director's initial investigative footage with the screenwriter's fictional story. On the final day, Calvin Hui considered the role played by fashion and cinema (in the form of Ma Ke's show *Useless* and Jia Zhangke's 2007 documentary of the same name) in the construction of the Chinese middle class subjectivity, and Tamara Courage's detailed textual analysis of Hu Jie's *Though I Am Gone* (2006) raised the issue of the cinematic representation of cultural memory. Certainly, it appears that documentary – as a genre, a mode of filmmaking, a philosophy – is beginning to occupy a significant position in the study of Chinese cinemas in the 21st century, as the approaches to be found in these diverse and exciting papers demonstrate.

Another key theme that spanned the three days was the relationship between the local and the global, often baring itself through differing examinations of hybridity. In the first paper of the conference, Gaik Cheng Khoo used the Malaysian movies *Petaling Street Warriors* (James Lee, 2011) and *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (Wee Meng Chee, 2011) to call for a way of reading films that takes into account the specific ideologies and social contexts through which production is framed. These two texts, Gaik argued, envisage Malaysia as a hybrid, cosmopolitan community; culturally and geographically grounded in contemporary Malaysian politics, they localise a supposedly "Chinese" genre through intertextual references which may be lost on global audiences. Following this, Felicia Chan and Andy Willis delivered a fantastic paper on the little-known, British-born Chinese director Po-Chih Leong, who is currently based in the US. Contending that Leong has been all but forgotten in scholarship on transnational Chinese filmmaking due to a privileging of the auteur, Felicia and Andy convincingly asserted that space be made for a consideration of the director – who works across different commercial industries, national cinemas and genres – in the

study of contemporary global cinema. Hybridisation at the level of production also proved to be a popular topic over the three days. Andrew Stuckey approached Peter Chan's overlooked *Perhaps Love* (2005) as belonging to a "globalizing genre" in which musical film generic conventions are used to express an opening up to the outside world through a circulation between Hollywood, Bollywood and China. Turning to Taiwanese cinema, both Michelle Bloom and Pei-Yin Lin considered hybridity in their examinations of films in which "China" and "France" (as constructs, not simply locations) interact. Michelle viewed *Flight of the Red Balloon* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2007) as a multicultural, hybrid, "makeover" product, and Pei-Yin Lin analysed the portrayal of Taipei and French culture in Arvin Chen's *Au Revoir Taipei* (2010), a film whose interweaving of foreign-culture and locally-based threads led to a discrepancy in its reception domestically and globally.

In other papers, the diverse and far-reaching potential of the future of Chinese cinemas scholarship was certainly on display. Crossing boundaries in terms of methodologies, disciplines and theoretical frameworks, the variety to be seen in the talks given across the entire three days suggests to me (despite my lack of detailed knowledge of the subject) that the current work being done on the area points towards a rich and lively field of study. Some fine textual analysis came in the form of Margaret Hillenbrand's exploration of space in the films of Jia Zhangke, Marco Bohr's deconstruction of the representation of landscape in Zhangke's *Still Life* (2006), and Yijie Zou's assessment of Zhang Meng's stylised aesthetics. On the industrial side of things, a number of excellent papers drew on issues of distribution, exhibition, reception and consumption. Leung Wing-Fai (speaking also on behalf of her co-author, Daria Berg) discussed product placement in contemporary commercial Chinese cinema, whilst Yen-nan Lin turned to box office and budget figures in his consideration of the production and reception of *Cape No. 7* (Wei Te-sheng, 2008). Su-Anne Yeo's brilliant study of the dissemination of independent screen media traced the circulation of Asian films in both Hong Kong and Canada, and How Wee Ng's survey of the reception of the US television series *Garrison's Gorillas* in China in the 1980s called for a rethinking of censorship as a positivist discourse. Elsewhere, Corrado Neri took an interdisciplinary approach in his entertaining discussion of propaganda film *My Long March* (Zhai Junjie, 2010) and Feng Menbo's art installation *Long March: Restart*, and Tan See Kam brought to

the fore a notion of “banal cosmopolitanism” in his talk on Zhang Yimou’s 2011 movie *The Flowers of War*.

Perhaps the most rewarding and productive period of the event, however, came in the final day: a postgraduate workshop in which student papers were followed by feedback from discussants (all network partners), and then opened up for discussion. Conducted in a relaxed and friendly environment that had been building steadily over the previous two days, these sessions prompted lively debate from all those who attended, and no doubt the advice given by the discussants was gladly received by each student. Proceedings started with a lengthy roundtable discussion led by Rey Chow and the revered Chris Berry (if only it were longer!), reflecting on the conference by pulling together some of the major themes and threads that had emerged over its course. Reiterating what Song had asserted in his closing talk the previous day, both Rey and Chris were quick to recognise the important role played by postgraduate work in shaping and pushing forward the field of Chinese cinemas studies. That this project was set up with the postgraduate community in mind is indeed to be commended, offering as it does the vital opportunity for Chinese cinemas students to meet with one another, share their work with other academics, and become part of a rich and dynamic research community. The intelligent and engaging papers delivered by Emilia Chi-Jung Cheng, Wen-chun Kuan and Shu-Yi Lin, among others, were certainly testament to this, with all contributing postgraduates confidently challenging and questioning the boundaries of the field through their original and insightful research. This, coupled with a wealth of fascinating presentations by established scholars and a welcoming and inspiring atmosphere that developed throughout, made for a most intellectually stimulating and enjoyable three days; the subsequent events scheduled to take place in Amsterdam, Singapore and Taiwan surely now have a tough act to follow!

Joe Hickinbottom is a PhD student at the University of Exeter. His thesis focuses on the distribution, exhibition, reception and consumption of the work of Japanese filmmaker Takashi Miike through an examination of the process of cultification. He presented at the Chinese Film Forum UK’s 2012 symposium, ‘The Distribution and Exhibition of Chinese and Asian Cinema in the UK’, and will be giving a paper at the upcoming ‘Cultural Translation and East Asia: Film Literature and Art’ conference in Bangor.