



# **FUTURES OF CHINESE CINEMA**

**TECHNOLOGIES AND TEMPORALITIES  
IN CHINESE SCREEN CULTURES**

**EDITED BY OLIVIA KHOO  
& SEAN METZGER**

# Futures of Chinese Cinema



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Edited by Olivia Khoo and Sean Metzger



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## Note on the Text

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For the most part, Chinese words have been transliterated using pinyin notation. Therefore, this book usually provides the names of films in Mandarin Chinese. For films where the dialogue is not principally in Mandarin Chinese, we have tried to provide titles in the original language with English translation where possible. Individual essays sometimes depart from this rule, and we have followed the desires of each contributor in those cases.



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## **Introduction**

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Sean Metzger and Olivia Khoo



Why invoke futures of Chinese cinema? How does an emphasis on contingency and possibility augur what those futures might look like? Does it still make sense to understand Chinese film as work produced within the current geographic borders of China, or even greater China; work financed all or in part by the governments of the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong or Singapore? Or work in a Chinese language, guided by a Chinese director? Given the flux of political regimes and the accompanying status of nation states, the increasingly interconnected global economy, shifting patterns of linguistic innovation and the complications of ethnic and racial identifications, the very idea of Chinese cinema is always already fractured, a convenient rubric for complex processes that often exceed China as a reference point.<sup>1</sup> Rather than engage the questions above within a framework of the 'national' in various Chinese contexts, this volume argues for an engagement with time and technology that is limited neither to the discourse of the nation nor to its cognates (the transnational) and ostensible antecedents (empire). Remembering Benedict Anderson's influential argument in his *Imagined Communities* that the idea of the nation depended on technological innovation (the printing press, in his case), scholars must increasingly think of the future of Chinese cinemas in relation to evolving media and in the context of the morphing powers of nation states.<sup>2</sup>

We argue that 'Chinese films' register and enact these shifts. In this introduction we deploy a quintet of recent films to outline various trajectories, past and present, that we see as driving the continued development of Chinese cinema. Together, these films provide the imaginative backdrop for the central concerns of this volume; namely, how to track changing technologies and investigate time as it is understood and invoked differently to imagine various 'futures' of Chinese cinema. Our brief analyses of each of the five selections below suggest the shifting interplay between questions of Chineseness, cinema, technology and temporality that recur in different ways in the chapters that comprise this volume. In our opening comments, we have chosen to concentrate on contemporary examples because of the ways in which these films highlight a continuum, not of linear progression, but of a multitude of different connections to the past that yield quite distinct possibilities for the future. The films negotiate with their predecessors (and contemporaries) by various means: from veneration, to scepticism, to playful parody, and form part of a continued dialogue with the examples in the chapters to follow.

## Temporalities of Chinese cinema: Five takes

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An homage to Albert Lamorisse's 1956 award-winning short, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Flight of the Red Balloon* (*Le voyage du ballon rouge*, 2007), departs from its titular French cousin not only through the addition of dialogue and a comparatively intricate plot, but also through depictions of specific forms of intercultural exchange: puppet theatre and overseas students.<sup>3</sup> *Flight of the Red Balloon* cites director Hou's previous work that brought Taiwan cinema to international attention as well as the French art cinema that at least partially inspired him. While also emblematic of a certain auteurist vision, Wong Kar-Wai's *My Blueberry Nights* (2007) suggests the lure of Hollywood to directors whose careers have previously been heavily connected to national or local cinematic traditions within Asia. Straddling similar artistic and commercial imperatives, Peter Chan's *Perhaps Love* (*Ruguo ai*, 2005) might evoke the sumptuous hues of Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2001), but it also draws on a different commercial form through the use of Farah Khan's kinetic Bollywood choreography. Chan's work also recalls a lineage of musicals produced by Hong Kong's Cathay Studios, including Yi We's *Manbo Girl* (*Manbo nulang*, 1957) and Wong Tin-lam's *The Wild, Wild Rose* (*Ye mei gui zhi lian*, 1960).<sup>4</sup> Just as often discussed in the context of globalization, Jia Zhangke's *The World* (*Shijie*, 2004) examines the labour of performers and other staff members in World Park on the outskirts of Beijing as well as the electronic devices that facilitate and inhibit communication among them. Finally, as probably the best-known Asian film among North American and European audiences, Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (*Wohu canglong*, 2000) recreates the mythic world of its literary source material through martial arts cinema (*wuxia pian*) and specifically references the work of King Hu, while creating a new cinematic form of his own.<sup>5</sup>

This perhaps unlikely quintet – Hou's *Flight of the Red Balloon*, Wong's *My Blueberry Nights*, Chan's *Perhaps Love*, Jia's *The World* and Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* – stimulate different imaginings of the interplay among temporality and technology at a moment when China and things Chinese are understood to be reshaping structures of aesthetic, economic and political power across the Pacific and beyond. If the films share little else in common, they reveal as a group the notion of Chineseness to be contentious rather than fixed. Filmmakers – including directors, crew, onscreen talent and producers – as well as distributors, exhibitors, audiences, scholars, critics and others attached to the industry directly or indirectly play a role not only in registering but also in helping to enact new visions of Chineseness in an increasingly globalized world. These visions vary and often conflict with one another depending on multiple factors of production, distribution and reception – not the least of which is the location of each. For example, *Flight of the Red Balloon* would seem only tangentially connected to Chineseness, its director notwithstanding, given that the whole film is shot in Paris. The narrative concerns a puppet troupe's vocalist named Suzanne (Juliette Binoche), who employs a student filmmaker named Song (Fang Song) to assist with the care of Suzanne's son Simon (Simon Iteanu) as well as translation services. However, Suzanne manifests an increasing dependence for her livelihood on various forms

of Chinese labour from her master teacher to Song. Moreover, because Song is the onscreen documentarian who captures the flight of the balloon and also a Taiwanese filmmaker in the West, she potentially parallels the gaze and perhaps even the emotive investment of Hou at and in the film's putative subject. Certainly the presence of a Chinese filmmaker shooting on digital video within the remake wraps together issues of technology, temporality and Chineseness in a novel manner that the 1956 short did not anticipate.

As another example, we might consider some of the vigorous debates surrounding *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, animated in part by the polarized receptions it received among Mandarin-speaking and non-Mandarin speaking audiences located in different regions. As Felicia Chan has pointed out, the latter group is often accused of consuming an orientalist version of a mythic China and a tension has emerged around the translatability of film in different linguistic and cultural contexts.<sup>6</sup> The production evinces a desire to bring together diverse Chinese and English-speaking constituencies at levels from shooting to screening, but the aural dimension of accented speech seems to have proven a strong barrier to the realization of this goal in some theatres, as indexed in both the press and online blogs. If the distinctiveness of Chinese language users from a variety of backgrounds caused consternation, so too did the digitization of some of the scenes, such as the now-famous conflict between Li Mubai (Chow Yun-Fat) and Xiao Long (Zhang Ziyi) in the bamboo forest.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless such innovations have helped to establish a formula for the transnational Chinese blockbuster that is repeated, for example, in the recent trio of martial arts epics by Zhang Yimou as well as Feng Xiaogang's *The Banquet* (*Ye yan*, 2006).<sup>8</sup>

Although set in quite opposite eras, *Flight of the Red Balloon* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* pay homage to the work of earlier directors; within both the production processes and the worlds onscreen, they also engage time in thematic and structural registers. If the red balloon in Lamorisse's Paris seems guided by the exigencies of chance, then Hou's film might be understood to be similarly paced by non-events. Just as Song with her camera follows the crimson oval through the air at the speed of the tracked object, spectators experience randomness in the unfolding of the narrative. Within this linearity, the puppetry offers at least the suggestion of an opposing temporality, one that is mythic and, as is the case with theatre, cyclical in the sense of beginning anew each time the same piece is performed. This kind of cyclical pattern repeats within the diegesis the repetitive facet of the production concept. Hou's version reworks but also, to some extent, reenacts the previous 1956 film. It also picks up the puppet motif that emerged earlier in Hou's oeuvre with *The Puppet Master* (*Ximeng rensheng*, 1993), a film that uses the figure of the puppeteer to explore a different kind of cultural contact: the protagonist's life during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan.

Like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Flight of the Red Balloon*, *Perhaps Love* and *The World* foreground issues of technology and temporality, albeit in other ways. *Perhaps Love* uses a cast of pan-Asian stars to explore a love triangle in and doubled through a film within the film. The narrative shuttles back and forth depicting the relationship of Sun Na (Zhou Xun) and Lin Jian-Dong (Takeshi Kaneshiro) on the set of a 1930s musical and their encounter a decade earlier, before their professional breakthroughs. On set and in the frame narrative,

the director Nie Wen (Jacky Cheung Hok-Yau) proves an obstacle to their relationship, particularly when he decides to assume the lead role in his own production. Because it shows the ongoing process of cinematic creation, the film self-reflexively defamiliarizes the technologies that create the screened illusion and thus breaks the relationship between ‘real’, or profilmic time, and that of the diegesis. Indeed, the relatively brief opening image of snow falling under light is revealed only a few minutes later in the first song and dance number to result from physical labour on the set. *The World* has also been described as a musical, albeit of a different order than Chan’s.<sup>9</sup> Live performance, still photography and animation all feature prominently in Jia’s first government-sanctioned tale of characters – including migrant workers from Russia as well as rural areas of China – who struggle to connect in a milieu of shifting surfaces.

From the cinematic examples we have introduced, it is possible to outline five different dimensions or modes of temporality in relation to Chinese cinema. These are crystallized in our contemporary examples but remain present throughout the history of Chinese cinema as demonstrated in various ways by the contributors to this volume. Obviously, time operates most clearly in the diegesis – not only in terms of a narrative unfolding, but also in terms of its suspension (e.g. many of Hou’s works) and interruption (e.g. the animated sequence in *The World*). The extradiegetic, particularly sound and music unsynchronized with the image, composes another temporal element.<sup>10</sup> In *Perhaps Love*, for example, songs often suture together actions occurring in the present with flashbacks, so the backward and forward chronology of the diegesis no longer coincides with the music, which advances independent of what we see onscreen.<sup>11</sup> Variations on this theme occur throughout the film. At the conclusion of Nie Wen’s solos, which tend to end in relatively long takes creating tableaux, musical phrases either swell or decrescendo to completion. The musical tempos counter visual stasis. Third, as our discussion of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* reveals, the audience also inhabits its own time, that is, the elapse of hours in the Cineplex or, as is still more often the case in China, the passage of time gazing at a film formatted for a television set or computer screen. Fourth, the cinematic apparatus involves its own temporal progression; usually this refers to the speed of the film moving through the machine at 24 frames per second. However, wuxia pian aficionados are quite familiar with a faster pace often used to enhance fight scenes with a rapidity of motion; similarly, fans of the art productions of Wong Kar-Wai are accustomed to the jerky movements resulting from his signature dropping of frames. Finally, Chinese film studies offers, like Chinese cultural studies in general, a strong investment in periodization, which is a retrospective construction of time through which the views of audiences can be framed. An influential example here might be Rey Chow’s discussion of the PRC’s Fifth Generation filmmakers during the 1980s and early 1990s. Chow describes a ‘primitive’ mode that emerged as a dominant trend in the Chinese cinema circulating on the international festival circuit characterized by almost ethnographic coverage of quotidian life in rural areas of China.<sup>12</sup> Her study of the Fifth Generation filmmakers highlights the often retroactive labels that shape the way in which we understand a given film as an object of inquiry.

Using these five understandings of time in relation to Chinese cinema, we suggest in the remainder of the introduction how work on time and cinema might encourage a reconsideration of Chinese modernity in the context of Chinese cinema studies. Second, we shift the term cinema to Chinese screen cultures to encompass the ways in which the constituent chapters in this volume explore the advantages and pressures that other screen media offer to and place on film. Finally, we outline how the chapters engage modernity and Chinese screen cultures as well as time and technology more generally through three conceptual categories that define the work in this book: historiography, capital and epistemology.

### **Contrapuntal modernities**

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Rey Chow's work in *Primitive Passions* has not generally been received as a nascent theorization of cinematic temporality in Chinese cinema, but her contention that 'a history of visibility as such would enable us to see the oft-discussed relation between tradition and modernity primarily in terms of the technologized image' merits unpacking, given recent scholarly discussions of time and the moving image in other regional contexts.<sup>13</sup> For Chow, this statement allows her to differentiate between pre-twentieth-century Chinese forms of visibility as aestheticized and their twentieth century counterparts as politicized in order to suggest that both processes participate in flip sides of primitivism, which she uses here as a temporal indicator. In the aestheticized case, primitivism denotes 'an *other* time', in the politicized one, it suggests 'origins and primariness'.<sup>14</sup> Chow then moves on to see the "China picture" of the 1960s as 'the climax of Chinese modernity' – an exemplary moment for combining both modes simultaneously.<sup>15</sup> Whether or not we accept the content of these assertions, the book's structuring of Chinese modernity through a series of 'moments of filmic visibility' (broadly understood to include, for example, some of Lu Xun's written musings on the subject) corresponds with several other scholarly accounts of modernity in Chinese contexts.<sup>16</sup> If modernity understood as imbricated processes of urban industrialization, religious secularization and spatial condensation suggests linear development in Europe and North America, in China by comparison, such shifts have occurred chronologically later and in a more uneven and cyclical manner.<sup>17</sup> If instead we understand modernity more as an epistemology, what Homi Bhabha frames as 'the historical construction of a specific position of historical enunciation and address', then it bears mentioning that China's historical development has dramatically differed from nation states in the western hemisphere.<sup>18</sup> As a country that remained largely agrarian through much of the twentieth century, the locus of enunciation for the project of modernity was located not in the mouths of Fordist entrepreneurs, but instead in the mouths of May 4th intellectuals, guomindang elite and, eventually, communist government officials. From US and European colonial incursions into China's coastal regions during the Opium Wars through the fall of the Qing dynasty, the warlord period, the establishment of a new republic, the transition to communism and

beyond, modernity has surfaced as a fractured concept. Cinema's status as a technology coincident with modernity in European and American discourses thus requires revision in relation to China's different movements toward variously articulated modernities.

Economic reforms from the four modernizations (*si ge xiandaihua*) announced in the late 1970s to Deng Xiaoping's 1992 tour of southern China and the increasing elasticity of the notion of socialism with Chinese characteristics (*juyou zhongguo tese de shehuizhuyi*), have exposed tensions *within* the nation state over what might constitute Chinese modernity since the end of the Maoist era. The changing dynamics of territory and sovereignty including the 'one nation, two systems' policy for Hong Kong and the ongoing debates concerning Taiwan and Tibet highlight the limitations of the nation state as an appropriate measure of complex developments that exceed the PRC's duration as such. Given its size, the distribution and diversity of its constituent populations, the disparate access of those populations to mechanical equipment, political representation, etc., modernity in relation to China has signified and continues to connote several incongruous processes. We group such processes that occur both within and beyond China under the term *contrapuntal modernities*.<sup>19</sup> This formulation allows for both harmonious and dissonant conceptions of modernity to play with and against each other through a continuing composition – that is, multiple iterations – of Chineseness.<sup>20</sup> The scope of *contrapuntal modernities* includes the often disjunctive histories of special administrative regions like Hong Kong, other national spaces such as Taiwan and Singapore and diasporic Chinese communities.

In pragmatic terms, *contrapuntal modernities* remind us that time itself has been variously understood. Current examples include the competing calendars utilized by Chinese populations. During dynastic reign, the administrative bureaucracy marked time in regnal years. Although the government adopted the Gregorian calendar for official use in 1912 following the collapse of imperial infrastructure, its status during warlord rule is debatable. In 1928, the *guomindang* readopted the Gregorian calendar along with Greenwich Mean Time. Nevertheless, major cultural festivals in Chinese diasporic communities, such as the New Year (*xinnian*) and Mid-Autumn Festival (*zhongqiujie*) continue to follow a lunisolar calendar. This mundane remnant of keeping time does not function as a celebratory inscription of multiple temporalities somehow occurring in a euphoric present. Rather, to follow Bhabha's conclusions or to examine epics like Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang biejie*, 1993), Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* (*Lan fengzheng*, 1993), Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (*Huoqzhe*, 1994) or Hou Hsiao-Hsien's Taiwan trilogy, we see competing temporalities erupting through and into one another, with often violent effects. *Contrapuntal modernities* facilitate a tracking of these apparent paradoxes.

As an interpretive paradigm, *contrapuntal modernities* builds on 'contrapuntal reading' advocated by Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism*, a study of primarily British, French and American novelists. Said compels his readers 'to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relations, all of them co-existing and interacting with others.'<sup>21</sup> While Said's project aims at

returning colonial contexts to the study of largely nineteenth century European books, his tactic enables the visualization of the contrariness of modernity and Chineseness. Ultimately the individual articulations of these concepts provide a complicated texture, perceived as a whole or in parts, but which we might analyse as Chinese modernity. We do not describe on this generalized theoretical level, the relationship between Chineseness and modernity as necessarily unique. James Clifford has argued that ‘contrapuntal modernity’ usefully labels modern life (lived experience) resulting from diaspora and hybridization.<sup>22</sup> But our elaboration of this notion has pointed to the particularities of how contrapuntal modernities contour our view of Chineseness and vice versa. Having noted its utility, we caution against the potential impulse to frame the invocation of the contrapuntal as intrinsically resistant.<sup>23</sup> The contrapuntal does not guarantee a politics.<sup>24</sup> For our purposes, it marks a kind of texture that both structures and is shaped by the technologies of cinema that constitute the focus of this book.

As an analytic to bring together cinematic technologies and contrapuntal modernities and in recognition of the fact that the idea of counterpoint is first and foremost a term derived from music, we resignify the time signature. According to the *OED*, a time signature is ‘a sign placed at the beginning of a piece of music, or where the time changes, to show the measure or rhythm; rhythmical signature’. Unlike the ‘personal authorial signature’ of accented filmmakers, this text foregrounds the conditions of possibility pace Foucault that enable the articulation of the individual filmmaker in the first place.<sup>25</sup> In this vein, we understand the time signature not as a means of composition so much as a translation device that would render music intelligible from what might otherwise be random noise. Music as the perception of sound in time varies from composer to performer to audience member. Jazz illustrates these different registers quite clearly. By the same token, we see film – on the one hand, the imprint of a series of still images on celluloid, but also the perception of images moving in time subject to the manipulation of the cinematic apparatus – as variable according to the five dimensions of time in Chinese cinema: that of the diegetic, extradiegetic, audience, apparatus and periodization.

### **Chinese screen cultures**

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As the time signature signifies and translates the rhythmical structure of a piece of music for its audience, so too do developments in technologies of representation alter how we might encounter, see and interpret a particular film. From the duration of cinema’s ‘movement-image’ to the primary value of electronic or digital temporality which is the instant, the bit, technology allows us to experience time in a multitude of ways.<sup>26</sup> Technology also necessarily moves us beyond national and nationalist perspectives. As Appadurai’s technoscapes indicate in their interaction with other dimensions of global cultural flows, the movements of technology foreground the disjunctures brought about by the forces of globalization.<sup>27</sup> Appadurai’s technoscapes refer to ‘the global configuration, also ever so fluid, of technology,