

# Griffith Asian

## Regional Culture

ASIAN WESTERN FILMS  
MEETS THE EAST  
WORLD CINEMA AND CO-PRODUCTION

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# Griffith Asia Institute

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## Regional Outlook

Asian Western Films Where the Exotic Meets the  
Familiar Chinese Images in the World Cinema and  
Coproduction

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Asian Western Films Where the Exotic Meets the Familiar: Chinese Images in World Cinema and Coproduction

including emotional expression, narrative methods, performance, education awareness, and so on.



Basically there are three elements which fit together to show the whole picture of Chinese cinema and Chinese elements in global cinema in the history of Western culture. The first element can be considered to be the export of pure Chinese movies to global markets. The first Chinese influence on the global market can be traced to the fifth generation directors in the 1980s, together with other directors from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Well known directors such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Wang Karwai (Wang Jiawei), as well as Chinese directors maturing in recent years such as Zhang Yuan and Jia Zhangke, together with the rapid development of the Chinese economy, brought more and more Chinese productions to global cinemas. The second element involves Chinese images in western films. In fact, the history of Chinese images in Western movies is as long as the history of film itself. As early as 1890, the American company, Mutoscope, made two brief subjects on the visit of a Chinese official, Li Hongzhang, to New York City. In 1919, the film *The Broken Blossom* was considered to be the greatest work of D.W. Griffith ever released in the West, despite the fact that the Chinese character was performed by a Caucasian man. In fact, during the more than one hundred years of motion picture history, Chinese images in Western directors' hands have been manipulated into many classic types, negative and positive, reflecting the attitude of the times towards China and the historical political balance in the world. The third element, most interesting one, is the Western Chinese movie. This refers to those who produce Chinese movies in English, aimed at Western audiences or the global market. The earliest example of this type of production would be the motion picture *Good Earth* made in the 1930s. This film was the first formal Hollywood production made with the Chinese government, despite the fact that the film was fully produced in Los Angeles, and the main characters were all played by Asian-actors. Later, winner of nine Academy Awards, the film *Last Emperor* made in 1987 and directed by the Italian, Bernardo Bertolucci, opened a new chapter in this type of production. All Chinese characters in this film were played by Chinese actors, and spoke in English although the scenes were shot in China. On one hand, these days thanks to the temptation of big profits and much investment







In the book *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*, the author Sax Rohmer indicates the character's outlook as Shakespeare and Satan, both of whom are considered to be popular Western icons, although he also mentioned the yellow peril incarnate in one man to emphasize the Asian race of the character. This could be one important reason why the audience and original readers of the book were often misled by the adaptation using a white man pretending to be Asian in this film. Also, the character of Charlie Chan is a detective living in Honolulu. Although he is a Chinese and the role was originally played by a Japanese, it was not until a white actor was cast in the title role that a Chan film met with success, beginning with 1930's *Charlie Chan Carries On* starring Swedish actor Warner Oland as Chan.

This interesting phenomenon, of Asian characters being played by Western actors, may be due to a lack of Asian professional actors, although in the Charlie Chan series there is always a regular Chinese face, Keye Luke, who played Chan's Number One Son. The overall ethnic origin in many films seems designed to blur the distinction between Asian and Caucasian characters during this period. In 1916, the film *Broken Fetters*



# 3 Chinese cinema in the Global Market after 1999

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Filmmakers like Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, Wu Ziniu, He Ping, Huang Jianxin and Zhang Yimou, many of whom were graduates of the Beijing Film Academy, were branded as the fifth generation. They brought the Chinese wave into the global cinema. Films like *Yellow Earth* (1984) and Zhang Yimou's *Red Sorghum* (1987) reached international audiences and gained critical acclaim around the world.

Even though they don't necessarily emulate the genre directors, many Chinese directors compete in restaging and reinventing exotic, erotic rituals and other ethnic cultural elements. To a great extent such competition was triggered by western interest in, or demand for, such a genre. Film festivals, as the trend setter, in turn provide a platform for this trend of ethnography to circulate. Hence Dai Jinhua laments that, winning such prizes has become a prerequisite for film making; western culture, artistic tastes, and production standards in international film festivals now determine our purely national films (Dai, Wang & Barlow 2002).

In *Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival* (1992), Bill Nichols studied national cinemas in the festival circuit and stated that film festivals become a crucial means of mediation through which new films are encountered. For him, film festivals enable the cultural reception of an alien culture in which discovery processes operate. Like Nichols, Julian Stringer (2001) defines international film festivals as situated sites, where festival films are developed as a new genre to be



integrate traditional Hong Kong Kung Fu and comedy genre with Hollywood commercial elements, and are popular with both Eastern and Western audiences.

While the action directors and stars such as John Woo, Jackie Chan moved to Hollywood for mainstream action, Wang Ka's art films became the new landscape of Hong Kong cinema and were considered indications of the culture of contemporary Hong Kong (Marchetti, 2000). With *Chungking Express* (1994), *Fallen Angels* (1995) and *Happy Together* (1997) being distributed in America a



Chinese directors have managed entry into the American mainstream cinema market with commercial blockbusters, rather than showing in art house cinemas as in the past. There is a long list of these commercial successes, including *Zhang Yimou's House of Flying Daggers* (2003) and *The City of Golden Armors* (2006), He Pingping's *Warriors of Heaven and Earth* (2003), Chen Kaige's *Master of the Crimson Armor* (2005), the Hong Kong new wave pioneer Hark Tsui's



## 5 Conclusion



At the beginning of this paper, one of the elements discussed involved the term Chinese images in







the bestselling novel of the same name, the story of a Japanese geisha during World War II. It is simple to understand why Western producers were keen to make this purely Asian story into a Hollywood blockbuster. There is a long tradition of studios producing big budget films from bestselling novels and the Asian market is the target for production companies. Although *Geisha* is a purely Japanese story, rather than choosing Japanese actresses, the film casted a Chinese actress Zhang Ziyi (*Touching Tiger Hidden Dragon*) as Li Hsiao-tsun. Michelle Yeoh (*Tomorrow Never Dies*) also had a role in the film.

*Memoirs of a Geisha* several times. The conclusion is obvious. This Hollywood made Japanese film was a total failure in the two most important Asian markets because of the cultural conflicts and lack of understanding of audience's particular properties.

Feedback from the American domestic audience presented the different attitudes towards this film. Few critics in the US mention the Chinese cast issue, therefore it can be easily understood movie made a few decades earlier might have used white actresses, like for example, in *The Good Earth*. The process of Hollywood directors choosing Asian actors is well under way due to the development of modernization and globalization.

However in *Memoirs of a Geisha* the director's decision about dialogue being in English is more problematic. Zhang and Gong are not adept at this language and their delivery of it and their cadence frequently incorrect. The castigation of this East film is largely in regard to the English language acting in the film, except in instances when scenes rely on the aspects of the performances. Spoken with heavy accents and inaccurate pronunciation, the dialogue sounds forced.

critics who criticize the character of the slum boy, saying that his speaking of perfect English does not ring true. However the Hindi version of this film settled this problem, and gained greater popularity in India. It not only allowed access to the English-speaking population, but also raised sales 50% at the box office in the domestic market (Sinha, 2009).

During the dissemination of a film across different countries, there is always much misunderstanding of the real information due to the differences among the target audiences and their subjective interpretations of the contexts. For example, the Chinese language film *Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, which is highly popular in the Western world but which was not widely accepted by a Chinese audience. The distribution company actually lost half a million US dollars during the film's release in China. The Chinese audience in general considers this film to be missing vital ingredients. The Kung Fu scenes do not contain great visual effects, the love story lines are disappointing and the uneven

Culture is a large topic. It normally refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs

*TMNT* (2007), for the Japanese role to be dubbed into English, a Chinese actor's voice was used. It is not surprising that film producers consider certain Asian stars in order to attract their audience. However, from past experience, most Western filmmakers only consider the Asian stars' popularity in the West, rather than in their native culture or the appropriate culture represented in the particular film. It is certainly not because there is a lack of actresses with the ability to play the leading roles in *Memoirs of a Geisha*, but simply that the three Chinese actresses have a certain image in the Western world. It is not as easy as inviting an Australian film star to act as an American, Western producers neglect the cultural identity in each market in Asia. In reality, taking China, Japan and Korea as examples, these three major markets have entirely different contemporary history, language and social values. A purely Western movie might be popular in the three markets at the same time, but for co-production relevance to their own culture, national identity

interest of the local audience in order to settle any problems of poor pronunciation by an international cast. However,

Asian Western Films



