

EAST 353 001: Approaches to Chinese Cinema (3 credits)
Fall 2024
Fridays, 2:35–6:25 PM
Location: Sherbrooke 680, Room 391
McGill University

Land Acknowledgment: This course is being held on unceded Indigenous lands in Tiohtiá:ke, a place that has long served as a site of meeting and exchange for Indigenous peoples. The Kanien'kehà:ka (Mohawk) of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy are recognized as the traditional custodians of these lands and waters.

Prerequisites/co-requisites: It would be helpful if you have taken a course on or have some background knowledge of Chinese culture. It would also be helpful if you have taken an intro to film course. But if you lack background knowledge in either Chinese culture or film, don't worry, I'll work with you.

Instructor: Dylan Suher 蘇和 / 苏和
Office: 680 Sherbrooke, Room 267
Office Hours: Fridays 1–2
E-mail: dylan.suher@mcgill.ca



A. Course Overview

This course is designed as an introduction to one of the greatest traditions in all of global cinema. We will examine how such practices and institutions as Chinese opera, martial arts fiction, folk songs and folk arts, Maoist revolutionary aesthetics, mobile projection units, the Beijing Film Academy, and the film theories of André Bazin contributed to the production of some true masterpieces of cinema. Yet the more we

learn about the history of Chinese film, the more it will become *unclear* what we mean by “Chinese film”—that is to say, it is difficult, if not impossible, to confidently define a national “Chinese film” tradition based on aesthetics, practices, or audience. Instead of a neatly circumscribed domain of Chinese film, we will instead find that the questions that confronted Chinese filmmakers and film viewers—how to effect political change through film, how to balance artistic innovation with popular appeal, the meaning of realism in film—are crucial questions for *global cinema* as a whole.

The first half of this semester will be a chronological survey of key moments in the century-long history of Chinese film. Through this survey, we will grasp the historical development of the medium in China from the teahouse to the Shanghai art deco film palace to the mobile-projection-unit-screened model opera to films smuggled out to Cannes. But we will also think about paths not taken by Chinese filmmakers, and think critically about what it means to do film history—how we think about film texts, contexts, and audiences. We will build on those insights into the problems of film history when we explore other approaches to Chinese cinema in the second half of the course. We will contrast an auteurist approach with one more invested in the film industry; we will think about how questions of ethnicity and sexuality can be explored through film; and we will end the semester by leaving cinema-screened fiction film behind to think about the problems of documentary and new media.

B. Course Goals:

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

- Identify important moments, institutions, and people in the history of Chinese film and understand the broader historical context of important films in this history;
- Understand and intelligently comment on such long-running debates in Chinese film as the place of politics in film, film as a tool of education and social uplift, film as a form of popular entertainment, and realism and representation in film;
- Understand the significance and limits of the concept of national cinema;
- Identify basic film techniques and confidently analyze a film sequence.

C. Readings and films

All readings will be available online via MyCourses. Because we have a four hour bloc in the schedule, **all films will be screened during class**. If you are for whatever reason unable to attend the film screening for that week, you will be responsible for obtaining and viewing the film on your own.

D. Course Structure

Please complete the reading for that week by Friday at latest and preferably by Wednesday night when, beginning on week 3, you will be expected to submit a short question or reflection on the reading. Each session will begin with a lecture of about an hour that is structured to provide you with opportunities to participate and ask questions. We will then take a short break and view the film in class. Starting from week 3, after the film has been screened, there will be a brief one-question in-class quiz, and then we will discuss the film for about a half hour.

E. Assessment

Note that all assignments add up to 100 points. Your total score at the end of the semester will be the sum of all points you receive on all assignments (plus participation), which will then be converted via the standard McGill undergraduate grading scale into a letter grade. Even if you are taking the class pass/fail or have decided to accept a lower grade, **submission of the midterm paper and final exam is mandatory**. If you fail to submit either of those assignments, you will receive a J for the semester.

McGill University Policy: In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the control of McGill University, assessment tasks in a course are subject to change, provided students are sent adequate and timely communications regarding the change.

8 pts — Participation. Find a way to engage in and contribute to the class, preferably by answering questions during lecture and being an active part of the post-film discussion. Be present and thoughtful about what you are watching and learning. Don't worry about how you might sound—I just want to hear you thinking, and the way we refine our ideas is by thinking through them out loud. I'd like to hear your voice, ideally, at least once a week, but at minimum at least once every two or three weeks. If you don't feel totally comfortable talking in class, you can come by office hours, or you can email me. Just find a way to engage in the class that works for you.

10 pts — Post-film one-question quiz. It is important for you to be present and paying attention for every part of class. Beginning on week 3, I will ask you a single question every week after the film about a detail from the film **or** from lecture. It won't be a trick question, so if you're paying attention, you should be fine. But if you miss the quiz, you miss it—no make-ups!

12 pts – Short responses (~100 words). To help me figure out what to focus on for lecture, I will ask you to submit a very short response to the **reading** for that week **on the dedicated weekly forum on MyCourses, due Wednesday at 11:59 PM**. We will start with responses on **week three**. You can make an observation, you can pose a question, you can write about whether you agree or disagree with the readings for that week...you can really write anything you want so long as it reflects engagement with that week's material—I just want to see what you're thinking about the material for that week. Full credit (**1 pt per post, except for the last post**) will be given to any post that substantially engages with that week's reading and topic. I will try and grade the posts on Thursday morning, and will generally not comment on the contents except to explain why you are not receiving full credit, but please stop by office hours if you want to discuss those ideas further! **No late submissions accepted.**

10 pts — Film techniques quiz. In order for you to produce sophisticated analyses of film, it is necessary for you to learn the vocabulary of “film language”: framing, camera angles, camera movement, editing, *mise-en-scène*. Early in the semester, I will show you a set of clips and ask you to identify basic film techniques that I have gone over in class. Later in the semester, you will be given an opportunity to take another film techniques quiz if you wish; the highest of the two scores will be counted toward your final grade.

20 pts — Sequence analysis (~1200–1500 words). You will be given a choice of one of three sequences from the films we viewed in the first six weeks of the course. The analysis will be divided into three parts: a) accurately describing in reasonable detail, with correct terminology, at least two or three film techniques used in the sequence (i.e. accurately describing the framing, angles, edits, use of sound, etc.) b) explaining the probable effects of the various techniques employed by the filmmakers, as inferred both from the sequence itself and the context of that sequence in the film; c) explaining how this sequence and the techniques used within it relates to at least one of the readings assigned in the first six weeks of the course. A good sequence analysis will evince an ability to carefully read a film sequence and use correct terminology to describe it; an ability to reasonably infer the effects of a filmmaker's choices; and an ability to draw connections between a sequence, its context in the film as a whole, and broader problems of film history and theory.

40 pts — Take-home final exam. The final exam for this course will consist of identifications/short answers for key concepts, a brief sequence analysis, and an essay on various scholarly debates we have gone over in class. The exam is take-home and open notes, so you may refer to the readings, PPTs, notes, and any other course material, but outside sources are forbidden. You are encouraged to prepare for the exam with a study group, but your answers on the exam must be your own. Answers that are too close for comfort will be investigated as plagiarism.

F. Course Policies

Attendance. The deal you are making when you sign up for this class is that for 12 weeks, your Friday afternoons belong to this course and the community of this course. You are expected to be present, physically and mentally, for **the entire class**: lecture, screening, discussion. You owe it to me, to your classmates, and to yourself. My side of the deal is to make each part of class worth your time and energy, and I will try my best. But it's a commitment for both of us, and if you cannot commit to spending that time every week on this class, this class is not for you.

That said, we all get sick or have unexpected job shifts or have to pick up kids from daycare or whatever—it happens. That being the case, **you are entitled to two excused absences per semester.** I appreciate you letting me know if you won't be in class that day, but no doctor's notes or anything are necessary. And sorry, no making-up the one question quiz for that day—they's the breaks.

Electronics in the classroom. Some of you legitimately need to use a laptop (or related electronic devices) to take notes and effectively participate in the work of the class. However, many of you do not, even though you may think you do, and, in my experience, you critically overestimate your abilities to multitask and overcome distraction. I encourage you to try to rely on good ol' pen and paper in lecture, and if it becomes evident that laptops are becoming a problem in class, I reserve the right to ban them from my classroom. **Laptops are absolutely barred from screenings**—watch the movie!!!

Accessibility. You have a right to an environment in which you can learn. You may be eligible for special accommodations within the classroom; if that's something you think you might benefit from, I encourage you not only to let me know, but also to contact Student Accessibility and Achievement (<https://www.mcgill.ca/access-achieve>, 1010 Sherbrooke Ouest, Suite 410, access.achieve@mcgill.ca, 514-398-6009). Even if you do not think you need special accommodations, Student Accessibility and Achievement may be able to provide you with strategies tailored for how you learn best. There is no need to struggle alone; look for help when you need it!

Everyone, of every gender, race, creed, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and origin, will be respected as a fellow student and as a human being in this classroom. Harassment or intimidation will not be tolerated. You are not alone and you matter. You are of course always welcome to talk to me, but if you are experiencing harassment or discrimination, you can also seek assistance from the Office for Mediation and Reporting (<https://www.mcgill.ca/omr>, 550 Sherbrooke O. Suite 1010))

As part of this course, we will read and view materials that may be disturbing. As an instructor, it is my responsibility to prepare you for what you are going to read and see, and I will do that to the best of my ability. But you know yourself best: **if there are categories of materials that trigger a traumatic reaction for you, please, please, please let me know.** I can make sure to warn you ahead of time, or you can miss that day of class; we can figure something out.

Communication. You can email me or come to office hours if you have any questions or concerns about the class, about school, about life. **Talk to me. If you talk to me, I can help you; if I don't know you need help, I can't help you.** If you are struggling or just not feeling your best, you are also encouraged to make use of the resources offered by the Student Wellness Hub (<https://www.mcgill.ca/wellness-hub>, Brown Student Services Building, 1070 Avenue Dr. Penfield, 3rd floor, 514-398-2559).

Language of Submission

“In accord with McGill University's [Charter of Students' Rights](#), students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French written work that is to be graded.”

« Conformément à [la Charte des droits de l'étudiant](#) de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté.»

Extensions. Extensions will only be granted if you contact me ahead of time and give an explanation as to why you cannot complete the assignment by the given deadline. That explanation can just be “I'm really busy this week” but you need to show that you have a plan for managing your time and getting the assignment done. Otherwise, an extension will not be granted, and assignments submitted after the official deadline will be docked half a point per day.

Academic Integrity “McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the [Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#)” (See [McGill’s guide to academic honesty](#) for more information).

« L’université McGill attache une haute importance à l’honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l’on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon [le Code de conduite de l’étudiant et procédures disciplinaires](#). »¹

Use of Generative AI. I have no objection to the use of AI in principle; I see it ultimately as a tool, like a word processor or a grammar checker. The problem is that the assessments for this course stress building an argument around textual evidence and making specific claims, and in my experience, ChatGPT is bad at both of those tasks. It cannot build an argument on evidence because it cannot reason in that way, and because it is a Large Language Model, by definition it favors generic language over the specific language that is useful for analysis. If you insist, you can try to use ChatGPT and if you still meet my standards, I will not penalize you for it, but I think you will find that it takes more time and energy to use AI for these assessments than it would if you simply tried to write the paper yourself.

Discussing Grades. If you are unhappy with your grade, you may contact me **72 hours after you received the grade**. Take some time to cool off. I will not read or respond to any complaint made within that cooling off period. After that period, however, if you still feel like you do not understand your grade, I encourage you to stop by my office hours and discuss it with me.

¹ McGill University Senate Resolution, January 29, 2003, quoted in Student Rights and Responsibilities, “FairPlay: A Guide to Academic Integrity,” 2023, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/students> [see what I did here?]

G. Schedule

Note: I will try to limit the amount of reading to **60 pages at most**, so please do not panic. **Just read as much as you can.** Doing the readings before Friday will help you to best appreciate the films, but don't worry if you can't finish—you can always catch up before the exam. Always read with purpose, noting what you find interesting or important, and skimming through parts in which you're less interested.

I. Key Moments in a Century of Chinese Film

Week 1 (August 30): Course Intro; From Teahouse to Cinema—Early Chinese Cinema

Films:

Laborer's Love 《勞工之愛情》 (dir. Zhang Shichuan 張石川, 1922)

Woman Warrior White Rose 《女俠白玫瑰》 (dir. Zhang Huimin 張惠民, 1929)

Readings:

Zhen Zhang, "Teahouse, Shadowplay, and *Laborer's Love*," *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937*

Week 2 (September 6): Stars, Scandals, and Socially Active Cinema in 1930s Shanghai

Film:

New Women 《新女性》 (dir. Cai Chusheng 蔡楚生, 1935)

Readings:

Kristine Harris, "The New Woman: Image, Subject, and Dissent in 1930s Shanghai Film Culture"

Lu Xun 魯迅, "On 'Gossip Is a Fearful Thing'" (trans. Hu Ying)

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Week 3 (September 13): Revolutionary Melodrama in the People's Republic

Response posts (due WEDNESDAY before class) and post-film quizzes begin this week.

Film:

The White-Haired Girl 《白毛女》 (dir. Wang Bin 王濱 and Shui Hua 水華, 1950)

Readings:

Jie Li, "The Hot Noise of Open-Air Cinema" [You can read this chapter next week if you don't get to it this week] and "Revolutionary Horror and Redemption," *Cinematic Guerillas: Propaganda, Projectionists and Audiences in Socialist China*

Zhuoyi Wang, "From 'a Hundred Flowers' to 'a Poisonous Weed': Dangerous Opportunities for Satirical Comedies, 1955–1958," *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951–1979*

Xia Yan 夏衍, "Problems of the Film Industry"

《为电影事业的继续大跃进而奋斗》

Week 4 (September 20): Higher than the Screen: Cultural Revolution Film

Film techniques quiz in class

Film:

The Legend of the Red Lantern 《红灯记》 (dir. Cheng Yin 成荫, 1972)

Readings:

Nicole Huang, “Azalea Mountain and Late Mao Culture”

Jiang Qing 江青, “On The Revolution in Peking Opera” 《谈京剧革命》 and
“Jiang Qing Critiques Feature Films”

Xie Tieli 谢铁骊, “On the Making of the Peking Opera Film *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*” (trans. Dylan Suher)

《关于京剧电影〈智取威虎山〉的创作》

Week 5 (September 27): Film Modernization and Primitive Passions—The Fifth Generation

Prompt for sequence analysis paper distributed

Film:

Ju Dou 《菊豆》 (dir. Zhang Yimou 张艺谋, 1990)

Readings:

Ni Zhen 倪震, “Noses to the Grindstone,” *Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy: The Genesis of China’s Fifth Generation* (trans. Chris Berry)
《北京电影学院故事: 第五代电影前史》

Rey Chow, “The Emergence of Primitive Passions,” “‘Returning to Nature’: Visuality in Films of the 1980s and Early 1990s,” and “Women’s Places,” *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*

Week 6 (October 4): The Urban Generation—The Sixth Generation

Film:

I Love Beijing 《夏日暖洋洋》 (dir. Ning Ying 宁瀛, 2001)

Readings:

Zhang Zhen, “Introduction: Bearing Witness: Chinese Urban Cinema in the Era of ‘Transformation’ (*zhuangxing*),” *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*

S. Louisa Wei, “‘My Motivation Is to Depict People I Can Identify With’: An Interview with Ning Ying.”

II. Approaches to Chinese Cinema

Week 7 (October 11): Art Cinema Auteurs—Jia Zhangke

Film:

Unknown Pleasures 《任逍遥》 (dir. Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯, 2002)

Readings:

Jason McGrath, “The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: From Postsocialist Realism to Transnational Aesthetic,” *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*

Sequence analysis paper due Sunday October 13, 11:59 PM.

NO CLASS OCTOBER 18—FALL BREAK

Week 8 (October 25): Global Markets and Chinese Blockbusters—Feng Xiaogang

Film:

Party A, Party B 《甲方乙方》 (dir. Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚, 1997)

Readings:

Shuyu Kong, “Genre Film, Media Corporations, and the Commercialisation of the Chinese Film Industry: The Case of ‘New Year Comedies’”

Week 9 (November 1): Animation

Film:

Havoc in Heaven 《大闹天宫》 (dir. Wan Laiming 万籁鸣, 1964)

Readings:

Daisy Yan Du, “Introduction: Animated Encounters: Chinese Animation in Motion,” *Animated Encounters: Transnational Movements of Chinese Animation, 1940s–1970s*

Week 10 (November 8): Minority Cinemas in China

Film:

The Silent Holy Stones (dir. Pema Tsenden, 2006)

Readings:

Anup Grewal, “Contested Tibetan Landscapes in the Films of Pema Tsenden”
Xiaoning Lu, “The Politics of Recognition and Constructing Socialist Subjectivity: Reexamining the National Minority Film (1949–1966)”

Week 11 (November 15): Queer Chinese Cinemas

Film:

Star Appeal 《星星相吸惜》 (dir. Cui Zi'en 崔子恩, 2004)

Readings:

Hongwei Bao, "From 'Celluloid Comrades' to 'Digital Video Activism': Queer Filmmaking in Postsocialist China"

Cui Zi'en 崔子恩, "The Communist International of Queer Film" (trans. Petrus Liu)

Week 12 (November 22): The New Documentary Movement

Second film techniques quiz in class

Film:

Out of Phoenix Bridge 《回到凤凰桥》 (dir. Li Hong 李红, 1997)

Readings:

Luke Robinson, "From 'Public' to 'Private': Chinese Documentary and the Logic of *Xianchang*"

Week 13 (November 29): New Chinese Media

Film:

Present.perfect 《完美现在时》 (dir. Zhu Shengze 朱盛泽, 2019)

Readings:

Jian Lin and Jeroen de Kloet, "Platformization of the Unlikely Creative Class: Kuaishou and Chinese Digital Cultural Production."

Katherine Morrow, "Movies Born Online: Chinese Internet Movies as Vernacular, Industrial Genre"

Final exam posted on the course website after class on November 29

Final exam must be submitted on the course website by Sunday December 15, 11:59 PM