

New Online Teaching Resources for EARLY CHINESE CINEMA

By Christopher Rea

The Chinese Film Classics Project is a research, teaching, and translation initiative aimed at making early Chinese cinema more accessible to the general public. The centerpieces of the project are two interlinked web resources: (1) the website chinesefilmclassics.org and (2) the YouTube channel Modern Chinese Cultural Studies (<https://tinyurl.com/4zk6wevb>). These sites currently feature twenty-four Chinese films released between 1922 and 1949 with complete English subtitles; over 150 film clips, organized into playlists; and a semester-long online course on Chinese film classics, with a pair of video lectures on each of eleven films. Both online resources are free and do not require login or registration. Additional translated films, film clips, and related materials will be added on an ongoing basis, thanks to contributions from scholars and students around the world.

These films, and the related teaching/learning aids, comprise a valuable resource for educators teaching film studies, Chinese language, translation, popular and mass culture, cultural history, social history, political history, women and gender studies, globalization, international cultural exchange, and digital humanities. This multiplatform archive of films and clips is designed to be modular, allowing wide latitude for discovering interests, making connections, and developing personalized projects.

The Largest Online Collection of Early Chinese Films with English Subtitles

Many educators (myself included) have long been frustrated by the general unavailability of early Chinese films with high-quality English subtitles. Thousands of films were produced in China up until 1949, when the Communists won the Civil War, and hundreds of extant films have been released from archives in digital format. Unsubtitled versions of most of these films are widely available on websites like Bilibili.com, Youku.com, 56.com, and YouTube. DVDs and VCDs of early films are also distributed within the People's Republic of China by private companies like Beauty Media Inc. (Qiaojiaren). The US-based private distribution

company Cinema Epoch issued a limited selection of subtitled early Chinese films on DVD, but the translations are uniformly of poor quality, with many errors and omissions, and the series now appears to be dormant.¹ British Film Institute DVD and BFI player streaming offerings of a few restored films, such as *Spring in a Small Town* (1948), have regional availability limitations. (For DVDs, UK is Region 2, and USA is Region 1.) High-quality English subtitles are occasionally commissioned for film festival screenings, but these copies have historically been made available only for a limited time to a paying audience in a specific geographic locale.²

University instructors who wish to include early Chinese films in their courses have, consequently, tended to rely on informal personal networks to get access to copies for classroom use—an imperfect system that disadvantages instructors without such connections.

I began translating the films in 2019 while doing research for my book *Chinese Film Classics, 1922–1949* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).³ When the pandemic hit, I suddenly faced the prospect of teaching two film courses online, and I realized that colleagues around the world were in the same predicament—no more showing the DVD in the classroom. We needed subtitled films to stream online to students around the world. Using a personal archive of films I had acquired in Asia, I began translating films in earnest, working with UBC PhD students Liu Yuqing and Yao Jiaqi, who contributed research and created the subtitles using my translations.

Subtitled films currently available on the Chinese Film Classics playlist (<https://tinyurl.com/7xvu52yn>) include, by year of release: *Laborer's Love* (1922), *Woman Warrior White Rose* (1929) (translated by Frank S. Zhou), *Woman Warrior of the Wild River 6: Rumble at Deerhorn Gully* (1930) (translated by Frank S. Zhou), *The Peach Girl* (1931), *Wild Rose* (1932) (translated by Nick Stember), *Spring Silkworms* (1933), *Playthings* (1933), *Daybreak* (1933), *Song of the Fishermen* (1934), *Sports Queen* (1934),



The earliest-known surviving full Chinese-made film, *Laborer's Love* (1922).



The Chinese silent film classic, *Goddess* (1934).

Source: All of the photos in this article are screen captures from the *Chinese Film Classics'* YouTube channel, *Modern Chinese Cultural Studies* at <https://tinyurl.com/4zk6wevb>.



The earliest surviving Mulan film, *Hua Mu Lan* (1939).



First Chinese full-length animated film, *Princess Iron Fan* (1941).

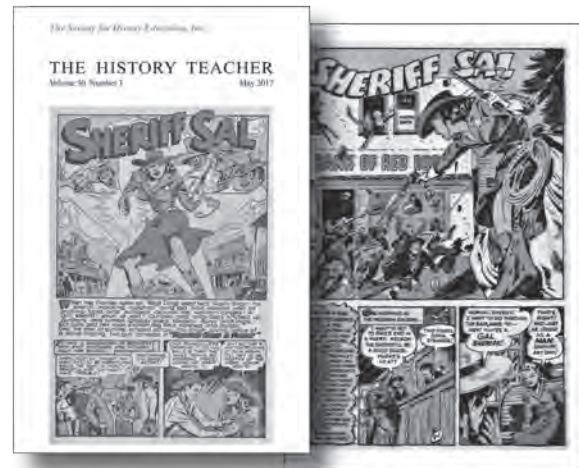
Goddess (1934), *The Great Road* (1934), *Song of China* (1935), *City Scenes* (1935), *New Women* (1935) (translated by Eileen Cheng-yin Chow), *Song at Midnight* (1937), *Street Angels* (1937), *Hua Mu Lan* (1939), *Princess Iron Fan* (1941), *Love Everlasting* (1947), *Long Live the Missus!* (1947), *Spring River Flows East* (1947, in two parts), *Spring in a Small Town* (1948), *Wanderings of Three-Hairs the Orphan* (1949), and *Crows and Sparrows* (1949).

Most of these films are now available for the first time in English. For silent films with bilingual title cards (intertitles), the policy I adopt is to represent all legible Chinese text onscreen, such as shop signs. I also retranslate the Chinese when its meaning differs significantly from the English. For example, in *Laborer's Love*, a drunken patron steps out of the All-Night Club and remarks, in the original English intertitle: "What a fine dinner. I feel so good I could fly." But the Chinese reads only "Ah! What a fine dinner." Translating the Chinese reveals that the filmmakers chose to add an extra joke to the English dialogue before the speaker takes a fall.

Highlights of this growing archive include the earliest-known full Chinese-made film to survive, *Laborer's Love* (1922); the silent classic *Goddess* (1934); the sensational "woman problem" film *New Women* (1935); the earliest surviving Mulan film, *Hua Mu Lan* (1939); the first Chinese full-length animated film, *Princess Iron Fan* (1941); the two-part wartime melodrama *Spring River Flows East* (1947); and Fei Mu's acclaimed work of lyricism, *Spring in a Small Town* (1948). One of the most popular films on the channel to date, with over 17,000 views as of July 2021, is *Wanderings of Three-Hairs the Orphan* (1949), a live-action film for children adapted from

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a comic strip. All published videos are accompanied by information about cast and crew, and a synopsis of the plot.

Forthcoming films include *Cave of the Silken Web* (1927), *The Mighty Hero Gan Fengchi* (1928), *Poor Daddy* (1929), *An Amorous History of the*



Two part war-time melodrama, *Spring River Flows East* (1947).



One of our most popular films, *Three-Hairs the Orphan* (1949).

Silver Screen (1931), *Love and Duty* (1931), *Plunder of Peach and Plum* (1934), and *Onstage and Backstage* (1937) (translated by Josh Stenberg, Sophia Huei-ling Chen, and Qiu Yanting).

The only films published online are those that are in the public domain due to the expiration of copyright on the work's underlying rights. For proprietary copies of films, I obtain written permission from the copyright holder before publishing. The National Library of Norway, for example, generously shared a digital copy of the restored, partially extant silent film *Cave of the Silken Web* (1927), along with an English translation of the Norwegian intertitles, to which I will be adding my translation of the Chinese intertitles so that viewers can see how the film was narrated differently to different audiences.


Translators are contributing to this ongoing project from Australia, Asia, Europe, and North America. One translator, Frank S. Zhou, is a high school student. Students and instructors, in other words, are not just intended consumers of these films but also producers. If you or your students are interested in translating films, please email me.

An Open-Access Course on Early Cinematic Masterworks

The website also contains a full online course on Chinese film classics (<https://chinesefilmclassics.org/course/>) covering eleven films. Each learning module includes the translated film and two video lectures of ten to eighteen minutes in length that contextualize the films and appraise their artistry. The lectures track the chapters of the book *Chinese Film Classics, 1922–1949*. The course is introductory, the video lectures

- Module 1: Laborer's Love (1922) >
- Module 2: Sports Queen (1934) >**
- Module 3: Goddess (1934) >
- Module 4: The Great Road (1934) >
- Module 5: New Women (1935) >
- Module 6: Song at Midnight (1937) >
- Module 7: Street Angels (1937) >
- Module 8: Long Live the Missus! (1947) >
- Module 9: Spring River Flows East (1947) >
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- Module 12: Course Wrap-Up >


Module 2: Sports Queen (1934)



Sports Queen is a film made in order that offers a few surprises. Li Lili was coming into her own as one of Lianhua Studio's star actors, and *Sports Queen* was made to showcase her "healthy," "athletic," and "playful" persona. Its release was timed to coincide with an actual major sports event, the precursor to the Asian Games. The film also espouses ideas promoted in the Nationalist government's New Life Movement, launched earlier in the year, especially that China needs to strengthen the body politic by strengthening actual bodies. In three ways, then, *Sports Queen* is very much of the moment. But the filmmakers and the star have fun with this didactic premise, celebrating comedy, playfulness, the joys of motion, sex appeal and even risqué politics.

This module corresponds to chapter 3 in the book *Chinese Film Classics, 1922–1949*.

The film:



Alternative English titles: *Queen of Sports, The Athletic Queen*
 Director/screenplay: Sun Yu
 Studio: Lianhua
 Date of release: April 14, 1934
 85 minutes, 10 reels
 Cast: Li Lili, Zhang Yi, Yin Xu, Bai Lu, Wang Moqiu, Gao Weilian, He Feiguang, Shang Guanwu, Li Junpan, Han Langen, Liu Jiqun, Yin Xiufen

Screen capture of a typical film module page.

addressing foundational questions such as: What did early Chinese films look like? Who were the stars and auteurs (filmmakers of great creative influence) of early Chinese cinema? How does early Chinese cinema relate to Hollywood, European, or other world cinemas? What should I watch or read if I want to learn more about Chinese cinema history?

Below the video lectures are links to clips and stills from other films. The module on *Laborer's Love* (1922), for example, contains clips from Buster Keaton's *The Haunted House* (1921) and *The Electric House* (1922), Harold Lloyd's *Never Weaken* (1921), and Dan Duyu's *Woman Warrior White Rose* (1929) that illustrate the use of common motifs like trick staircases and other comedic connection devices.

To give one more example, the module on *Sports Queen* (1934) features relevant clips from musicals like *Footlight Parade* (1933), which show how director Sun Yu incorporated Busby Berkeley staples like arranging bodies into geometric shapes, and how he even replicated a women's dormitory sequence from *The Kid from Spain* (1932), albeit with toned-down sexuality. The video lectures discuss issues such as how *Sports Queen* projects an ideology supportive of the nationalist government's 1934 New Life Movement by showing images of healthy bodies marching in unison and unfolding a narrative of individual sacrifice for the good of the nation. At the same time, it points out how Sun Yu leavened the didacticism with slapstick humor and sexual voyeurism, and even cross-cut the national glory message by appearing in a cameo as a former track star who has fallen into poverty.

Overall, the content of the online course is similar to that offered by companies such as The Great Courses but is free and flexible. The course may be taken as a self-paced package; modules can also be incorporated into courses selectively.

The "Resources on Early Chinese Cinema" section of the website contains film studies, bibliographies, and events listings; information about filmmakers and actors; and posts about themes such as special effects,

animations, and cartoons—updated on an ongoing basis.

Playlist Pedagogy

The website integrates with the YouTube channel Modern Chinese Cultural Studies, which contains over 150 film clips from Chinese and other films, including Hollywood films and European films, mostly dating from between the 1890s and the 1940s.

These clips are organized into playlists by theme, including:

- gags and special effects
- sounds and songs
- superlative scenes (“best use of voice-over to set the tone,” “most dramatic heroine entrance,” “best parallel editing”)
- how-tos (“how to turn a movie into a virtual toy shop,” “How to identify symbolism in set design,” “How to tell when your spouse loves someone else,” “how to make the ending of your film politically correct”)
- animation and cartoons
- cinematic motifs China shares with Hollywood and Europe

Together, these playlists allow for both self-directed study and a curated exploratory experience. Students can discover new interests and develop their own projects using this free archive of audiovisual materials. The idiosyncratic titling of some video clips is intended to add an element of unexpected fun and enable browsing by scenario, since many names and titles are unfamiliar to many viewers.

Educators can also develop their own YouTube playlists, drawing on this and other channels, to create a streamlined learning experience for students in a particular class. This past spring, for example, I created separate unlisted YouTube playlists—meaning that the playlist content is not searchable/findable to the general public and can only be accessed if you have the hyperlink—for two online film courses I taught at UBC. In addition to the ready-made content drawn from the channel, I linked to films from other channels and uploaded new video lectures that I created during the semester.

Interactivity is another key feature of the YouTube platform. As with all YouTube videos, viewers can see the view counts and likes, and can write comments of their own.⁴ This functionality creates opportunities for dialogue with other viewers (see the extensive comments on *Hua Mu Lan*, for example) and with the video creator. I make a point of responding to all comments, which have included queries from students and supplementary information about the film. One particularly active user, a specialist in Chinese music, has gone out of his way to provide information about the composers, librettists, and song lyrics for multiple sound films. YouTube comments have great potential for asynchronous conversations among students, scholars, and the general public.

What Can Students Learn from Early Films?

The Chinese Film Classics Project offers extensive language-learning tools. Students of Chinese can test their listening comprehension by listening to dialogue and songs, and their reading comprehension by reading title cards and animated song lyrics. (Traditional characters were the standard during this era.) The YouTube platform gives students the option of pausing and replaying as needed.

Films also offer a great jumping-off point for exploring a variety of cultural topics, such as the relationship among cinema, theater, radio, the recording industry, the graphic arts, print culture (such as newspapers), and politics. For example, John Crespi’s online scholarship and “scanlations” of 1920s–1930s magazines like *Shanghai Sketch*, *Resistance Sketch*, and *Modern Sketch* allow students to discover links between cinema and the colorful world of Chinese cartooning.⁵

Through films, students can seek answers to a wide variety of questions that come up in a variety of Asia-related courses. Some of these questions are historical: How did popular films represent the status of women in China? (*Goddess*, *New Women*, *City Scenes*, *Hua Mu Lan*, and *Long Live the Missus!* make women’s status their central theme.) How was the film industry connected to other industries, such as publishing or popular music? (*The Great Road*, *Song at Midnight*, *Street Angels*, *Hua Mu Lan*, and other films demonstrate cinema’s close ties to the phonograph industry and radio broadcasting.) How did filmmakers and other artists respond to foreign invasion or civil war? (*Daybreak*, *Playthings*, *Spring River Flows East*, and *Spring in a Small Town* illustrate a variety of artist responses to war.) What types of films were made for children? (*Princess Iron Fan* and *Wanderings of Three-Hairs the Orphan* both directly address young audiences.) What types of censorship were common in the Chinese film industry before the Communist era? (*Hua Mu Lan* was subjected to both Japanese and nationalist Chinese censorship, and two copies of the film were literally burned in the streets of Chungking.

Module 1: Laborer's Love (1922)	>
Module 2: Sports Queen (1934)	>
Module 3: Goddess (1934)	>
Module 4: The Great Road (1934)	>
Module 5: New Women (1935)	>
Module 6: Song at Midnight (1937)	>
Module 7: Street Angels (1937)	>
Module 8: Long Live the Missus! (1947)	>
Module 9: Spring River Flows East (1947)	>
Module 10: Spring in a Small Town (1948)	>
Module 11: Crows and Sparrows (1949)	>
Module 12: Course Wrap-Up	>

Chinese Film Classics Course

This free, self-paced online course offers an introduction to eleven of the best extant films made in mainland China up to the year 1949, when the Communists won the civil war and began the process of nationalizing the film industry. What did early Chinese films look like? What stories did Chinese filmmakers tell? What artistic decisions did they make, and why? Who were the stars and auteurs of early Chinese cinema? How does early Chinese cinema relate to Hollywood, European, or other world cinemas? What should I watch or read if I want to learn more about Chinese cinema history? If you're curious about questions like these, this is the course for you.

Eleven modules each include:

- One Chinese film, with English subtitles
- Two video lectures analyzing the historical, cultural, and cinematic significance of the film
- Basic information about the film's production, cast, and crew
- A curated selection of further viewings and readings (forthcoming)
- Self-study modules (forthcoming)

Start by watching these two brief introductory videos:







Introductory video 1: Welcome to the course









Christopher Rea
Professor of Asian Studies
University of British Columbia

Screen capture from the website's introductory course page with a video of Christopher Rea's course overview.







Chinese Film Classics ▶ PLAY ALL
Full Chinese films, circa 1949 and earlier, with English subtitles. chinesefilmclassics.org

 22:10	 27:09	 1:14:13	 1:28:39	 1:20:01	 1:33:53
Laborer's Love 劳工之爱情 (1922) with English subtitles Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 12K views • 1 year ago	Woman Warrior White Rose 女侠白玫瑰 (1929) with... Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 403 views • 1 month ago	Woman Warrior of the Wild River 6: Rumble at Deerhor... Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 202 views • 1 month ago	The Peach Girl 桃花泣血記 (1931) with English subtitles Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 3K views • 10 months ago	Wild Rose 野玫瑰 (1932) with English subtitles Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 154 views • 3 weeks ago	Spring Silkworms 春蚕 (1933) with English subtitles Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 1.4K views • 9 months ago

Chinese Film Classics - online course ▶ PLAY ALL
Learn about early Chinese contributions to the cinematic arts in these brief video lectures by UBC Professor Christopher Rea about the best Chinese films made up to 1949.

 2:18	 3:49	 14:47	 9:46	 13:31	 16:39
Chinese Film Classics - Welcome to the course Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 1K views • 10 months ago	Chinese Film Classics - Five tips for getting the most o... Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 493 views • 10 months ago	Chinese Film Classics - Laborer's Love 劳工之爱情... Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 945 views • 7 months ago	Chinese Film Classics - "Laborer's Love" 劳工之爱... Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 668 views • 10 months ago	Chinese Film Classics - "Sports Queen" 體育皇后... Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 635 views • 9 months ago	Chinese Film Classics - "Sports Queen" 體育皇后... Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 454 views • 9 months ago

Best of early Chinese cinema ▶ PLAY ALL
Superlative scenes from Chinese films, circa 1949 and earlier, with English subtitles. chinesefilmclassics.org

 4:59	 4:50	 1:02	 3:08	 1:40	 3:04
Sweetest kiss - Street Angels (1937) Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 364 views • 8 months ago	Cleverest retaliation against bullies - Hua Mu Lan (1939) Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 115 views • 8 months ago	Best cameo by a chicken - Spring in a Small Town... Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 110 views • 8 months ago	Zhou Xuan 周璇 sings "Song of the Four Seasons" 四季... Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 909 views • 8 months ago	"Lovely Little Rose" 可爱的一朵玫瑰花 - Spring in a Smal... Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 120 views • 8 months ago	Fastest haircut - "Street Angels" 馬路天使 (1937) Modern Chinese Cultural Studies 223 views • 5 months ago

Screen capture showing a very small selection of the films offered on the Modern Chinese Cultural Studies YouTube channel.

Wanderings of Three-Hairs the Orphan and *Crows and Sparrows* both began production before—and were completed after—the People's Liberation Army entered Shanghai in May 1949, and bear traces of the regime change in their optimistic endings.)

Audiovisual artifacts from earlier eras also help anchor students' theoretical questions in specific realities: How should we understand relationships between Asian and other cultures? How do power asymmetries play out in popular culture? (Why do pawnshops appear in so many Shanghai films, for example?) What are gender norms, and why do they matter? What is cultural soft power? When do governments and artists collaborate, and when do they fight? What types of storytelling do artists turn to in high-temperature versus low-temperature moments? What has shaped my own expectations about what culture is, or should be?

Like other historical sources, films are valuable not least because they inspire self-reflective questions like these. Early films can move digital natives out of their comfort zones by confronting them with different constraints, styles, forms, and poetics of audiovisual storytelling, prompting new curiosities. When students realize that they are noticing something that differs from their expectations, new questions emerge, and with them, new directions for learning. ■

NOTES

1. I give a few examples of the shortcomings of *Cinema Epoch* (cinemaepoch.com) translations, such as the omission of vulgar expressions, in this interview with Patrick Galvan, published in *Our Culture* June 14, 2021: <https://tinyurl.com/r2wrrx26>. All websites cited were accessed July 13, 2021.

2. For example, the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) has coordinated with UC Berkeley faculty members to offer screenings of original prints of Republican Era films in film series such as *A Golden Age of Chinese Cinema, 1947–52* (2017) and *Zheng Junli: From Shanghai's Golden Age to the Cultural Revolution* (2019). See <https://tinyurl.com/m4t3num8> and <https://tinyurl.com/2xj7adyu>. The China Institute NYC offered live screenings in July 2021 in its *Seeing China through Film* series (<https://tinyurl.com/abv9utfs>). *Goddess* screened at MoMA with live musical accompaniment in August 2021.
3. See <https://tinyurl.com/2jthm8km>. My translations of the full dialogue of *Long Live the Missus!* (1947) and *Crows and Sparrows* (1949), with still images and added stage directions, appear in the Modern Chinese Literature and Culture Online Publication series: <https://tinyurl.com/5ak4f9cv> and <https://tinyurl.com/su78au6p>.
4. Views and likes, of course, give only a rough sense of popularity, since videos are posted on different dates and are subject to the YouTube algorithm, which promotes some videos over others. Commenting is not possible on videos where the creator has disabled comments or on videos that the creator has listed as made for children.
5. See <https://www.colgate.edu/about/directory/jcrespi>.

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