

# Teaching Chinese History and Culture through Film

By Cecilia Chien

For many of my students, China is a faceless, distant land. Others who teach undergraduates indicate that their students view China as an economic or national security threat. I have found the use of film in teaching about China to be most useful in giving students different perspectives on China than those directly connected with either economics or national security. However, in my first attempts to show Chinese films in world history classes or other courses, I encountered resistance. Students who had never watched a foreign film before described their unease; they feared they would be lost not knowing the language, story, or actors: “I’m not into subtitles.” “If I wanted to read while I watched a film, I would read a book.” “I think we should only watch foreign films in a language that we know.”

I have since found that students enjoy Chinese films more when we begin with full introductions of the story we are about to see and hear. It is also beneficial to include the arguments for how we may access another culture and larger objectives: to place values in context; to appreciate that foreign cultures are in some ways similar to our own; and to understand the lives of other peoples, with the hope that international understanding is one way to foster intercultural understanding.

## Student Engagement

Before introducing a film, I distribute a handout that includes information on the year, genre, director, cast, plot, background, and questions for discussion after viewing. I do not necessarily approach the films from the perspective of film studies or film criticism or even whether a given film reflects the historical record. General discussion approaches include the following:

- Have you watched a Chinese film before? If not, how does this compare to what you expected?
- What is your personal reaction to the film? What scenes stand out to you and why?
- How do the director’s experience and background affect his work?
- What do you think is the director’s message? What is the backdrop to the making of this film, and how might it affect the message?
- What is the historical context to the story? What do you learn, if anything, about geography and economy, society, government, and culture?
- What questions, large or small, do you have? What questions would you pose for discussion?

## Selected Historical Films

I have selected the following films by Chinese diasporic filmmakers, listed in order of period and based on subjective taste, historical and cultural significance, student reception, and availability of DVDs with subtitles. I have successfully used all of the films in my classes.

### *Hero* [Yingxiong]

DIRECTED BY ZHANG YIMOU

STARRING JET LI, TONY LEUNG, MAGGIE CHEUNG, ZHANG ZIYI

2002, 99 MINUTES

HISTORY, ROMANCE, FANTASY, MARTIAL ARTS EPIC

RATED PG-13

In the third century BCE, the *qin* king defeats six other kingdoms to unify China and become the first emperor of the first centralized imperial dynasty. A trio of assassins, however, aims to stop his conquest. The story centers on the dialogue between the king and a warrior called Nameless

who comes to the palace to announce that he has slain the assassins. The story is presented in several *Rashōmon*-like conflicting perspectives.

The film premiered at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing and became a blockbuster. It was then the most expensive film made in China, with hundreds of extras, choreographed swordplay, and extensive computer-graphical interface (CGI). The *qin* ruler has been a controversial figure with parallels drawn between the *qin* dynasty and modern China. A number of films have explored this theme, including *The Emperor’s Shadow* and *The Emperor and the Assassin*.

The acclaimed Zhang Yimou began as a cinematographer and created *Yellow Earth*, which pioneered Fifth Generation Cinema. After a trilogy that challenged the traditional Confucian system (*Red Sorghum*, *Judou*, *Raise the Red Lantern*), he moved to contemporary themes and a realistic look at ordinary people (*Story of Qiu Ju*, *Not One Less*, *The Road Home*, *Happy Times*). For a time, the government banned Zhang’s work but later gave him the honor of choreographing the 2008 Beijing Olympic ceremonies.



Hero screen capture.  
©2002 Miramax Films.

### Student discussion questions:

- What is the look of the film, and how do the visuals express themes? What do the colors of the flashbacks symbolize?
- Scenes were shot in locations such as the Jiuzhaigou Lake region and Mongolia's forests—where are these places, and how do they show the diversity of the landscape?
- Who is the hero in *Hero*? What is the nature of heroism? What is the nature of swordsmanship?
- What does the final image of the Great Wall prefigure? What is the message of *Hero*?

### *Red Cliff* and *Red Cliff II* [*Chi bi*]

DIRECTED BY JOHN WOO

STARRING TONY LEUNG, TAKESHI KANESHIRO,  
CHANG CHEN, VICKI ZHAO

2008, 150 MINUTES AND 2009, 142 MINUTES

HISTORICAL EPIC, WAR, DRAMA

RATED R

As the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) declines, a three-way division of power develops among the generals. The calculating Cao Cao controls the north and sets out to conquer the south; Liu Bei controls the southwest; Sun Quan controls the southeast. Liu Bei's brilliant strategist, Zhuge Liang, forms an alliance with Sun Quan's forces, but their two forces are still outnumbered by Cao Cao's army as they face off in the Battle of Red Cliff, one of the most famous military conflicts in China's history.

The film is based upon events in one of the most popular novels in Chinese literature, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. It has been rendered into other film versions and incorporated into school curricula, computer games, and comics.

John Woo perhaps epitomizes the transnational nature of Chinese cinema today because his Hollywood reputation is growing (*Hard Target*, *Broken Arrow*, *Face/Off*, *Mission Impossible 2*). Woo's ultraviolent gangster thrillers (*A Better Tomorrow*, *The Killer*, *Hard Boiled*) are famous for reinventing masculinity through brotherhood in a lawless world. *Red Cliff* was his first foray into ancient China.

### Student discussion questions:

- What does the film say about brotherhood? chivalry? courage?
- How does the heroism differ from that of "Hero"?
- What military formations were used? What technology and weapons were employed? How did they compare to those of the West at the time?
- What were the peacetime roles of the various generals?

### *A Chinese Ghost Story* [*Qiannu youhun*]

DIRECTED BY CHING SIU-TUNG

STARRING LESLIE CHEUNG, JOEY WANG, MA WU

1987, 98 MINUTES

LOVE, COMEDY, SUPERNATURAL ACTION, HORROR,  
MARTIAL ARTS, FANTASY

UNRATED

In the Tang dynasty (618–907), an innocent scholar arrives in town to collect taxes but is abused by the locals. He stays overnight in a haunted temple guarded by a gruff ghostbuster, where he meets a supernatural seductress. The ghostbuster helps both of them against an evil tree monster. The scholar saves the beautiful ghost's soul by reburying her urn and burning incense for her. While this film does not necessarily have direct historical content, it can illuminate cultural practices.

Students should be forewarned not to be put off by the film's vintage and cheesy effects: It is a Hong Kong cult film, full of zombies and stormy nights and ideal for Halloween. The error-prone subtitles provide half the humor. The film sparked copycats and contributed to the rise of the Hong Kong ghost story genre. Sam Raimi borrowed scenes from *A Chinese Ghost Story* for an *Evil Dead* film, as well as for episodes of *Xena: Warrior Princess*.



*Red Cliff II* screen capture.  
©2008 Red Cliff Productions Ltd. and Three Kingdoms Ltd..



The beautiful ghost and scholar screen capture from  
*A Chinese Ghost Story*.  
©1987 Cinema City Company, Ltd.

As a British colony until 1997, Hong Kong developed into a film center whose output in the 1980s and 1990s was third in the world. Hong Kong cinema is commercial, focusing on comedy and action, but also drawing from traditional drama and mixing genres. In the 2000s, the crime trilogy *Infernal Affairs* (the basis for *The Departed*) and the high-grossing comedies *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle* helped rejuvenate the industry.

**Student discussion questions:**

- How does *A Chinese Ghost Story* compare with typical American ghost story films?
- What does the film teach about traditional culture, including dress, art and architecture, music, wedding ceremonies, funerals, and burial customs?
- How does one become a ghost? What does the film reflect of the perceived relationship between this world and the next? What does this say about family?
- What is the message about good versus evil? What is the commentary on human society? Describe the critique of the government and justice system that is included in the film.



*House of Flying Daggers* screen capture.  
©2004 Sony Pictures Classics.

***House of Flying Daggers*  
[*Shimian maifu*]**

DIRECTED BY ZHANG YIMOU

STARRING ANDY LAU, TAKESHI KANESHIRO,  
ZHANG ZIYI

2004, 119 MINUTES

DRAMA, LOVE, MARTIAL ARTS, ADVENTURE

RATED PG-13

During the decline of the Tang dynasty, the government battles rebel groups, one of which is the Flying Daggers. Two police captains are ordered to capture its mysterious new leader. They hatch a plan in which one pretends to be a lone warrior and rescues a beautiful blind rebel from prison,

earning her trust while escorting her to rebel headquarters. En route, however, the two fall in love, and layers of deception are revealed.

The Chinese title, meaning “ambush from all sides,” is the name of an early song describing a battle. The beginning echo dance scene was based upon a Tang painting of a drum dance; the actress trained for months to control the yards-long sleeves in the scene. *Flying Daggers* was a blockbuster in the US. This movie may not provide as much content on ninth-century China but features stunning visuals, action, and universal emotions.

**Student discussion questions:**

- How does the film portray women? How does this fit the horse culture and ideal of female beauty in the Tang?
- How is love portrayed? How is violence depicted?
- The director typically uses vivid colors—how does he use color here?
- What cultural values do you see? Do you think the heroine sacrificed herself for nothing?



Wong Feihung and his aunt screen capture from *Once Upon a Time in China II*.  
©1992 Golden Harvest.

***Once Upon a Time in China II*  
[*Wong Feihung (Cantonese)*]**

DIRECTED BY TSUI HARK

STARRING JET LI, ROSAMUND KWAN,  
DONNIE YEN

1992, 113 MINUTES

HISTORICAL DRAMA, MARTIAL ARTS ACTION,  
COMEDY

RATED R

In 1895, the folk hero Wong Feihung and his beautiful aunt (by marriage), who is enamored with the West, find themselves in the midst of a struggle by the fanatical White Lotus cult (asso-

ciated with the Boxers) to expel foreigners from Canton. At the same time, a ruthless Qing dynasty official threatens a fledgling revolutionary movement led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who attempts to transform China into a modern republic.

Wong Feihung (1847–1924) is a popular historical figure on par with Robin Hood. He was a famed martial artist, revolutionary, and doctor who has become the subject of hundreds of films and TV series starring prominent actors.

Tsui Hark emigrated from Việt Nam to Hong Kong in his teens, attended college in Texas, and then moved to New York City until returning to Hong Kong in the 1970s. He is a prolific director and producer, launching genres from triad (Chinese criminal organizations) films to ghost stories. Yuen Woping is the most influential martial arts action choreographer in Hong Kong.

**Student discussion questions:**

- What themes do you see in this period film, made on the eve of the British return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty?
- What are the characters' divergent views of Westerners?
- What is the nature of love as it is portrayed?
- What are the film's messages on wealth? righteousness? religion? Who are the villains?

**Raise the Red Lantern**  
[*Dahong denglong gaogaogua*]

DIRECTED BY ZHANG YIMOU

STARRING GONG LI

1991, 125 MINUTES

HISTORICAL DRAMA, MELODRAMA

RATED PG

In the 1920s, when her father dies, a nineteen-year-old college-educated girl becomes the concubine of an older man who also has a wife and two other concubines. Each woman has a compound and a maid. This sentence stays the same but I accidentally marked it out on the copy I sent. Servants raise red lanterns each night outside the quarters of the wife or concubine with whom the master has chosen to spend the night. Each female schemes for the master's attention, which bestows power and privileges to the woman who has gained it.

The film was adapted from the novel *Wives and Concubines*, in which a girl is broken by the concubine system in the 1930s. The film was shot in Shanxi at the compound of a landlord. Zhang used a process no longer employed to produce the brilliant reds, oranges, and yellows. A common element in his work is the use of strong female characters whose individual desires challenge the system.

**Student discussion questions:**

- How did the landlord class live? How is the master portrayed? What does he look like? How does the film touch on the world beyond the mansion walls?
- What is the relationship between Fourth Mistress and Master? between Fourth Mistress and the other women? How might the film be seen as a critique of Confucianism?
- How might the film, banned by the government, be seen as a critique of the Communist power structure? How might the film be seen as resistance to neocolonialism? Does Gong Li represent China's struggle against the West, and if so, how?
- Gong Li's star image was constructed from her being not only an object of desire but an agent of desire—how do you see this in the film?

**Nanjing! Nanjing!** [*City of Life and Death*]

DIRECTED BY LU CHUAN

STARRING LIU YE, GAO YUANYUAN, FAN WEI,  
NAKAIZUMI HIDEO, KOHATA RYU

2009, 133 MINUTES

EPIC WAR DRAMA

RATED R

The Japanese invasion that began in 1931 was a crucial event in the history of modern China. Nanjing, the wartime capital of China, fell to the Japanese on December 13, 1937. In the ensuing Rape of Nanjing,



Raise the Red Lantern screen capture.  
©1992 Orion Classics.



Nanjing! Nanjing! Japanese victory dance screen capture.  
©2009 Media Asian Entertainment Group.

Japanese forces committed brutal atrocities and killed up to 200,000 to 300,000 innocent civilians within six weeks. They raped women, euphemistically dubbed “comfort women,” who were forced to serve as sex slaves to the Japanese Imperial Army. Much of what we know of the Rape of Nanjing comes from Westerners who witnessed the atrocities and sent word to the outside world, including the German John Rabe and the American Minnie Vautrin.

The film, one of many fictionalized recreations, is the first full-scale reenactment filmed in China. It far understates what actually occurred and tells the story from the perspective of both the Chinese victims and from a Japanese soldier who struggles with his conscience. The “harrowing, shocking and searingly emotional” film was a blockbuster.

**Student discussion questions:**

- What were the domestic events leading up to the Nanjing massacre? What were the foreign policies of China and Japan in 1937? What were Japanese objectives in China?
- What was the response of the Chinese government to the Nanjing atrocity? What was the response of the Japanese government? What are some historical examples of genocide, and how do they compare with what occurred in Nanjing?
- What were the roles of international organizations? Who were the various rescuers in Nanjing?
- How does the director portray the Japanese enemy and Japanese soldiers? What is a hero, and what qualities does he or she have?
- How has the Rape of Nanjing affected the people of China and Japan and relations between the two countries?



***Not One Less* [Yige dou buneng shao]**

DIRECTED BY ZHANG YIMOU

STARRING MINZHI WEI, HUIKE ZHANG,  
ZHENDA TIAN

1999, 100 MINUTES

DRAMA, COMEDY, REALISM

RATED G

The film is set in a contemporary poor village in Hebei Province. When the village schoolteacher must return home to care for a relative, the village head hires a thirteen-year-old girl as the substitute teacher. The head promises the teenager a bonus if all the students

in the class are still present when the teacher returns and “not one less.” The girl is only slightly older than her students and has no teaching skills, but she becomes absolutely determined to succeed. All the actors are amateurs who play their roles in real life. Shooting on location and the use of hidden cameras lend a realism and semi-documentary feel to the film.

**Student discussion questions:**

- What was your image of the Chinese countryside before this film?
- What examples in the film do you see of post-Mao reforms that liberalized the economy? What scenes reveal the plight of the rural areas?
- How do you interpret the girl’s stubbornness to find the missing boy? Was it about the money?
- How might Cannes Film Festival judges have perceived the film as not sufficiently against the government? What do you think was behind the director’s response that, in the West, Chinese films are either anti-government or propaganda?

***Please Vote for Me***

DIRECTED BY CHEN WEIJUN

2007, 58 MINUTES

DOCUMENTARY

UNRATED

A third-grade teacher in the contemporary city of Wuhan in central China chooses three responsible eight-year-olds to compete in an election for the prestigious position of class monitor. The filmmaker follows the children at school and at home as they prepare for the talent show, the debate, and campaign speeches. One is an underdog female candidate raised by a single mother, one is a wiry male candidate whose father is on

the police force, and one is a chubby male candidate whose mother is a TV production professional. All are only children of the One Child Policy launched from 1980 to curb population growth.



*Please Vote for Me* screen capture.  
©2007 First Ren Features.

### Student discussion questions:

- How do the children understand the meaning of democracy? How do the adults understand and enact the democratic process in the film?
- How would you as an eight-year-old have understood democracy? How does what occurs in this film compare to US election campaigning?
- How might the upbringing of the parents have affected the coaching of their children?
- Who did you want to win the election and why?
- What insights did you gain about contemporary Chinese urban middle-class society from the film?

### In Their Own Words

Student feedback reflects how profound an impact visuals can have. What follows are typical excerpts from student comments regarding films in my classes:

*At first, I thought the movies were going to be dull and unrelatable to my life. However, each movie struck a different chord with me, and the subtitles eventually became a norm.*

*The films really helped me connect to the people and society.*

*From textbooks and even primary sources, one doesn't get a feel for how all the events and histories mix into the cultures. By viewing their films, one can see what they're proud of or what is/was a social hot topic or caused great controversy or what was mundane. The films furthered my understanding of not just what was done but why it was done and the reaction it got from other people.*

Films spark curiosity and interest:

*The films sparked a passion for Asia Pacific studies. The material and information discussed and shown in this class was completely new to me. I now wish to know more!*

*I am hungry for more Asian history.*

*I would find myself coming home from class really inspired and moved by some of the films, especially films that dealt with female oppression and differences.*

Films help humanize others and challenge student initial perceptions about China:

*The film showed me that the people of China are not the crazy Communists I once thought. They have humor and deeply care for one another.*

*The course taught me to respect nations of the world other than mine, and it gave me the ability to empathize with the struggle and hard work it takes to raise a country, especially in hard times.*

*The most important thing I have taken away from this course is a less America-centric view on world history. This course has shown me how to view history from a much different and diverse lens.*

Though this essay focuses on using Chinese film in teaching history and culture, some readers unfamiliar with Chinese cinema might be interested in learning more about the history of Chinese film and about contemporary Chinese filmmakers. I have included bibliographical entries for two essential introductory books on these topics below:

Berry, Chris, and Mary Farquhar. *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. This well-done survey also includes an extensive bilingual film bibliography and a chronology of Chinese history alongside its film history.

Berry, Michael. *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005. The book features in-depth interviews of filmmakers from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, with filmographies and bibliographies for each. ■