

Teaching Post-Mao China

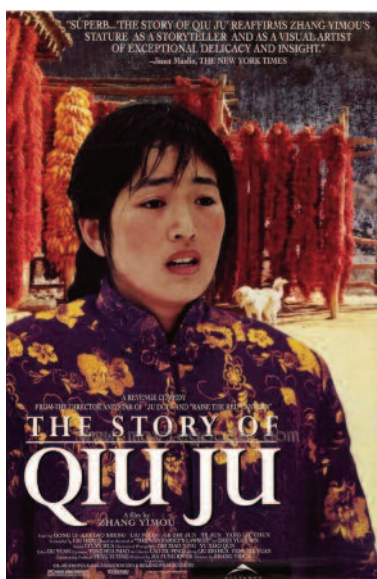
Two Classic Films

By Melisa Holden

Introduction

The Story of Qiu Ju and *Beijing Bicycle* are two films that have been used in classrooms since they were produced (1992 and 2001, respectively). Today, these films are still relevant to high school and undergraduate students studying history, literature, and related courses about China, as they offer a picture of the grand scale of societal change that has happened in China in recent decades. Both films illustrate contemporary China and the dichotomy between urban and rural life there. The human issues presented transcend cultural boundaries and, in the case of *Beijing Bicycle*, feature young characters that are the age of US students, allowing them to further relate to the narrative.

As an instructor of a two-year college-level film course, my goal is to prepare students to look critically at cinematic elements of film while also looking into the sociocultural elements under which the film was produced. I am not an instructor of world history, but when discussing film, history prominently presents itself and is woven into the course. As film instructors often bring history into their courses, teachers of history and related subjects should consider the inclusion



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of film and cinematic language to enhance their lectures.

Before embarking on teaching with film, teachers should familiarize themselves in its techniques, as cinema has a language all its own. Examples include a low angle providing meaning that the subject has power or is intimidating; high angles depicting subjects as inferior, not powerful; and shaky handheld shots that evoke something unstable, perhaps scary. Setting, costume, and lighting give the viewer a great deal of information about story and narrative that can be read for meaning, while editing and pacing give important clues to

what is going on within the frame of a film. A general film textbook can give an excellent overview of cinematic language. There are also numerous websites teachers can use to learn about shot types, uses of editing and lighting, and set design (some of these resources will be available at the end of this article).

City, Country, and Confucius: *The Story of Qiu Ju*

Instructors teaching twentieth century Chinese history may find that *The Story of Qiu Ju* offers a great deal that will enhance students' understanding of life in post-Mao China. Released in 1992, the film examines village life and the tensions that have come from the growth of the rural/urban divide. The plot involves a pregnant woman named Qiu Ju whose husband has been assaulted by the village chief. Qiu Ju demands an apology, which the chief refuses to give, so the woman begins to navigate the legal system in order to find justice.

The rich texture of peasant life in China is presented in a low-key

documentary style with which filmmaker Zhang Yimou is normally not connected. This style—long shots of city scenes filled with people and a subdued color palette—contribute to the viewer's understanding of life in China in the early 1990s. The village scenes could be from anytime in twentieth century China, as the extent of modernization is limited. For example, inside peasants' homes, viewers see steam spewing from characters' mouths because of the severe cold and lack of central heating. However, when Qiu Ju travels to the urbanized areas, it becomes obvious that the setting is the late twentieth century. The film was shot only a couple of years after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Zhang's previous two films (*Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*) had been banned in China, but with *The Story of Qiu Ju*, Zhang depicts government officials in a positive light, therefore earning the Chinese government's endorsement. One feels an underlying tension through Qiu Ju's search for justice, as if it is not only justice for her husband's injured body and psyche, but also justice supposedly found through democracy. The theme of democracy can be taught in conjunction with studies of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

The depiction of family and village life in Shaanxi Province is realism at its best, with Gong Li in the title role and the other characters played by local people, not professional actors. This realism lends a quality to the film that is not present in many current Chinese films that eventually became popular in the United States and provides viewers with an intimate portrait of life in late twentieth-century China. It is important to note the depths that the roots of Confucianism go in traditional Chinese society as depicted in the film. The crux of the plot is that this young woman has set out for justice, and this justice in some ways does not coincide with Confucian ideals. Her actions create disharmony; she does not kowtow to the village officials and instead stands up for her and her husband's rights. Class discussion can center on Confucianism, the Communist Party's attempt to eliminate the "Four Olds" (Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas), and the actions of Qiu Ju and the village chief.

Your Bicycle or Mine?

Beijing Bicycle, directed by Wang Xiaoshuai, is the story of two young men in the city of Beijing—one a high school student (Jian) and the other a migrant worker (Guei). The two boys lay claim to a bicycle, and herein lays the conflict of the film. Wang says, "The bicycle may be only a material symbol, but it's also a symbol of China."¹ Most people, when they think of China, think of the massive numbers of people and how they transport themselves (and often goods). The bicycle is that twentieth century symbol of China. However, this mode of transportation is quickly being replaced by automobiles, as we are often reminded by news of high pollutants in the Beijing air. Teachers of modern Chinese history will find a great deal of information to use from *Beijing Bicycle*. The themes most obvious in the film include China's change from a rural to an urban economy and the plight of migrant workers in China. Jian and Guei represent the theme of the rural world clashing with the cosmopolitanism of the big city of Beijing. Migrants do not have the ability to possess a *hukou*, or residency certificate, and are not considered citizens of a city within their own country. Over the past 30 years, the economy of China has rapidly changed from a rural economy with small villages whose residents operate like an extended family to a fast-paced urban economy with polluting factories, high rises, and migrant workers. Instead of tight, closely knit families, young parents are leaving their children behind with grandparents in order to follow work in locales far away from their homes. And young adults, when they reach a certain age,

RESOURCES

FILM REVIEW ESSAY

are also leaving home to find work in these factories.

Guei represents the segment of Chinese society that is finding it necessary to leave home in order to find work. The film is loosely based on Lao She's novel *Rickshaw Boy* (*Luotuo Xiangzi*), which chronicles the life of a young man and his relationship with his rickshaw. The novel is a short, easy read, which enables students to explore themes between the novel and *Beijing Bicycle*. In addition, many parallels are drawn between *Beijing Bicycle* and the Italian neorealist film, *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di Biciclette*). Clips from both films can be used to make parallels between the economic challenges that Italy faced after World War II and the challenges China faced at the end of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Students react well to both films, as they both depict the story of young people. *Bicycle Thieves* is about a boy, his father, and their search for their stolen bicycle; *Beijing Bicycle* is also about a stolen bicycle and stars two young adult boys who fight over its possession.

Jian and Guei, had they come from similar backgrounds, may have been friends, and this is emphasized toward the end of the film when they agree to share the bike. The culminating fight at the end pits the two of them against a gang of boys with whom Jian has problems. Again, Guei is put into a situation he did not ask for. These difficult



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situations and the ultimate destruction of his bicycle symbolize the unfortunate circumstances that migrants are in. They work hard and are not offered compensation that equals their efforts. The city kids destroy the one tool that Guei needs for his livelihood, and by the end of the film, we wonder how Guei will survive. The camera moves close up on his bicycle as he carries it through the streets and eventually pulls back and up to a bird's eye view of the city streets teeming with au-

tomobiles—not bicycles—making Guei's figure almost shrink before our eyes until he eventually disappears in the sea of cars and pollution, again representing all that he and other migrants are up against in the city.

Relevancy of the Films to Today's China

The PRC at the time of production of both films is, of course, different than the PRC of today. The middle class has grown as well as China's per capita income, but so too has poverty. The division of wealth has created some of the world's wealthiest people, as well as some of the poorest. Also, the poor and the elderly are more often being pushed out of the land on which they have lived for generations and into urbanized areas. This expansion of urbanization and the embrace of the free market have made life difficult for millions of displaced rural denizens. Many people in the countryside can no longer work their land and live off their bounty, and they must move to cities to make a living. Qiu Ju's son most likely left his children with Qiu Ju and her husband to go work in one of the big cities at a factory,

forgoing harvesting and selling chili peppers as Qiu Ju and her family does in Zhang's film. Urbanization has also promoted pollution, which gets worse every year in China, as the automobile takes over the bicycle as the main means of transportation. Regularly, we read in the news that cities such as Beijing have such poor air quality and that people are encouraged to stay inside.

In addition, as factories go up, more displaced workers face long hours and low wages in a frequently alien land. As in Guei's case, increasingly, young people (and young parents) leave their small villages to eke out a living in factories in various cities around the country, often leaving children behind with grandparents (as is illustrated in the documentary *Last Train Home*). To a great extent, the filmmakers of the sixth generation take the problems of contemporary China and expose and magnify them for their art. Students will appreciate the truth expressed in these two films and may perhaps look on Netflix for more films about China today. In the classroom, Wang's and Zhang's films offer an excellent springboard into a class discussion of more contemporary issues in the PRC.

Although teaching with film may require an instructor to move outside his or her comfort zone, the results are well worth the effort. Teachers who choose to weave international films into their classes will not only expose students to other cultures, but will enliven these cultures and their histories for their students.

NOTES

1. The Film Foundation, "Beijing Bicycle," *Story of Movies*, accessed June 7, 2013. <http://tiny.cc/l66d7w>

LIST OF HELPFUL WEB SITES AND ARTICLES

Basic Strategies in Reading Photographs

<http://tiny.cc/066d7w>

This web page offers a succinct, easy-to-read overview of how to read images in a frame.

Beijing Bicycle (film review)

<http://tiny.cc/c96d7w>

Text can be downloaded from *Education About Asia's* archives page. Jeffrey Johnson's review of *Beijing Bicycle* in *Education About Asia* offers numerous ideas for the classroom and further discusses some of the issues the film presents.

Film Education

<http://tiny.cc/u96d7w>

A site supported by the UK Film Industry to promote and support the use of film in the curriculum. It offers information and curriculum resources for specific films, as well as general film studies.

The 'Grammar of Television and Film'

<http://tiny.cc/da7d7w>

This site offers an excellent overview of the language of cinema. It visually describes different types of camera angles and shot types, how editors manipulate time and space, narrative styles, and use of sound.

The Story of Movies: An Introduction to Contemporary Chinese Film
<http://tiny.cc/7a7d7w>

The Film Foundation (with IBM and Turner Classic Movies) offers excellent resources for teachers who want to embark on teaching

with films from China. Currently, they offer extensive resources (including a teacher resource guide and student activity booklet on Beijing Bicycle, King of Masks, and Kekexili Mountain Patrol

The Story of Qiu Ju (film review)

<http://tiny.cc/c96d7w>

Text can be downloaded from *Education About Asia's* archives page. Art Barbeau's *Education About Asia* review of The Story of Qiu Ju presents ways in which the author feels the film can be utilized in classroom settings.

Yale Film Studies

<http://tiny.cc/8b7d7w>

Yale's film analysis guide is an excellent source to help people become familiar with the vocabulary of film studies and cinema technique.

MELISA HOLDEN is a school librarian and film/cinema studies instructor at City Honors School in Buffalo, NY. She has a deep interest in the cinema of China and its connection to the history of China throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Professionally and personally, she strives to connect young people with film that are outside of their comfort level.

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