

CENTER FOR EAST ASIAN STUDIES  
FRIDAY NOON FILM SERIES

PRESENTS

Recent Chinese Cinema: The New Formalism

Mainland Chinese cinema of the 1980s was known for the somber historical allegories of the “Fifth Generation” filmmakers, while a new generation in the 1990s turned to a raw *cinéma vérité* style that sought to expose harsh contemporary realities with a minimum of stylization. With the turn of the century, however, a new wave of cinema has appeared, one which tells unpredictable and often playful stories with a concern for formal experimentation unprecedented in the People’s Republic. The new trend is no doubt in part a reaction against the self-seriousness of the Fifth Generation as well as the ascetic realism of the independent films of the 1990s. Another undeniable inspiration for these films, however, is the example of Hong Kong’s Wong Kar-wai, whose jazzy, aestheticized depictions of contemporary urban life—and occasional plunges into pure cinematic excess—have offered an alternative model of Chinese filmmaking. Some of the new formalist films directly reference Wong’s style, while others take the spirit of experimentation in different directions, but all these films share in the effort to work out fresh relationships between cinematic art, individual memory, and life in contemporary China.

This series will be presented by Jason McGrath, Ph.D student in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilization.

October 3: Dazzling (Hua yan)

Li Xin, 2002, 84 min

Wim Wenders meets Wong Kar-wai in a dreamlike story that amounts to a reflection on the power of cinematic imagination itself. Guarded by a pair of angels under the skies of a modern but romanticized Shanghai, various youth—theater patrons re-imagined by a forlorn movie usher with light-sensitive eyes—try their luck at love. The stories the usher conjures up take place over the course of twelve hours: a college youth pursues a girl from a photograph on the theater’s floor; an overweight gym teacher finds sudden athleticism when his girlfriend dumps him; a young woman follows a map into the forest and finds her true love. As the couples play out different themes of urban romance—fear of commitment, love as repetition, love as obsession—the usher waits endlessly for a young woman he has encountered in a bar to meet him in the park. Moments of magic realism and impressive visual style combine with an episodic narrative technique to capture the essence of love in the modern city.

October 10: Suzhou River (Suzhou He)

Lou Ye, 1999

This trendsetting film blends influences from *Vertigo* to *Fallen Angels* to create a distinctive visual and narrative style. The film is told from the viewpoint of a lonely videographer who studies the human traffic that passes through the streets below his balcony. He meets and falls in love with Meimei, a mysterious nightclub performer with a mermaid act. In a parallel narrative, Mardar, a motorcycle courier, recounts the story of his lost love, a free spirit named Moudan who disappeared into the Suzhou River but whom he now believes to have survived in the form of her double, Memei. Filled with arresting imagery and uncanny shifts of emotion, *Suzhou River* is a journey through a paradoxical and harsh Shanghai as well as through the complexities of love and obsession. This was also the breakout performance for the actress Zhou Xun, who would quickly become ubiquitous in films by both Hong Kong and mainland directors.

October 17: Chicken Poets (Xiang jimao yiyang fei)

Meng Jinghui, 2002, 94 min.

Frustrated poet Yun Fei arrives in the Beijing suburbs to visit his old friend Chen Xiaoyang, who had also

been a poet but is now a successful young entrepreneur who farms black-feathered chickens and markets their black eggs. Yun Fei meets Fang Fang, a local colorblind woman who keeps trying and failing to get a job as a flight attendant. In a series of escalating absurdist incidents, Yun Fei wrestles with his acute claustrophobia, the temptation to sell out his art, and his complicated relationship with Fang Fang. The directorial debut by China's leading avant-garde theater director, this film reveals its creative roots in theater (with most characters played by longtime members of Meng's troupe) as well as a surprisingly accomplished and distinctive cinematic style. However, despite the absurdist comedy and visual stimulation, the film becomes an ultimately moving fable on the fate of the arts in China's economic boom as well as the difficulty of maintaining the idealism of youth.

October 24: Quitting (Zuotian)

Zhang Yang, 2001, 118 min.

Jia Hongsheng was an emerging film star in the 1990s whose roles ranged from a stage version of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* to early art films of the "Sixth Generation" such as Wang Xiaoshuai's *Frozen*. However, his fragile psychological state, combined with heroin addiction, led to his withdrawal from the outside world. He quit acting, cut himself off from his family and friends, locked himself in his apartment, and suffered delusions including the conviction that he was John Lennon's son. His parents, concerned for his well-being, packed up their belongings and journeyed to Beijing to try to rescue Jia from his private hell. In this daring film from the director of the far less harrowing *Shower*, Jia Hongsheng and his family play themselves and re-enact their ordeal of a few years earlier. However, Zhang Yang counterbalances this element of documentary realism with periodic disruptions of the narrative by elaborate formal devices, such as the sudden tracking back of the camera to reveal that the film's setting is actually a cutaway of an artificial house set on a theater stage. The depiction of a painful generation gap as well as an alluring yet frightening rock-and-roll lifestyle made this film a recent favorite among Chinese intellectual youth.

October 31: Spring Subway (Kaiwang chuntian de ditie)

Zhang Yibai, 2002, 93 min.

Jianbin has been unemployed for three months, but he cannot bear to tell the truth to his live-in girlfriend of seven years, Xiaohui. He spends each day lingering in the subway, where he befriends several interesting characters who also frequent the subway: a teenage boy with a crush on a willing girl whom he is nevertheless too shy to pursue, a banker who falls in love with a saleswoman. As those characters' stories develop in parallel, Xiaohui has a flirtation with a business associate, while Jianbin himself begins spending his days with an injured and temporarily blind schoolteacher. This stylish film by a former television and music video director is reminiscent of Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express*, with its multiple storylines, voiceover narration, potential lovers who fail to connect, and especially its flashy visual style. Never have Beijing's subway stations looked so good.

November 7: Missing Gun (Xun qiang)

Lu Chuan, 2003, 90 min.

After a respected and likeable policeman in a small, rural village loses his gun, his life begins to come apart. The gun must be found, and while many people aid in the search, others seem to have secrets they refuse to tell. The village is turned upside down, and Hitchcockian paranoia flows freely until eventually every villager the policeman meets is a suspect. As was the case in an obvious precursor, Kurosawa's 1949 masterpiece *Stray Dog*, the officer's search for his gun becomes less a straightforward cop thriller than an uncanny exploration of psychology and memory. Veteran actor Jiang Wen turns in a strong performance, and the film is unique in that it transfers the film noir sensibility of recent Chinese urban films such as *Suzhou River* and *Lunar Eclipse* to a rural village setting.

November 14: I Love You (Wo ai ni)

Zhang Yuan, 2002, 98 min.

Countless romantic Chinese youth must have been fooled by the title and poster for this film, and bought it at the local pirated DVD bin only to be faced with a grotesque exploration of a dysfunctional relationship of

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? proportions. This is a vivid, fiercely ironic and intense portrait of a yuppie couple in Beijing who, though trying to follow the usual path of a loving young marriage, nevertheless suffocate and tear each other apart. Ju and Yi are attractive young professionals typical of the new commercially spirited Beijing who, after a tragic accident involving Ju's former fiancé, fall in love and get married themselves. However, their relationship becomes filled by bickering, even though both characters only play exaggerated versions of the usual gender roles: Ju the passive-aggressive and occasionally jealous woman resentful of Yi's friends, and Yi the seemingly long-suffering man who nevertheless subtly needles Ju with his ostensibly superior reason and objectivity. The downward spiral of their marriage culminates in shocking violence. Popular starlet Xu Jinlei, simply competent and attractive in *Spring Subway*, has a career performance in this unsettling and claustrophobic film by Zhang Yuan, who was formerly China's prototypical "underground" director but now makes equally challenging films within the studio system.

November 21: Zhou Yu's Train (Zhou Yu de huoche)

Sun Zhou, 2002, 96 min.

Gong Li, star of mainland Chinese classics like *Raise the Red Lantern* and *To Live*, plays Zhou Yu, a young artist who makes delicate pottery. On a business trip to the city of Chongyang, Zhou meets the shy poet Chen Ching, played by Hong Kong idol Tony Leung Ka-fai. The two fall in love and Zhou begins to travel twice a week by train to meet Chen, who rarely leaves his library. Zhou spends so much time on the train that the sound of the wheels and the spinning scenery dominate her memories. A lush and impressionistic, at times stream-of-consciousness, tale of obsession and the age-old question of whether it is better to be loved or to love, this film eventually springs a puzzling surprise in a trick of character doubling reminiscent of *Suzhou River*.

December 5: Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress (Xiao caifeng)

Dai Sijie, 2002, 116 min.

Based on the semi-autobiographical novel of the same title written by the director, this beautifully shot film depicts a love triangle among two "sent-down youth" during the Cultural Revolution and a beautiful seamstress in the rural village where they have been assigned. The young men are best friends who get access to an illicit stash of translated European literature, which is of course banned under the rule of revolutionary Maoism. In secret meetings among the two boys and the seamstress (*Suzhou River*'s Zhou Xun), the youngsters fall in love with each other and with Balzac, whose influence they even surreptitiously leak to the villagers in the form of storytelling. This lushly photographed film depicts a mountainous landscape that, in a stunning fantasy sequence, is submerged by the Three Gorges Dam project decades later as the now-grown protagonists indulge in melancholic remembering. While the film pushes the usual buttons about the oppression of the Cultural Revolution, rarely has that period been depicted with such loving nostalgia and scenic beauty.

ALL SCREENINGS ARE FREE AND TAKE PLACE IN JUDD 302, BEGINNING AT 12:40 PM.

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