



E-ASIA

university of oregon libraries

<http://e-asia.uoregon.edu>

Kaim, J.R. "Chinese Films," *The China Journal of Science & Arts*, Vol. XXXI, No.2 (August, 1939), pp. 72-75.

CHINESE FILMS

BY

J. R. KAIM

MOTION PICTURE making was introduced into China approximately twenty years ago and although the whole process of production is still to be credited to Western technique the adoption has been the Chinese producers' own. The first film was brought to China in 1904 by a Spanish merchant called Rames who opened an old style cinema in the famous tea-shop of Ching-Lin-Ko in Shanghai. At approximately the same time a Chinese named Lung Chu San brought films and mechanical equipment from America to Peking, where he entertained with his performances at a well known tea shop.

Five years later an American, Benjamin Brosky, produced the first films in Shanghai and after having realized that this new industry might become profitable a Chinese group. founded the first motion picture company in China under the name "Mingsin Company." During the World War, in 1917, a well known publishing firm of Shanghai, the Commercial Press Limited, tried to enter the film business and added a film department to its existing enterprises, but production of Chinese films by this department was soon interrupted It was not before 1922 that a concern of some importance was established under the name, the Star-Motion Picture Company.

When the present Sino-Japanese hostilities commenced eight motion picture companies were operating in Shanghai but as most of their buildings and studios were destroyed during the hostilities, none of them is functioning at the present. However, new enterprises were started shortly after the outbreak of the "incident" and China once again became a contributor to the international movie market. Investments, indeed, are rather modest but the Chinese sometimes seem to be able to produce something out of nothing an, taking into consideration all other handicaps to be mentioned later on, the results are really surprising.

The newest studio erected in Shanghai, and belonging to the "Chinese Motion Picture Company" was organized in February, 1939, with a capital of \$200,000,000 Chinese currency. It was in the studios of this company that the so-called Chinese "Historical Superproduction" originated with the film "Sable Cicada" which has been shown with success in several American movie theatres. The success of this film in China induced the company to produce another historical film, the "Empress Wu Cheh Tien," which



Above is a scene from "Hua Mu Lan," or the Chinese Jeanne d'Arc, which was produced by the United Motion Picture Corporation.



Two very popular Chinese actors are depicted above in a scene from "Sable Cicada," a Chinese picture which was successfully shown for three weeks on Broadway in New York before coming to Shanghai.



A picture of Miss Y.S. Chen, the actress who represented the Chinese Jeanne d'Arc in "Hua Mu Lan," a Chinese movie which enjoyed the greatest popularity amongst Chinese cinema visitors.



Miss Violet Koo, a promising young Chinese star, in her role as Empress Wu in the film of the same name.



Modern Chinese films are often Chinese versions of American screen representations. The above is a scene in "Desire."



The producers of the well known film :Sable Cicada" are now working on a foreign interest picture entitled "Angel," of which the above is a scene.

page 73

became a still greater hit. The novel of this play was based on the story of a Chinese of the T'ang Dynasty, the only woman who ever ruled China (for all Empress Dowagers were only acting on behalf of minor princes) and so far as historical experts assure, sceneries and costumes have been carefully reproduced in this play. The leading role was played by Miss Violet Koo, a young actress who reached stardom, as far as Chinese movie fans are concerned, by her lively and truly expert representation unique historical figure.

It is only natural that historical films to-day are very popular with the Chinese public ; in Shanghai there seems to be no other possibility to inform the masses of the national crisis and to stir up patriotism. The censorship does not allow any reference to the present political situation and as far as producers are concerned the bounds of what the censors call "political" appear to be very extensive. Under these conditions a historical play is not only educating but at the same time may become a kind of medium for patriotism make itself felt.

Thus the greatest success which a film ever scored in China was the recent representation of Hua Mu Lan, a Chinese Jeanne d'Arc, which enjoyed performances eighty-five days in Shanghai's theatres.

The leading actress was Miss Y. S. Chen, and the picture was produced by the United China Motion Picture Company ; this young and charming lady is said to be the idol of Chinese girl students preferring a real reformation of China's style of life and, indeed, one of the best means of preaching this doctrine is offered by the modern plays. Just in June, 1939, the Chinese public applauded her in a "Play of Chinese Society" called "The Angle," a film the "revolutionary" ideas of which, however, seem to be a little too cautious. It was in this film, too, that foreign visitors for the first time had the opportunity to see real Chinese dancing girls on the screen, but as a matter of fact this ballet still seemed to be a rather modest one.

The reason is that Chinese families are not yet very fond of seeing their daughters working in film studios, neither as hopeful actresses nor as badly paid dancing girls. The profession of screen actresses has apparently the same reputation among Chinese families it had 40 years ago in Western countries.

But, nevertheless, those among the actresses who already became "stars" are Chinese public's favourites. Besides the two mentioned "stars" another company, Yi Hwa Motion Picture Company starred Miss Chang Tse Hong, a young sing-song girl of Nanking who, indeed, represents a special type among the modern Chinese actresses. People abroad, informed about the sometimes fabulous salaries several of the Hollywood screen celebrities might be rather disappointed to learn the sums the best known Chinese stars receive. Neither the companies nor the stars naturally are very fond of disclosing details about the payments but it was revealed that the highest salary a Chinese star ever received for a picture was C.\$ 5,000. If one into consideration that the star generally is under contract for six films a year the highest income till now has been \$ 30,000 Chinese currency yearly. As a fact not more three of the female and two of the male stars might have actually received this sum.

Male stars, indeed, sometimes are even better known by the Chinese public than the best sing-song girls. In the great scenes of the historical films men of courageous, lofty character represent the ideals of present day China which, according to Chinese feelings,

page 74

needs the return of those heroic ideas and looks out for national heroes. The thick and mighty Mr. S. C. Ying and the strong and robust Mr. William Foo, therefore, are the representatives of those ideals, personifying strength, vigour and chivalry of Chinese youth.

As a matter of fact while young Chinese women mostly hesitate to appear as extras in the pictures, young men are eager to play. Thus, even before the arrival of many thousands of Chinese refugees in Shanghai who looked for jobs, there was always a surplus of male extras offering their art or their good will to the film companies Though, in fact, a Chinese extra mostly does not get much more than a ricsha-coolie, the average salary being a Chinese Dollar a day, this poor payment has never decreased the number of applicants.

We now have been informed about the highest salaries some of the stars receive and we have learned the poor payment of Chinese extras; but what sums have been invested in the pictures themselves ?

The "Super-Production" film "Empress Wu" was said to have cost approximately Chinese \$ 100,000.00 and according to the company, the throne alone of the "Empress," a very beautiful work, did not cost less than \$10,000.00. In comparison to the sums we know with reference to Western productions these amounts seem more than modest! But even the whole official capital the above mentioned corporation started with, was not more than Chinese \$ 200,000.00 (The Corporation is incorporated in U.S.A.) On the other hand the producers assured that the Chinese Government never granted any subsidies to the Chinese film industry and all investments were brought up by the producers themselves.

Thus, the firms were obliged to produce as many films as possible and the speed of their production, indeed, may become the highest danger for the young industry just because a short time ago the firms were able to start the export of their productions to Western countries. The average yearly production in the three studios of the corporation combined was said to have totaled seventy pictures, i.e. nearly six a month!

The Chinese producers as well as the importers of foreign pictures have at their disposal the modest number of approximately 250 cinemas, 40 of which are operating in Shanghai. Taking into consideration the 400 millions of inhabitants of the country, one is bound to notice that there are still many future possibilities for a new development but that for the moment the chances are rather poor.

Only three of Shanghai's big cinemas and 15 of the smaller theatres usually play Chinese films of all kinds of detective serials and comedies, but also the "Super-Production." Considering the small number of cinemas in the whole country, however, the consumption of movie pictures is a rather satisfying one from the commercial viewpoint : In 1936 the Shanghai Municipal Council censored not less than 812 short films, 21 of domestic and 791 of foreign origin, and 415 normal theatre films, 51 of which had been produced in China. In spite of the war time, the number of films increased in 1938, totalling 1595 pictures of 4,493,194,00 feet of length, and among them 463 were main features.

More than 90 per cent. of imported films were of American origin and the Chinese public seems to have chosen their idols among the Hollywood actors. Although, naturally, no statistic exists with reference to the choice the Chinese public made, many observers assure that Chinese movie goers prefer in the first place adventure films and all kinds of "Shows." That, indeed, may be true, but it does not prove anything as regards the Chinese taste. When Western people sometimes concluded that

page 75

the Chinese public mostly prefer this kind of pictures they forgot that the first reason of this seeming fact was the handicap of the language. Not even one per cent. of the visitors of smaller cinemas had been able to follow an English spoken conversation and, as the domestic production till now was insufficient to cover all demands, the owners were obliged to choose films the understanding of which did not absolutely depend on the knowledge of the foreign language.

Even in China herself the language very often became a handicap. The Shanghai made films have dialogues in the "national dialect" only, the so-called "Mandarin," which, in fact, is not understood by the ordinary man in South China speaking Cantonese. Chinese producers, so far as the writer was

informed, did not yet find a good solution to overcome this handicap but are still confident to find a way, for surely after the end of the present hostilities the southern market will become of the highest interest to them.

The same handicap of the language certainly exists in export business of Chinese made pictures. The only solution has been the use of sub-titles written in the foreign language and although these commentaries sometimes may tire unaccustomed visitors, also Western producers who sell their films abroad, never have discovered better possibilities. As a matter of fact foreign pictures shown in Greece, Turkey, Egypt or other countries of the Levant, have always been furnished with sub-titles in Greek, Turkish or Arabic and no handicap has ever arisen from this system.

Thus, in fact, it seems easier to make Chinese pictures more comprehensible to foreigners than to Chinese people incapable to understand "Mandarin."

Chinese movie goers mostly are heart and soul in the picture they are just seeing even if the film is not a very thrilling one. They feel with the poor wretch hunted by his adversaries and, when in the well known fairy-tale the evil wolf just seems to have the chance to reach the good, weak persons he hunted, the public cries in order to animate the poor fugitives to save their souls. The bad wolf finally killed, the audience is happy as though they themselves were saved from terrible dangers.

The writer never has had an opportunity to observe Chinese peasants looking at a movie picture but all visitors he has seen were inhabitants of big towns who, nevertheless, produced the impression to be "naive" movie goers. But they are not naive at all! They know very well that what they see is but theatre and that the "bad wolf" is not more than a piece of paper; they know very well that the whole story is a fairy-tale but they wish to be illusionated. Their power of imagination, indeed, as proved by many of their poetries seems much stronger than that of Western people and imbibing the picture's story they are always willing to grant many poetic licences.

The style of Chinese pictures, therefore, probably will remain different from what Western production has chosen. Although Chinese movie goers mostly wish to see a "happy end," managers of cinemas assume that for their public the happy end is not all they are waiting for. They wish to laugh about a bombastic actor, they wish to see the devilish scoundrel getting the worse, they wish to profit by the story on the screen. These wishes seem even to be decisive for the success of foreign films in China and, as a matter of course, Chinese producers are bound to cherish and to protect the heroes of Chinese history offering the fulfilment of those yearnings. They certainly will try to foster with great care the worship of all kinds of figures touching the Chinese audience to the quick and thus there is a hope they might be able to assure a peculiar Chinese style of their screen production.