

## VR363: Chinese Society in Contemporary Chinese Cinema

Spring 2015

### **Syllabus**

Instructor: Dr. Xuelian Zhang

Email: [Xuelian.Zhang@sjtu.edu.cn](mailto:Xuelian.Zhang@sjtu.edu.cn)

Office: 410

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### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Course Description**

Twentieth-century Chinese cinema can serve as a valuable teaching tool for students to understand Chinese politics, culture, and society through the image of the Chinese woman, family, individual, and historical event. Female characters, individuals and families in the melodramas mentioned here play important roles as signs of some of the significant upheavals China has undergone in the twentieth century. These figures and stories express pain, suffering, happiness and feeling lost, embody political ideologies, and highlight questions about the government, social changes and economic development.

This course will explore 20th century China through its cinematic and literary representation by Chinese who lived through or reflected back on the tumultuous and tragic events of their modern history. The cinematic texts are read not just as a “reflection” of Chinese society but as discursive constructions, the product of variable and historically specific sets of relations within particular contexts, and with a complex relationship to social change.

Background readings and documentaries will provide basic historical narrative; centering on the dynamic interplay between film and society, class discussions will focus on contemporary Chinese representations of cultural, social, and political change mainly in movies and some related fictions.

We will focus on the period of the Reform era (1979-present), with prominent and popular films and related literary works (fiction, memoir, drama, etc.) keyed to the era. We will also introduce some critical readings that address issues of gender & women, community, the family, modernity & the nation, visibility and memory.

Film viewing will take place mainly outside of class meeting time. No prerequisites, but a familiarity with Chinese history or knowledge of literature/film studies will be helpful.

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

#### **Course Objectives**

- 1) To acquaint students with the dramatic impact of 20th century Chinese history on people's lives, thinking, modes of expression, and artistic conceptualization.
- 2) To introduce students to major works of filmmaking and related literary works in contemporary China, and to methods of analyzing and understanding Chinese film and fiction in historical, social and cultural terms.
- 3) To enrich students' appreciation and critical understanding of the place of modern Chinese history and cultural expression in modern global history and culture
- 4) To cultivate the capabilities of critical thinking among students about the identity of China as well as an array of important cultural and social issues related to post-socialist China.

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### ACTIVITY/PROCESS

#### Tentative Weekly Calendar

##### Week 1

Introduction, Transformation of Chinese society in 20<sup>th</sup> century and its visual representation

- Introduction to the course: syllabus, assessment, assignment, conditions etc
- Lecture #1: Introduction to the course: Methodology, Disciplinary approach
- Lecture/Reading #2: Introduction to contemporary Chinese Cinema and Zhang Yimou as a fifth generation filmmaker
- Film Screening: *To Live* (Dir. Zhang Yimou) 《活着》 (余华)
- In-class discussion
- Lecture #3: Parable of a nation: the fiction *To Live*

Short Weekly Assignment (due last class each week)

1) Define the following concepts :

Narrative (in film and literature), Character , Characterization, Setting, Representation, Epic, Protagonist

Reading Response: *Essentials of Modern Chinese History*

2) Reading assignment: (Week 1-2)

- Yu Hua Novel *To Live* (Chinese version for Chinese speakers, **required reading**) 余华 (中文版)
- *The Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* (Chinese version, **recommend**) 余华 《许三观卖血记》 (中文版)

##### Week 2

Traditional Chinese society, family and women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century

- Reading #1: Brief introduction to the cultural history and literature in 1980s-early 1990s China
- Reading/lecture: Brief introduction to Su Tong and New Historical Fiction in 1980s
- Film Screening: *Raise the Red Lantern* 大红灯笼高高挂
- In-class discussion
- Lecture: Individual, Family and Confucianism in the Film of *Raise the Red Lantern*

Short Weekly Assignment: Gender, Identity, Patriarchy , Metaphor ,symbolism;

Reading: *Prof. Michael Goldberg How to Read a Film (Sakai)*

Reading Response Due (Yu Hua *To Live* 余华 《活着》)

##### Week 3: Urbanization & Modernization in Contemporary China

- Reading/Lecture: Zhang Yang and the Sixth Generation filmmakers in the 1990s
- Film Screening: Zhangyang *Shower* 张扬 “洗澡”
- Discussion
- Lecture: Community, urbanization, nostalgia and modernization represented in *Shower*
- Reading Response: *Transformation Urban Space in China's New Urban Films*

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- 1<sup>st</sup> Paper (Film Review 700 words) Due (last class of the week)

**Week 4:** Urbanization & Modernization in Contemporary China

- Lecture: Community, urbanization, nostalgia and modernization represented in *Shower*
- Film Screening: *Shanghai Baby* 上海宝贝
- Reading & Response:
- 1. Lara Vanderstaay: *Female consciousness in contemporary Chinese women directors' films: A case study of . . . . .* Page 1-3
- 2. Novel *Shanghai Baby* (Wei Hui), 卫慧小说《上海宝贝》
- Short Weekly Assignment: Female Consciousness, Urbanization, Modernism, Post-Modernism, Nostalgia

**Week 5:** Consciousness of Self, Individualism and Modernization in Cosmopolitan China

- Discussion: Film and Novel *Shanghai Baby*
- Lecture: Sexuality and Body Politics 1, 2
- Short Weekly Assignment: Sexuality, Subjectivity, Individualism, Self, Collectivism
- Reading: *Representation of Women in Contemporary Chinese Popular Cinema*
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**Week 6:** Commercialization in Contemporary China

- Group Presentation
- Film Screening: Feng Xiaogang *The Big Shot's Funeral, If You are the One* 冯小刚《大腕》《非诚勿扰》
- Short Weekly Assignment: Commercialization, Capitalism, Consumerism, commodity (and people as commodities), Black Comedy (in Motion Pictures)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Paper Due

**Week 7:** Commercialization in Contemporary China

- Film Screening: Feng Xiaogang: *If You Are the One*
- Discussion:
- Lecture: Visual History, Black Comedy and the Transformation of Society in Cosmopolitan China
- Short Weekly Assignment: Ideology, Melodrama, Fantasy, Realism
- Reading Response:

**Week 8 (Monday Only):** Students' Pick

- Lecture: Visual History, Black Comedy and the Transformation of Society in Cosmopolitan China
- Discussion/Group Work
- Short Weekly Assignment:
- Reading Response:

**Week 9:** No Teaching

- Final Paper Due

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### RESOURCES:

#### Required Text (Fiction and reading materials)

1. Yu Hua: a) *To Live* b) *The Chronicle of a Blood Merchant*  
余华《活着》《许三观卖血记》
2. Su Tong: *Wives and Concubines*。苏童《妻妾成群》
3. Wei Hui: *Shanghai Baby*. 卫慧《上海宝贝》

#### Required Film

4. *To Live* (dir) Zhang Yimo, 张艺谋 (导演): 《活着》(巩俐, 葛优)
5. *Raise the Red Lantern* (dir) Zhang Yimou; 张艺谋(导演): 《大红灯笼高高挂》(巩俐)
6. Zhang Yang: *Shower*---Neighborhood, community and nostalgia in the process of modernization 张扬 (导演)《洗澡》
7. Berengar Pfahl: *Shanghai Baby*--- Modernization and westernization of Chinese city  
Berengar Pfahl (导演)《上海宝贝》
8. Feng Xiaogang: *The big Shot's Funeral; If You Are the One( 1, 2)* ---Commercialization of China  
冯小刚 (导演)《大腕》《非诚勿扰》
9. Student's Pick/Choose 1

### EVALUATION

#### Assessment and Grade Distribution

Assessment: 100% coursework

Assessment Tasks	Content/Remarks	Weighting
Attendance	Anticipated absence should be cleared with the instructors; absences which are not cleared with the instructors in advance and are not due to emergencies (e.g., a car accident) or sudden illness will affect the course grade. More than two absences will have a serious impact on the final grade.	5%
Participation/Discussion	Participation includes preparing to discuss the week's film and readings, and turning in on time	15%

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	all written assignments. Willingness to engage new material approaches, & interpretations, to listen to other students, & to share your own ideas are what this course seeks to encourage.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Short weekly Assignment</li> <li>▪ 4-5 Terms or vocabularies/Week</li> <li>▪ And/Or</li> <li>▪ 1 Reading Response (about 200-300 words)</li> <li>▪</li> </ul>	<p>Important terminology (concept) &amp; vocabulary in media and cultural studies, film &amp; literature studies.</p> <p>Students are required to find the definitions of the concepts and vocabularies from reading materials, books and internet resources. Wiki definitions are acceptable</p>	22%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Group Presentation (1) (12-15 minutes)</li> </ul>		16%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Term Paper (2):</li> <li>▪ 1. Film review 9% (No less than 700 words)</li> <li>▪ 2. Paper One, 13% (No less than 900 words)</li> </ul>		22%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Final Project (Short research paper, no less than 1800 words)</li> </ul>		20%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bonus</li> </ul>	<p>Extra 5% will be given to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) extra efforts made to the study</li> <li>b) outstanding performance in discussion, participation and assignments</li> </ul>	5%
Grading Scale:	<p>&gt; 96% A+</p> <p>94-96% A</p> <p>90-93% A-</p> <p>87-89% B+</p> <p>83-86% B</p> <p>80-82% B-</p> <p>77-79% C+</p> <p>74-76% C</p> <p>70-73% C-</p> <p>66-69% D+</p>	

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60-65% D

<60 % F

### TERMS AND CONDITIONS

#### **Class Requirements & Policies:**

1. Each student is required to be registered for the class. No auditing is allowed.
2. Consistent, punctual attendance for the semester earns you 8 points toward your semester grade. You will lose 1 point off your semester tally for EACH unexcused absence or each absence after three excused absences. In the event you cannot attend class with an excused reason, you must E-MAIL the instructor BEFORE CLASS. Please do not ask classmates to relay your message for you.
3. Anyone who is late more than 20 minutes will be considered absent.
4. No make-up on graded material except in dire emergencies (e.g., hospitalization), with appropriate documentation. Instead, there is a 'droppable score' option on nearly all quiz and homework categories.
5. Written assignments must be completed on due date. LATE HOMEWORK SUBMITTED AFTER CLASS AND BEFORE 5:00 P.M. ON THE DUE DATE WILL LOSE 2 POINTS UP FRONT. NO HOMEWORK ACCEPTED PAST 5:00 P.M. ON DUE DATE.
6. Your performance in the classroom will be reflected in the 'Participation' score for the semester. High scorers will demonstrate
  - preparedness in answering questions in class
  - initiative in volunteering answers or asking questions
  - initiative in seeking help outside of class if/when difficulties arise
7. It is very important for all the students to follow basic classroom rules, especially no chatting during class. For students who constantly break the rules, their points of participation will be affected greatly.
8. Cell phones and other electronic devices must be turned off during class. You'll be too busy in class to answer your phone, text-message, do e-mail, or shop online.

#### **Academic Dishonesty and Punishment:**

Academic dishonesty will result at a minimum in a failing grade for the entire course. Academic dishonesty includes, but not limited to, cheating on any graded exercises and plagiarism. Plagiarism is any effort to present the work, writing or ideas of others as if they were own.

### Appendix

#### **How to "Read" and Write about a Film?** (Ruth Dunnell, Jianhua Bai, )

##### I. McCormick, R. Instructions for Sequence Analysis

1. State the "message(s) of the sequence, i.e. what is the filmmaker trying to communicate.
2. Explain how the message(s) are communicated by such channels as image, speech, music, sound effect and etc.
3. Sequence Analysis Worksheet:
  - A. Describe briefly what you see in the selected sequence.
  - B. What is the filmmaker trying to communicate in the segment?

C. How do the five channels of information in film, visual image, print, speech, music, sound effect, and work together to communicate the message? Is space—landscape or interior—used as a “comment” on the character’s inner state of mind? Does the use of space exude a certain atmosphere? Are there any symbolic uses of props? How are focus, angles, lighting, color and sound effect used to help communicate? What are some of the social and cultural codes?

D. Try to determine what function and significance this segment has for the film as a whole?

II. Viewing and reading share the same basic interactive process of getting the meaning across.

Author Playwrite ---> Director	Text ----> Film ---->	<---->Readers <---->Film audience
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Active reading and viewing involves constant interacting with the text and the film, analyzing how the messages are communicated via various channels. What broad statement is the film director trying to make? How is character portrayal is done to help communicate the director’s message(s)? How does the setting and time period shape or contribute to the film’s thematic structure or messages? Are certain cultural values (virtues) singled out for critical examination or upheld for emulation? How are cultural or social messages conveyed? How imagery is used? Such as camera angles and shots, lighting, color, focus, sounds, etc. Can you watch the movie and watch yourself watching the movie at the same time, i.e. critical reading/viewing?

III. Writing about a film.

When you write about movies, “it is insufficient to convince others to like or dislike the film, but to add to their understanding of the film... personal feelings, expectations and reactions may be the beginning of an intelligent critique, but they must be balanced with rigorous reflection on where those feelings and expectations and reactions come from and how they relate to more objective factors concerning the movie in question: its place in film history, its cultural background, its formal strategies... what is interesting is not pronouncing a film good or bad but explaining why (T. Corrigan).”