

Research Workshop on Contemporary Chinese Art-House Cinema

7 May 2021

9:00 am – 12:30 pm CET

Online on Teams

Co-organised by:

Université libre de Bruxelles (EASt), Waseda Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies (Research Group on Contemporary Chinese Independent Film), and Nagoya University (Cinema Studies Program).

This workshop focuses on Chinese art-house cinema (*yishu dianying*) since the reform of film industry in the 1990s. The Chinese market was then deregulated by an increase in the number of foreign films (mostly Hollywood blockbusters) distributed in film theatres. In order to become economically competitive, Chinese film studios fostered production of high-budget commercial films based on the American model and became reluctant to produce art-house films with little commercial potential. Thus, in the 2000s, only a minority of directors – such as Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai, whose films were regularly selected and awarded at international film festivals, managed to work within the Chinese film industry. Apart from these exceptions, Chinese art-house films were produced independently outside state-funded studios and screened in independent film festivals.

Due to the independent nature of art-house cinema, researchers have mainly been interested in its aesthetic and ethical features, while overlooking its economic and industrial sides. However, this conception of Chinese art-house cinema has become less relevant in view of the ongoing developments in the Chinese market that, since the 2010s, has provided young directors with more funding opportunities. A niche market dedicated to art-house cinema has thus started to grow, drawing the attention of critics and cinephiles in China and abroad.

Individual papers presented in this workshop will take stock of these recent developments that are still under-researched. Particular attention will be given to the industrial mode of film production, exhibition, distribution, and reception. These presentations, which aim at promoting a collective reflection on contemporary Chinese art-house cinema, are intended to be published in a collective book co-edited by Flora Lichaa (Université libre de Bruxelles), Ma Ran (Nagoya University), and Seio Nakajima (Waseda University).

Dai, Jinhua. 2009. “Celebratory Screens: Chinese Cinema in the New Millennium.” Khoo, Olivia (ed.), Metzger, Sean (ed.). *Futures of Chinese Cinema. Technologies and Temporalities in Chinese Screen Cultures*. Bristol, Chicago, Intellect: 39-55.

Lin, Xiaoping. 2010. *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola: Avant-Garde Art and Independent Cinema*. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press.

Yeh, Emilie Yueh-Yu, and Davis, Darell William. 2008. *East Asian Screen Industries*. London, British Film Institute.

Zhu, Ying. 2003. *Chinese Cinema During the Era of Reform: The Ingenuity of the System*. Westport, Praeger.

Schedule

9:00-9:05 **Opening** by Flora Lichaa

9:05-10:25 **Panel 1: Production, distribution, and reception in the Chinese market**

Chair: Vanessa Frangville – Université libre de Bruxelles

From Independence to Art: The Transformation of Chinese Independent Fiction Films

Lydia Wu – Newcastle University

Film Festivals and Localism in China's Contemporary Art-House Films

Maja Korbecka – Freie Universität Berlin

The Rise of Coming-of-Age Tales in Chinese Art-House Cinema

Flora Lichaa – Université libre de Bruxelles

Chinese Highbrow?: The Audience Construction of Chinese Art-house Cinema

Seio Nakajima – Waseda University

10:25-10:50 **Discussion**

10:50-11:05 **Break**

11:05-12:05 **Panel 2: Cross-strait and transnational relations**

Chair: Vanessa Frangville – Université libre de Bruxelles

Art-House Cinema in Taiwan: A Lost Continent ?

Wafa Ghermani – Cinémathèque française

Cross-Strait Collaborations: Taiwan New Cinema in Mainland Art Cinema

Timmy Chih-Ting Chen – Hong Kong Baptist University

The “In-Betweenness” of the Film Auteur (*dianying zuozhe*)—Translocalizing the Chinese Arthouse Cinema (*yishu dianying*) vis-à-vis the Sino-Japanese Film Connections

Ma Ran – Nagoya University

12:05-12:25 **Discussion**

12:25-12:30 **Brief introduction to the book project**

Abstracts and biographies

From Independence to Art: The Transformation of Chinese Independent Fiction Films

This paper looks at production and distribution of Chinese independent fiction films after shutdown of major independent film festivals in 2014, which resulted in the loss of the main domestic exhibition channel. Unlike Chinese independent documentaries which are usually self-funded and finished independently by filmmakers, the production of independent fiction films relies on teamwork and requires bigger budgets. Since 2010, a number of profit-driven film production and distribution companies such as Heaven Pictures, Black Fin and Rediance were founded to invest in fiction films, help indie filmmakers seek for approval of censors for domestic release and submit their works to international film festivals for international circulation and distribution. It has seen a transition from independent films to arthouse films since then. Based on extensive fieldwork and interviews with filmmakers and managers of these companies, this paper will re-examine the independence of Chinese indie/arthouse fiction films, analyse how these companies balance independence and profit-making and explore the extent to which they still retain independence of their films after gaining approval from the censors. This paper aims to do a case study on Geng Jun's *Free and Easy* (2015) and *Manchurian Tiger* (2019) produced and distributed by Black Fin and Rediance and argues that these companies have transformed indie films to art films by adopting niche marketing and other practices consistent with the established field of art film production. It also argues that independent filmmaking experience as positive reputation contributes to the artistic merits of his new works.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans R. Nice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Bordwell, David. 'The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice', *Film Criticism* vol. 4, no. 1 (1979): 56-64.

Ma, Ran. "Rethinking Festival Film: Urban Generation Chinese Cinema on the Film Festival Circuit". In Dina Jordanova and Ragan Rhyne, eds. *Film Festival Yearbook 1: The Festival Circuit*. St Andrews: University of St Andrews, 2011, 116-135.

Pickowicz, Paul G. "Independently Chinese: Duan Jinchuan, Jiang Yue, and Chinese Documentary". In Paul G. Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, eds. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006, 1-20.

Lydia WU is research associate for a major UK AHRC-funded project entitled *Independent Cinema in China: State, Market and Film Culture*. She holds a PhD in film studies from Newcastle University. Her research interests include Chinese language Cinemas, Chinese independent cinema, film festival studies, and film exhibition culture with an East Asian focus.

Film Festivals and Localism in China's Contemporary Art-House Films

In recent years, many young Chinese filmmakers have decided to shoot their debut fiction features in their hometowns and home provinces. Sharing the experience of domestic or

international migration in pursuit of higher education, after graduation from universities the production of their first films turns into a homecoming. Filmmaking becomes a way to reconnect with the space preserved in memories as well as construct the cinematic image of home cities and towns.

In the 1990s Zhang Ming and Jia Zhangke also decided to set their films in their hometowns. However, in the last decade the founding of film festivals away from China's main metropolises might have contributed to revitalization of film production in provincial areas, either directly (through promotion and exhibition) or indirectly (as a reference within the film, community-building).

Through the examples of *Great Happiness* 极乐点 (2020, dir. Wang Yi'ao 王一骜) and *Best Director* 最佳导演 (2019, dir. Zhang Xian 张先), I aim to answer the question what is the relation between filmmakers' debut works and film festivals in their home provinces (FIRST International Film Festival in the case of Wang Yi'ao and Pingyao International Film Festival with regard to Zhang Xian)?

The research is located in between production, exhibition and reception studies while paying attention to the geographic aspect of film festivals and filmmaking. Firstly, I apply the notion of filmic place-making as proposed by Dennis Hwa Lo to present the process of filmmakers' imaging their home towns and cities. Secondly, the notion of a "written festival" coined by Daniel Dayan will allow me to show the way the films are presented to the public and how they are interpreted by the viewers. My main sources of data are interviews with both film directors and producers of the two titles, texts published on the two film festivals' websites and Wechat accounts, press coverage related to *Great Happiness* and *Best Director*, comments on Douban. By researching the relation between film festivals and film production on the provincial level, I hope to contribute to the discussion on the notion of localism in China's contemporary art cinema.

Maja KORBECKA is a PhD candidate in the Graduate School of East Asian Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin. Her research focuses on Chinese-language cinemas and film festival studies. She is also interested in film curatorship and different forms of film criticism such as audiovisual essays and podcasts.

The Rise of Coming-of-Age Tales in Chinese Art-House Cinema

Before the 2010s, production of Chinese arthouse films was mainly funded by filmmakers' own savings and foreign sources of funding. Since the 2010s, the Chinese film industry has provided art-house film projects with material and financial support, such as state-supported funding (eg. CFDG Young Director Support Program), or pitch and work-in-progress organised by festivals (eg. Xining FIRST International Film Festival, Shanghai International Film Festival). This has enabled producers to work independently of state-funded studios, thereby increasing domestic production of arthouse films, especially debut-features by young directors. These films display personal stories that often focus on the passage from childhood or adolescence to adulthood.

This turn towards a low-cost auteur cinema bears apparent similarities with the American New Waves that emerged following the demise of the studio system in the 1950s, and later in the 1970s. Smaller independent producers, who thus could produce films without the backing of a

major studio, introduced a new conception of cinema by placing the auteur, instead of the studio, at the centre of the creative process. Films that explore youth beyond the mainstream appeared in this context. However, while these films focus on youth resistance and rebellion, relegating adults to a position of secondary importance, Chinese youth/teens films rather deal with topics of intergenerational relationships as well as tensions around cultural and national identity. In this sense, they seem more influenced by European youth/teen movies, in particular French films that explore conflicts between generations. This suggests that Chinese youth/teen films result from various economic factors and cultural influences. This presentation proposes a first attempt of definition of youth/teen films, considering its mode of production, its main themes, and its narrative and visual features. The analysis will be based on three debut-feature films all screened for the first time in 2019: *All About ING* by Huang Zi, *Summer is the Coldest Season* by Zhou Sun, and *Wisdom Tooth* by Liang Ming.

Flora LICHAA is a French researcher on Chinese cinema. Her PhD dissertation entitled “*Documentary in China (1905-2017): Between Artistic Autonomy and Political Concerns*” received a thesis prize from the French Association of Chinese Studies. She is currently a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow at the ULB Centre for East Asian Studies (EASt) in Brussels. Her current research project focuses on art-house film production in contemporary China. She was the Director of the Shadows Chinese Independent Film Festival in Paris from 2009 to 2015, and has curated numerous screenings and lectures related to Chinese cinema in academic and cultural institutions.

Chinese Highbrow?: The Audience Construction of Chinese Art-house Cinema

The Chinese film market has now become one of the thriving markets in the global film industry, and China has become one of the crucial players in the international film business. The rising global importance of the Chinese film industry notwithstanding, industrial practices and social reception of Chinese films within China are relatively unknown to international observers. In particular, the emerging category of “art film” (*yishu dianying*)—rough equivalent of “independent film” or “art-house film” in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere—has been neglected.

As is lucidly argued by David Andrews in his book *Theorizing Art Cinemas: Foreign, Cult, Avant-Garde, and Beyond*, even in places such as Europe and the United States, where the category of “art cinemas” appears to be well-established, “film scholars had never fully thought out the term ‘art cinema’” (Andrews 2013:IX-X) Andrews continues:

Strictly speaking, then, art cinema had *no* necessary-and-sufficient conventions at the formal level. *Indeed, I don’t think it as a form at all.* A practical way of imagining art cinema is an idea of cinematic high art that has since the silent era inspired value-oriented events and value-oriented institutions as well as a multitude of aspirational forms in a multitude of context. (Andrews 2013:2; emphasis original)

A particularly interesting aspect of art film in China is that it has to be distinguished, albeit not always successfully, from more independent, and underground, films (Pickowicz and Zhang 2006) that exist outside of the purview of the state-approved film industrial system.

In the context outlined above, what kind of position “art film” occupy in the broader Chinese film market? How do filmmakers and audiences define the category? As I briefly outlined elsewhere (Nakajima Forthcoming), to fully answer these questions, we need a comprehensive, holistic approach examining various actors in production (e.g., directors, producers, production companies, funders), distribution (e.g., distribution companies), exhibition (e.g., film theaters, theater chains, various online exhibition platforms), and consumption (e.g., reception and discussion by film critics and audiences). Before moving forward with the comprehensive analysis, however, we need a close examination of each sectors, and in this paper, I focus on the role of consumers of art films in constructing the category of art-house cinema in China. More specifically, I plan to conduct qualitative content analysis of reviews posted on Douban, an Internet portal that gathers information on cultural products such as film, TV dramas, music and books.

Andrews, David. 2013. *Theorizing Art Cinemas : Foreign, Cult, Avant-Garde, and Beyond*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Baumann, Shyon. 2007. *Hollywood Highbrow: From Entertainment to Art*. Princeton University Press.

Nakajima, Seio. Forthcoming. "Marketing Art Films in Contemporary China (Tentative Title)." in *Marketing the Arts: Breaking Boundaries, 2nd Edition*, edited by F. Kerrigan and C. Preece: Routledge.

Pickowicz, Paul G. and Yingjin Zhang, eds. 2006. *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Seio NAKAJIMA teaches sociology and Asian studies at the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University. He has conducted organizational analyses of the Chinese film industry, as well as ethnographies of Chinese independent film audiences. His recent publications include: ‘Official Chinese film awards and film festivals: History, configuration and transnational Legitimation’ (*Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 2019), ‘The sociability of millennials in cyberspace: A comparative analysis of barrage subtitling in Nico Nico Douga and Bilibili’ (Frangville and Gaffric, eds. 2019), and ‘Studies of Chinese cinema in Japan’ (*Journal of Chinese Film Studies*, 2021).

Art-House Cinema in Taiwan: A Lost Continent?

In Taiwan, the box-office has always been dominated by Hollywoodian productions, the notion of arthouse cinema seems to have started first in some film reviews of the 1970s. The recognition of the films of Taiwan New Wave, supported locally by young critics back from the US helped to set the idea of arthouse cinema. Since then, Taiwanese cinema oscillates between the pressure of the film production for succès and the artistic aspiration of film directors.

This presentation will be a first overview the historical background of an idea of arthouse cinema in Taiwan. It will also be starting point of reflexion on the strategies of the arthouse film distributors. Finally, we will see how the recent pandemic changed the film distribution landscape, allowing more space to local arthouse films.

Wafa GHERMANI holds a PhD from the Université Paris 3 – La Sorbonne Nouvelle in film studies. Her PhD focused on Taiwan cinema and National Identity from the Japanese colonial period to nowadays. She currently works at the Cinémathèque française and is a curator for many festivals and Taiwan film related events, including the "Taiwan Mauvais Genre Cinema" retrospective that took place at la Cinémathèque in 2019.

Her recent contributions include the forewords of the translation of the script of *A City of Sadness* into French, "Le cinéma taiwanais : repenser la marginalité comme centralité", 《然的內在風景與性別張力：評潘壘《颱風》》 in 電影欣賞 Film Appreciation, «Exils: de la nostalgie à la reconquête du passé dans le cinéma », and she co-edited the issue : "Industries culturelles en Asie de l'Est" for *Théorème* (Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle).

Cross-Strait Collaborations: Taiwan New Cinema in Mainland Art Cinema

This paper provides a brief history of the presence and legacy of Taiwan New Cinema in mainland art cinema and the cross-Strait cinephiliac camaraderie through the lens of editor Liao Ching-Sung and composer Lim Giong, both long-term collaborators of Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Cross-Strait collaborations can be traced back to Hou Hsiao-Hsien serving as an executive producer on Zhang Yimou's *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). Taiwanese art film producers such as Chiu Fu-Sheng, Peggy Chiao, Hsu Hsiao-ming, Ruby Chen, and Patrick Mao Huang provided an escape route—the Western art film market—for Fifth Generation, Sixth Generation, and post-Sixth Generation films facing the dilemma of making state-sponsored “main melody” films or market-oriented commercial films. Instead of turning for inspiration to the Fifth Generation directors who had ultimately been co-opted by the state and the market, Sixth Generation directors Wang Xiaoshuai, Jia Zhangke, and Liu Jie embraced the poetic realism of Taiwan New Cinema, leading to their cross-Strait collaborations with Liao Ching-Sung and Lim Giong. Post-Sixth Generation directors with aspirations of making art films have sought similar transnational collaborations.

Taking my cue from Song Hwee Lim's use of soft power as a framework in looking at Taiwan New Cinema, I argue that post-2015 mainland art cinema, a niche/small cinema compared to the domestic commercial cinema in China, has aspired to insert itself in the international film festival circuit, including Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards and Xining's FIRST Film Festival, through Liao Ching-Sung's and Lim Giong's proven records of Chinese-language international art films, piggybacking on what Song Hwee Lim calls “a small cinema's global critical acclaim.” The significance of these cross-Strait collaborations lies in their transnationality, intertextuality, and political volatility marked by Chineseness, cinephilia, and changing cross-Strait relations.

Timmy Chih-Ting CHEN is Research Assistant Professor at the Academy of Film, Hong Kong Baptist University. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Hong Kong with the dissertation “In the Mood for Music: Sonic Extraterritoriality and Musical Exchange in Hong Kong Cinema” (2016). Chen has published in *A Companion to Wong Kar-wai* (Wiley Blackwell), the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, *Surveillance in Asian Cinema* (Routledge), *The Assassin* (HKU Press), and *Frames Cinema Journal*.

The “In-Betweenness” of the Film Auteur (*dianying zuozhe*)—Translocalizing the Chinese Arthouse Cinema (*yishu dianying*) vis-à-vis the Sino-Japanese Film Connections

Intersecting critical transnational cinema studies, film festival studies and Sinophone cinema studies, this project seeks to grasp the transformations of China’s arthouse cinema (*yishu dianying*) in the new millennium both discursively and infrastructurally, from the perspective of the translocal, inter-Asian flows of the Chinese “auteurist film” (*zuozhe dianying*)—specifically, it positions the Chinese film auteurs and their works within the Sino-Japanese film connections in the age of neoliberal globalism.

To build up a micro-historiography concerning the translocal, transversal dynamics of the Chinese arthouse, first, this study looks at how several Chinese independent film provocateurs such as Lou Ye, Jia Zhangke, and Wang Bing have been associated with the well-developed Japanese arthouse film network of production, circulation, and distribution since the 1990s. Leveraging the Sino-Japanese film connections as its entry point, this research suggests that the Chinese film auteurs should be positioned “in-between” the “independent cinema” and “arthouse cinema”—the “in-betweenness” not only problematizes any teleological understanding about Chinese arthouse as the institutional, commercialized variance vis-à-vis the independent film; also, I use it to rethink Chinese arthouse’ associations with the European-American institution. Furthermore, this project examines Sinophone auteurs whose recent engagements with the Japanese arthouse network has taken the format of location shooting and co-production wherein Japan’s local film festivals have played a key role facilitating such collaborations. I turn to Peng Fei’s *Chasing Her Shadow* (*youjian nailiang*, 2020)—accomplished under Kawase Naomi’s mentorship via Nara International Film Festival, it is also picked up by China’s Nationwide Alliance of Arthouse Cinemas (est. 2016) for nationwide distribution.

MA Ran is an associate professor at the international program of “Japan-in-Asia” Cultural Studies and the program of Cinema Studies (*eizogaku*), Graduate School of Humanities, Nagoya University, Japan. Her research interests include East Asian independent cinemas and film festival studies, for which topics she has published several journal articles and book chapters, including contributions to *Chinese Film Festivals: Sites of Translation* (2017) and *The Japanese Cinema Book* (British Film Institute, 2020). Currently she is working on subjective filmmaking and self-documentary in post-war Japan. Ma is the author of *Independent Filmmaking across Borders in Contemporary Asia* (Amsterdam University Press, 2019).