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Cinema and Censorship: Artistic Limitations in Chinese Cinema

Sarah Rodes

HIST 415: History of China since 1600

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## Introduction

Mere days before the anticipated release of 2017 Chinese film *Youth*, Chinese moviegoers were met with disappointment. Feng Xiaogang, a Chinese filmmaker known as the Chinese Spielberg, had already released his film in Toronto Canada. The Chinese film bureau, with little explanation canceled the film's premier mere days before its Chinese release date.<sup>1</sup> This is not an isolated case but instead relatively common. In the case of 2013 film *Django Unchained* the film was pulled minutes before its release due to "technical difficulties."<sup>2</sup> This film was released weeks later with three minutes cut out of the original according to the Hollywood Reporter.<sup>3</sup> Feng Xiaogang himself has even spoken out about the difficulty of censorship in 2013. Curtailing his words during an honors speech at the China Film Directors Guild, Xiaogang was filmed speaking out about his frustrations with censorship. Xiaogang, as quoted by *The Atlantic* states: "To get approval, I have to cut my films in a way that makes them bad. How did we all persist through it all?"<sup>4</sup> This filmed speech has since been stripped from the internet. To many artists that call themselves filmmakers, this is the political reality that affects their art. Chinese control over cinema is not a new thing but has existed throughout the entire history of Chinese film.

In the twentieth century China has gone through several large changes to political structure, cultural, and economic life. The censorship of cinema is a testament to political

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Brzeski, "China's Censors Pull Revered Director's Film Days Before Release, Outrage Industry" *Hollywood Reporter*, September 24, 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/chinas-censors-pull-revered-directors-film-days-before-release-outraging-industry-1042592/> accessed 2 December 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Brzeski.

<sup>3</sup> Brzeski.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Lu, "Chinese Film Director: 'Censorship Is Torment'" *The Atlantic*, April 8, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/china/archive/2013/04/chinese-film-director-censorship-is-torment/275114/> accessed 5 December 2022.

leadership's knowledge that art is powerful in influencing the common people. Art has the power to change minds, ignite ideas and inspire reform. This power to influence has been regulated and still is regulated in Chinese cinema. This begs the question if art is really art if it is censored. In this paper I will first address how censorship limits cinema. Does Chinese protective regulations over their own legacy produce films that are more propaganda than art, and how do directors navigate authentic storytelling in this climate. Second, I will also address what voices are being silenced in Chinese cinema. Last, I will address the struggle with producing films and finding a platform if your film does not go through the film bureau, and the limitation this creates for filmmakers trying to create authentic films about real issues. Modern Chinese filmmakers find their authenticity and artistic liberties stifled through censorship, limited voice, limited platform, and financial opportunities.

## Background

Film slowly began gaining popularity during the twentieth century. While there is debate over what film was officially first, the start of Chinese film industry is thought to have begun in 1913 with the film *The Difficult Couple* by filmmakers Zheng Zhengqiu and Zhang Shichuan.<sup>5</sup> Filmmakers stepped into the first golden age of cinema in the 1930s. Despite this golden age censorship was still a reality. The Nationalist government initiated the Central Film Censorship Committee (FCC) focusing on controlling the narrative filmmakers were producing. In their article "The Politics of Filmmaking: An Investigation of the Central Film Censorship Committee in the Mid-1930s" authors Chaoguang and Weiwei say: "The situation changed greatly after 1927. Literature and art were marked for management and control. With its wide influence upon

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<sup>5</sup> Ainhoa Marzol Aranburu, "The Film Industry in China: Past and Present," *Journal of Evolutionary Studies in Business-JESB* 2, no. 1 (January 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1344/jesb2017.1.j021> accessed 25 November 2022.

ordinary people, the film industry became the first target.”<sup>6</sup> This shows that early cinema had to deal with censorship too, and in some ways still emulates modern censorship in the content that it censors.

Some of the topics banned by the FCC were depictions of anti-traditional themes, superstitious themes, fantasy themes, martial arts themes, and any U.S. films showing Chinese in a humiliating way.<sup>7</sup> In 1949 when the government structure shifted from the Nationalist Party to the Peoples Republic of China, film fell under the ownership of the state. During the Cultural Revolution the film industry was used to promote state ideology through films that promoted different political reforms and rhetoric. This slowed artistic film making down to a trickle only resurfacing with the rise of fifth generation filmmakers.<sup>8</sup> During the Cultural Revolution the Beijing film academy was shut down, decreasing artistic films. Some of the entertainment during the Cultural Revolution came from theatrical productions such as the eight-model opera’s shaped by Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao Zedong.<sup>9</sup> While a censorship committee did not exist during the Cultural Revolution, the political pieces produced during this time were more propaganda than art.

The fifth generation surfaced in the 1980’s creating the beginning of modern Chinese cinema. Fifth generation filmmakers were called as such, because they were the fifth generation to graduate from the Beijing University of film.<sup>10</sup> This generation played with visual effects and

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<sup>6</sup> Wang Chaoguang, and Zhou Weiwei. “The Politics of Filmmaking: An Investigation of the Central Film Censorship Committee in the Mid-1930s” *Frontiers of History in China* 2, no. 3 (July 2007) 416–44. doi:10.1007/s11462-007-0022-8.

<sup>7</sup> Chaoguang, and Weiwei.

<sup>8</sup> “Censorship and Cinema: the best of Chinese underground films” *The Spectator*, originally aired 29 June 2022, on YouTube by, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCPmgc-ZVUM> TS: 2:18 – 3:07

<sup>9</sup> Tristan Shaw “The brief and scandalous film career of Madame Mao” *The China Project* ( April 5 2019) <https://thechinaproject.com/2019/04/05/the-brief-and-scandalous-film-career-of-madame-mao/>.

<sup>10</sup> Cui, Shuqin. *Women through the Lens* (University of Hawaii Press, 2003) 100.

stunning imagery. Filmmaker Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* introduced a colorful fantasy style inspired by Chinese traditional art style called Shoujuan Hua. This film inspired director Zang Yimou's *Hero* which gained popularity internationally too.<sup>11</sup> Three prolific and significant directors during this time were Feng Xiaogang, who produced many historical based films, Zang Yimou, who also gravitated towards allegories and historical themes, and Chen Kaige, who produced popular Chinese films about everyday contemporary life in China. The cinema produced by these directors defined the fifth-generation cinema.

### **Censorship in Historical Narrative**

One of the most common ways China has censored film is by controlling the narrative of what both China and international audiences see. Historic events that portray China in a bad light are severed from public discourse and the silver screen. Incidents in China's past like the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the Cultural Revolution loom among the biggest events filmmakers cannot speak of. However, filmmakers find ways to vent their historical trauma allegorically or metaphorically by representing their understandings of the past. Such was the case in Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*. *Yellow Earth* is an allegory cleverly concealed in a historical drama. While allegories and metaphors are used, filmmakers also occasionally would make bold moves to explicitly deal with taboo themes. One example of this is *Farewell my Concubine*. Filmmaker, Chen Kaige, a former red guard in his youth denounced his own father during the Cultural Revolution. In the scenes of *Farewell my Concubine*, he creates a denouncement scene that some view as an apology to his own Father.<sup>12</sup> These films negative portrayal of the

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<sup>11</sup> "Cinema Asia : China". *Films for the Humanities & Sciences (Firm)*, Films Media Group, and Off the Fence Productions, dirs. 2009. Films Media Group.

<sup>12</sup> "Censorship and Cinema: the best of Chinese underground films"

communist party and the homosexual implications of the film eventually caused it to be banned. Eventually public outcry against this decision caused the ban to be lifted. This film demonstrates the ways fifth generation filmmakers explored their own historical trauma.

In recent years, with film regulations implemented by the Ministry of Radio, Film and Television (MRFT or SARFT after 1998) releasing a film like *Farewell my Concubine* film has become increasingly harder. Banned films from the fifth-generation filmmakers include titles such as *Beijing Bicycle*, *Blue Kite*, and *The Horse Thief* among a long list. Some of these films' bans were lifted years later or chopped up till the censors were happy. *Beijing Bicycle* was banned because the streets portrayed looked shabby and dingy. Chinese censors thought this could risk China's opportunity to host the Olympics. This ban was removed in 2004. *Blue Kite* was banned along with the director Tian Zhuangzhuang who was forbidden to make films for ten years. This was due to the film's negative portrayal of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>13</sup> The list of prohibited film content includes and is not limited to themes such as harming the reputation on the state, superstition, religion, speaking of revolutionaries in a bad light, or showing anything illegal.<sup>14</sup> This is only a small sample of the rules and regulations that directors need to navigate when creating films.

Artistic cinema is not the only thing that is subject to the rules and regulations of the censors. Directors of documentaries struggle to find genuine and authentic accounts of significant Chinese historical events, due to the fear participants have in sharing their accounts. Participants who do cooperate put themselves at risk when they retell their experiences. In documentary *One Child Nation* director Wang Nanfu interviews a local official about

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<sup>13</sup> "Cinema Asia: China".

<sup>14</sup> SARFT Reiterates Film Censor Criteria. 1 April 2008, in Business Alert- China. Industry Policy, <https://info.hktdc.com/alert/cba-e0804c-2.htm>.

implementation of the one child policy. His wife yells in anger at the film director's questions encouraging her husband not to answer. She verbalizes to the filmmaker that this had better not get her husband in trouble.<sup>15</sup> This shows the hesitation Chinese citizens have with sharing experiences that may endanger their status if it paints China in anything other than in a positive light.

While the fifth generation is thought to be the beginning of artistic cinema, as time passed the censorship limited the sixth generation in films they could produce, and vagueness caused a form of self - censorship. The process grew more grueling filmmakers had to deal with endless red tape. Films released in China are limited to thirty-four slots as it stood in 2021. To be eligible for one of these envied spots filmmakers must submit the script or finished film to the Chinese film bureau. The committee will offer suggestions to revise, and the filmmaker will then edit based on these comments.<sup>16</sup> This makes the market very competitive and causes filmmakers to self-edit their own artistic choices and voices in their own cinema to pass the film bureau's approval.

### **Voices in Chinese Film**

With the voices of even the filmmakers themselves being stifled it is difficult to represent voices of the marginalized and oppressed. The heavy hand of censorship not only represses the ability of the artist to create true authentic art, but also effectively silences other

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<sup>15</sup> One Child Nation. Directed by Wang, Nanfu, and Yuanchen Liu 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Joel Timmer, "FIGHTING CHINESE CENSORSHIP OF U.S. FILMS BY DENYING FILMMAKERS U.S. GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE: An Examination of the Proposed SCRIPT Act." *UCLA Entertainment Law Review* 28, no. 1 (January 2021): 1–30. doi:10.5070/LR828153855. 7.



voices in cinema too. Two of these voices are the voices of women and queer people both silenced to through lack of representation and censorship.

Voices of women in early film predating the fifth generation was often effectively silenced through lack of proper female representation in cinema. Female representation and voice in cinema have been an issue globally since the early days of film. Women's role in society has often been projected without allowing the character in the narrative to speak for herself. An example of this can be seen in the film *Goddess* in 1934. *Goddess* depicts a woman who is a dedicated mother by day, and prostitute by night. This juxtaposition of something deemed honorable and something deemed shameful invites audiences to have sympathy for a character that seems shameful but pure of heart. In Shuqin Cui's book *Women Through the Lens* she speaks to the lack of voice of this character by saying: "Although integration of the prostitute into national discourse created a forum for social discussion, the audience was not allowed to hear the prostitutes voice."<sup>17</sup> Cui's statement that the voice of the prostitute was silenced was meant metaphorically, as the film was a silent film to begin with. The film *Goddess* used the dichotomy of a virtuous women vs a woman dishonored by scandal as way to reinforce ideas that certain roles when not justified are unredeemable. Many women find their voices censored not explicitly by film censorship, but rather with the traditional roles they are placed in with little narrative of their own. In this way Women are portrayed in a role assigning her specific traditional duties. In *Farewell My Concubine* the character Juxian, to establish her virtue, is given the role of mother and wife. To this regard Shuqin Cui states:

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<sup>17</sup> Cui, Shuqin. *Women through the Lens*. University of Hawaii Press, 2003.

But because her acceptance of the conventional roles of wife and mother stems not from self-will but from repression, she becomes a man's absolute other.

Juxian approaches these roles with such determination she comes across as a one-dimensional character.<sup>18</sup>

This establishes the silencing improper representation can do. It's also good to note that censorship can come from more places than just the Chinese government.

Another voice that is effectively silenced due to censorship is representing those of different sexual identity. This is evident in the United States film *Bohemian Rhapsody*. U.S. film industry in China is important economically to the United States. In order, however, to continue this market the United States must also adhere to censorship. What this often entails is scenes chopped out of popular films to pass Chinese censorship rules. In the case of *Bohemian Rhapsody's* release in China, the United States had to cut out parts depicting main character Freddy Mercury as gay. This included chopping any mention of his homosexuality, a kiss scene, and the revelation that he had aids.<sup>19</sup> While this is an example of censoring an American film, this also applies to Chinese cinema causing films with these themes to never be released to the public, effectively silencing the voices of differing sexuality in cinema. An example of a Chinese film that was independently produced and dodged the Chinese censors is a film by the name of *East Palace, West Palace* by director Zhang Yuan in 1996. Many films of this nature were produced independently, otherwise they wouldn't make it past the censors.

### **Limited platform and financial stability.**

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<sup>18</sup> Cui, 163.

<sup>19</sup> Timmer, 10.

As technology increased, and with the creation of DVDs the sixth generation of filmmakers found it easier to evade Chinese censorship for a while. Under the shadow market filmmakers were able to enjoy some benefits of their independent films. Through the use of movie cafes people could watch underground films. Release abroad in film festivals gave a form of financial stability for these independent filmmakers. Though not released commercially, independent filmmakers were able to do well depending on their methods. An underground market of film was created, where people could still enjoy banned films, and content was free of the SAPPRT. However, this underground form of cinema ceased with the passing of a 2017 film law. In this it subjects any filmmakers making money on films that haven't gone through the proper process a fine of five times whatever profit gained, and confiscation of the film, along with other regulations slowing down the shadow market on films.<sup>20</sup>

The understanding of this financial cost comes with the explanation of Chinese films on the silver screen vs independent films. In an interview with Chris Berry, Professor of Film Studies at Kings College London, he explains the difference between United States independent films and Chinese independent films. At the implementation of the 2017 film law<sup>21</sup> in China, independent cinema means that the film is not sent through the film bureau and cannot be released commercially in China.<sup>22</sup> This virtually means that filmmakers could make whatever they want, but it is not allowed to be released in movie theatres in China. A film that wants to be shown in movie theatres needs to go through censorship screening by the bureau first. If they want it to be released on DVD, but not commercially there is still a censorship process they need

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<sup>20</sup> "China: First Law on Film Industry Effective in March" 28 February, 2017, in Library of Congress: Law Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2017-02-28/china-first-law-on-film-industry-effective-in-march/> Accessed Dec 8 2022.

<sup>21</sup> SARFT Reiterates Film Censor Criteria.

<sup>22</sup> "Censorship and Cinema: the best of Chinese underground films" 29:30 – 30:39

to go through, just not as vigorous as it would be if it was released in movie theatres. However, many people who are pouring time and money into their film projects can't afford the possibilities of last-minute censorship. This causes the dictates of censorship to self-edit their own scripts when presented with these limited options of platform.

These limited platforms are not the only issues filmmaker's encounter. To be one of the few who make it on the silver screen, filmmakers who go through the film bureau limit their own scope of things they create to avoid the vigorous negotiation that comes with putting your film through the bureau. Self-expression is clearly repressed in this situation affecting the product itself. The prospect of creating a film that can never be released and never make a profit also is a factor that scares filmmakers into self-censoring. This combination of financial loss at rejection by the bureau has created a weird byproduct of self-censorship that limits even the most creative filmmaker. Despite these drawbacks and frustrations, Chinese filmmakers continue to navigate censorship to produce their visions of film.

## **Conclusion**

Chinese filmmakers' creative expression is limited through censorship, silenced voices, and limited platforms for showcasing their films. Filmmakers continue to make films, either by censoring themselves or navigating the frustrating battle with the film bureau. This strict censorship is discouraging for filmmakers who want to produce films about real authentic issues. The censorship on historical events also limits healing of some of these historically traumatizing events.

Even with the rise of fifth generation filmmakers providing a resurgence of artistic expression in cinema, modern filmmakers still struggle to show the world see their stories. While

filmmakers use creative means through historical, metaphorical, and allegorical methods to speak on taboo topics this still sometimes doesn't escape censorship. China's tendency to control the narrative makes one wonder how many voices are silenced who speak up. Is art still art if it's censored? Yes, while censorship can take away authenticity it also forces filmmakers to innovate in a creative way.

In the end China's censorship may frustrate and torment those navigating the system, but the creativity is not squashed. The large shift and changes throughout the twentieth century in China have demonstrated the vastly different eras and how cinema can be an outlet for this historical trauma. Filmmakers all throughout China have not escaped the scissors of the censor, but still have risen above and created artistic masterpieces. Hopefully one day Chinese filmmakers can enjoy creating films without the heavy hand of the censors.

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