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Curse of the Golden Flower

CHINA:

FILM'S SLEEPING GIANT

In 1909, Wilhelm Grube called China a sleeping giant, shackled by its Confucian past, destined to perish unless it was able to shake itself free. Within years of writing these words, China surprised the world by doing exactly this, and by growing into a modern superpower.

By Jennifer Thomé

The History

China's film industry dates back to 1896, when moving pictures, or "electrical shadows," first came to China. When cinematographers began producing popular movies in the 1920s, the form cemented its position in the culture, leading to the Chinese industry's first "golden age" – the 1930s. During this period, the Nationalists and Communists competed for the market as means of gaining influence. Later, the industry matured under Communists, though most of its product was propaganda. One non-propaganda piece from this era, *Havoc in Heaven*, became an instant classic as well as a metaphor for the havoc caused by Mao Zedong's policies (which stopped all film production during the Cultural Revolution). When film production resumed in the late 1970's, a culturally starved nation flocked to the cinema, and it was here that modern filmmaking in China began.

The first group of filmmakers to emerge at this point (known as the "fifth generation") includes some of the most famous names in Chinese cinema today: Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou. The tension in the region culminating in the incident at Tiananmen Square marked the end of this "studio" era, and that group of filmmakers was replaced by the underground and independent filmmakers who constitute the "sixth generation."

The past seems to have left Chinese cinema with an identity crisis. A good example is the public's love-hate relationship with Zhang Yimou (*Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*, *Curse of the Golden Flower*). "The poor man just can't win," comments one blogger in one of the countless discussions on Zhang's films. It's true. The Chinese care about their public face, and Zhang Yimou has been criticized for presenting China as undeveloped in his earlier films and, more recently, for failing to represent modern China, instead selling era pieces full of violence and sex, for pandering to western tastes and for focusing on winning international awards (although his producer Zhang Weiping told *Capital Culture Magazine*, "Taking part in the Oscars is not simply to win awards but is because we hope to use...the Oscar to promote Chinese films").

International recognition is undeniably important, however, especially as it can supplement one's income in a competitive market. For instance, *Kong Que (Peacock)* originally received a little over US\$6,000 from its DVD distribution company, a sum that increased 200-fold after coming home with the Berlinale's Silver Bear in hand. Any help is welcome in a system where getting one's films into cinemas often costs two thirds of one's profits even before paying the distributor, and where getting in is no guarantee of staying power. Ticket sales for *The Last Level* were fantastic for the first three days, but on the fourth not a single ticket was sold, as it was categorically kicked out by Stephen Chow's *Kung Fu Hustle*. Actors and actresses face the same predicament, explains actress Zhou Xun's manager Huang Feng, as they must maneuver a fickle market at home and at the same time consider their strategy for entering the international film market.

The Marketplace

Cindy Lin, the managing director of Infotainment China, has a formula for determining the success of Chinese films overseas: $70\%A + 30\%B = C$. "C," in this equation, is Chinese film, with "A" being the common emotions that cross over race, nationality and territory, and "B" the Chinese flavor that arouses the curiosity of the international audience.

This strategy has undoubtedly shaped the view of China in the eyes of its overseas audience, particularly the American market which, compared to the Japan and European markets, consumes only a fraction of Chinese films. In fact, director Lu Yitong points out the international audience so expects certain things of Chinese films – such as shots of Tiananmen or peasants eating noodles – that "if the film doesn't have these, it is much harder to get recognized abroad." Undeniably, the two biggest-selling elements are martial arts and era pieces. In American productions with Chinese elements (*Kill Bill, Mulan*), the demand for these elements persuaded the rewriting of Zhang Ziyi's part in *The Banquet* to include a fight scene.

Despite the fact that many Chinese audiences claim to be bored with these themes, their repetition is destined to continue for one very good reason – they sell. *The Curse of the Golden Flower* smashed Chinese box-office records with an opening weekend of 100 million yuan (close to US\$13 million). While the film was criticized incessantly, there were enough elements to bring in the numbers: curiosity, famous faces, gift tickets from companies and, most importantly, a young generation that sees movies as a way of enjoying life.

However, successes like *Curse* don't come often. Ticket prices are expensive (the equivalent of about US\$10) and there are fewer than 4,000 movie screens in China. Figuring that the average annual income is equal to US\$2,000, one can understand why the average moviegoer saves up to see a big name film or why most would rather pick up a 75-cent pirated DVD on the sidewalk outside the cinema.

Piracy

Piracy is an element that has had a definite effect on the Chinese film industry. With new releases often hitting the streets within days of hitting the big screen, investors have become more cautious. Cory Vietor, who has produced movies in China, points out that the younger generation has gone to unusual places like coal mines or telecom companies for funding. These companies see it not so much as a financial investment as status.

It is estimated that Piracy employs 4 million Chinese people, as well as being accountable for another 1.3 million jobs established in the effort to control it. Piracy has also, however, been credited with creating a new generation of talented filmmakers by enabling mass exposure to a wide variety of films. While the theater seems unaffordable, pirated movies keep the people at home entertained and out of trouble, and satisfy the viewer's desire to



Chow Yun Fat (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) and Gong Li (*Memoirs of a Geisha*) have found themselves exported into foreign productions worldwide.

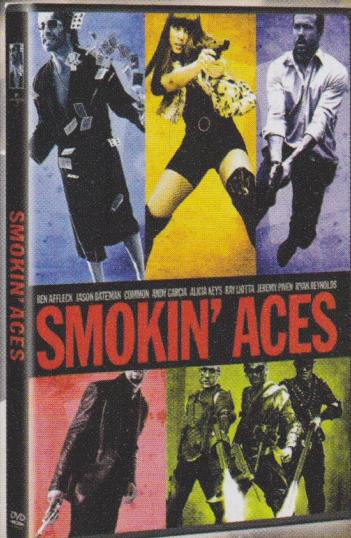
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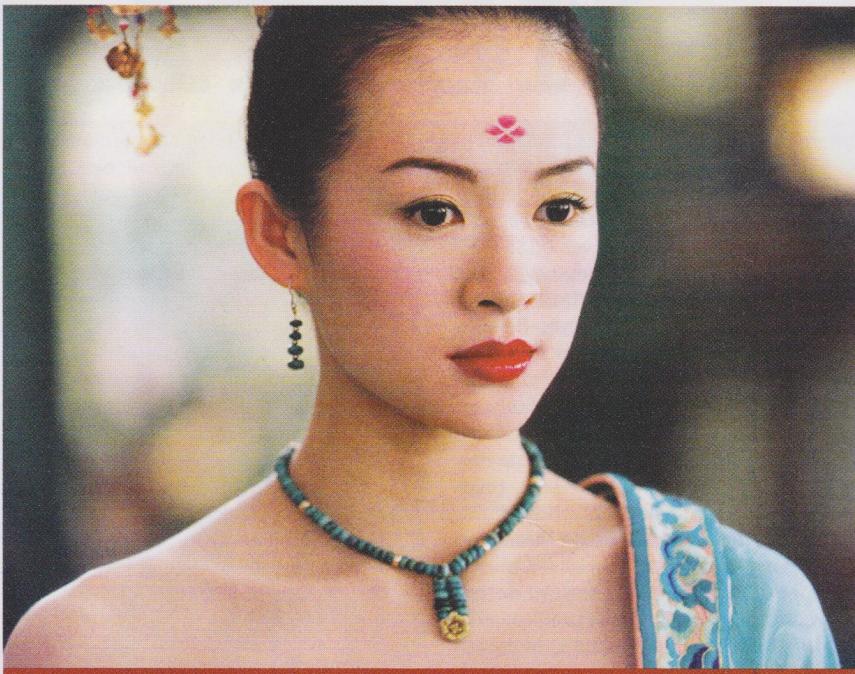


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Zhang Ziyi has starred in *The Banquet*, *Hero*, *2046*, *Memoirs of a Geisha* and *Crouching Tiger...*

experience the outside world that would otherwise be edited out of the already limited cinema experience (only 20 foreign films are allowed to be screened annually) by the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. Because of this, many young Chinese believe the government is partially to blame for piracy, and few have second thoughts about hurting the film industry, which they see as bloated and corrupt.

Wang Jing, film manager at Beautiful Spring, talked about the government's role in film production. "There are no direct laws governing the production and content of films," he said, "but there are many rules." He went on to say this has caused his generation to have a mental "pre-censorship" process before filming.

The Future

The government's policies have, however, improved over the last three years: The government no longer requires a complete script before giving permission to film, it has made permits easier to obtain, and has allowed more films to be shot. It has also become easier for co-productions to take place in China. These, in turn, have provided an inexpensive alternative for foreign filmmakers, a profitable combination for Hong Kong and Chinese filmmakers and, most importantly, a much needed outlet and tool for promoting the

acceptance of films on sensitive topics, such as the Oscar-winning *Blood of Yingzhou District*.

Today, there are more than 250,000 cameras around the capital. Government cameras, that is. It seems even they aren't quite sure what to anticipate, but one thing is sure: China will continue to change and grow, as will its film industry. Lin says that "in a healthy society, you can't only produce one type of film," and filmmakers are opening the market by finding new ways to make films. Films like *Crazy Stone*, whose low-budget production, word-of-mouth advertising and wild success seem to have breathed a new life and renewed hope into the industry.

And, although the future development of this market is unclear, one thing is certain: Grube's giant will be a force to be reckoned with. **-MPM**



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