

A Year at the Movies in The People's Republic of China

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A YEAR AT THE MOVIES

IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The scene is familiar from a million Hollywood opening nights. At this particular time and place, the world is divided into stars and lesser lights. There are those who have to queue to see the movie, and those who glide through the crowd to where the best seats in the house are reserved for them. What separates the first group of people from the mere mortals of this planet is not always obvious. Except tonight it is. **BY PATRICK WEST**

THIS is not Hollywood, and not even the USA. And those of us being ushered to our seats are hardly stars, merely teachers at the White Cloud Mountain campus of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDUFS) in Guangzhou, China – redheads, blondes and brunettes amongst all these black-haired Chinese. Our students have come from all over China to study Western languages, including English, German, Spanish and Japanese. While we have come from all over the world – France, Germany, New Zealand, Spain, Australia – to provide an international flavour to the Chinese classroom experience in this forever overcast city of eight million people: Guangzhou.

All of us are known by the honorific 'foreign expert', but our motivations for being here are as various as our nationalities. I am in town on exchange from Edith Cowan University in Perth, attracted not only by the thought of spending a year in China, but by the even more enticing prospect of being a stone's throw from Hong Kong in the year 1997: the year of the handover back to the Chinese mainland. Someone else, a pacifist Frenchman, is here in lieu of military service. Another, a German, spends his weekends trawling the markets of Guangzhou in search of medicinal compounds to stock in his doctor's practice back home. Yet another, an American, has been in these parts before, and while Asia has changed a lot since the Vietnam War, maybe he hasn't. Maybe he's just a little too eager to let people know of his past. Or maybe, to be honest, all of us here are fight-

ing our own private wars of identity, in a country that has a habit of turning one's preconceptions upside down.

The pay is nothing to write home about, even if writing home didn't require a bus trip into central Guangzhou to battle a post office whose opening hours are in inverse proportion to the number of customers milling about outside, and the almost unsolvable problem of stamps without any stick. But there are certain perks to being a 'foreign expert', chief among them being free tickets to the best seats

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in the house for the weekly, Wednesday night cinema screenings on campus. The excitement in the student body starts to stir on Thursday, grows steadily over the weekend, and by Wednesday afternoon everyone's heads – staff and students – are filled with nothing but movies.

There's time to take in our surroundings before tonight's screening com-

mences. This is no ordinary cinema. For a start, with no rake to the seating, you are forced to look up at the screen from a position of subtle submission. The architecture of the place reflects the hierarchical politics of this university setting, where the students sit docilely, two to a desk, in a classroom formation that resembles a typical Australian high school. When I was tutoring at The University of Melbourne, I sometimes used to take my students onto the South Lawn on sunny afternoons for classes. I doubt this could happen so comfortably here. Some of the young women come to class in evening gowns.

Outside is the tropical Guangdong night, but a little bit of the outside always seems to slip inside at this cinema. Unreasonably large buzzing things kamikaze into the lights, and fingers of garish green vegetation poke through the slatted shutters lining the walls. In places, some of the shutters are ajar, pushed open by peasants unwilling, or unable, to pay the price of admission. These are the people forever excluded from a seat at the movies, and from the education – passport to future riches – that the students around us are enjoying. Do they really know how privileged they are? Someone told me on my first day here that only one in 500 young people in China goes to university.

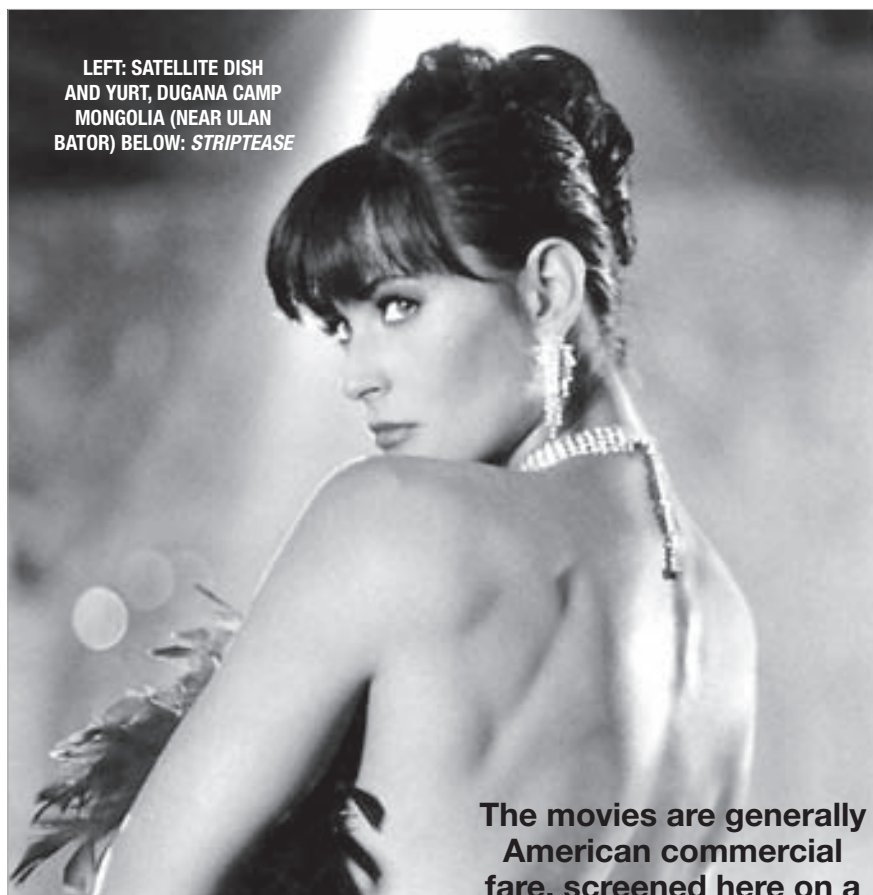
Finally the lights go down, the buzz amongst the students dies down to a whisper, and the show begins. So, what's screening tonight in this makeshift cinema? (Some nights we don't know what's going to be on even when we take our seats, given the peculiarities of the translation of the titles back into English, from their Chinese translation.) The movies are generally American commercial fare, screened here on a one-year delay from their Western release date, and tonight's is no exception. For the next two hours or so we'll be sharing this Chinese cinema with Demi Moore in *Striptease* (Andrew Bergman, 1996).

For the most part, the students are a diligent audience. In this, they differ from the audience I endured during an ill-advised trip to the cinema when visiting nearby Macau. Content to read the Chinese language subtitles, that audience happily chatted, laughed, rang friends and generally drowned out the English dialogue: it was movie as social wallpaper; movie as television in a room where no-one's really watching.

Tonight, however, the audience seems to be treating Demi Moore's antics as a lesson in English. Seriously! We can tell they are listening hard, even the weaker students, although the subtitles are always there to fall back on in linguistic emergency. And perhaps there is even in this circumstance of reception a vestige of the older function of Chinese cinema, which was to be a machine of propaganda and public service announcements. 'As propaganda for the party and state in pre-reform days,' note Hao Xiaoming and Chen Yanru, 'films were often shown free to the Chinese audience as part of the country's welfare and political education systems'.¹ As recently as the 1970s, towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, impromptu cinemas were popping up on grainy, whitewashed walls in the countryside.

The most striking lesson of the evening for us, however, is the censorship scenario played out before our eyes. We were by this time used to the laxness of the censorship regime, evident in the policing of television shows picked up (at least until the actual handover date) from Hong Kong television stations. 'Controversial' news items and the like had often run more than half their course before the screen died, and then, as if to compensate at the other end, a good part of the next 'inoffensive' story would irritatingly be blocked out. It wasn't difficult to imagine some Communist apparatchik, bored out of his mind in some dull office building somewhere, only half paying attention to his 'sacred duty'.

However, the censorship regime in our little cinema that night was much more personal and localized. In order to avoid displays of Demi Moore's 'sinful' flesh, the projectionist sped the film up every time she started to take off her clothes. Think *Striptease* was funny enough at normal



LEFT: SATELLITE DISH AND YURT, DUGANA CAMP MONGOLIA (NEAR ULAN BATOR) BELOW: *STRIPTease*

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pace? Then try it in this accelerated form. Indeed, so eager was the projectionist to perform his role with due professionalism that he several times cranked up the speed too soon, which only, of course, added to the general hilarity of the event, as he and his audience played out a daring duet of desire and the law. Perhaps, as novelists like Milan Kundera have long suggested, it is precisely in such moments that the sheer ridiculousness of censorship is laid bare (excuse the pun).

On another night, the film screening was *Up Close and Personal* (Jon Avnet, 1996). No imposed censorship this time, although the filmic quotation, between lingering close ups of Robert Redford and Michelle Pfeiffer, of that famous image of the frightened little girl fleeing the napalm destruction of her home was enough for me to exercise my own form of censorship. In short, I walked out at that point, for reasons that I can still, almost ten years on, only half explain to myself. A year in China hardly gives me the right to claim authentic insight into a world that most Westerners will never visit, but such an image of Asia used to buttress the concerns of two American movie characters struck me as patronizing of the expe-

riences of this 'other world', at best, and to put a harder edge on it, as shameful exploitation, at worst.

Funny things happen to history and identities in China through the medium of film. As well as watching a speeded-up Demi Moore, or Western images of Asia made strange by being shown in this corner of Asia, some of us ended up being on-screen ourselves. Local ad hoc production companies were always snooping around campus looking for 'foreigners' to play bit parts in Chinese commercials or in hastily shot movies. The slightly older American teacher, veteran of that first 'televised' war in Vietnam, found himself playing the same role in a Chinese war movie shot one weekend, being paid once again to fight on cue for the cameras, interweaving representations and reality. He liked working



at GDUFS because, amongst other things, it was close to the airport, and it's always good to be close to an airport in a crisis (real or imagined).

Such a 'role reversal' of history as movie-making is one aspect of what Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu refers to as the persistent 'transnationalism' of Chinese and indeed all cinema: 'In the ensuing one hundred years [since the invention of cinema in 1895], imported Western film technology has been put to indigenous use and has become an indispensable part of the social, political and cultural life of the Chinese nation'.² Extending this thought, Lu argues that 'the study of *national* cinemas must then transform into *transnational* film studies'.³ By extension, our circumstances at GDUFS as Western cinemagoers of diverse backgrounds might be read as a metaphor for Lu's notion of the transnationalism of cinema studies. I am aware, that is, that 'difference' in that mosquito-filled hall in Guangzhou was not just a matter of relations between the West and China, but also involved the relations amongst the 'foreign experts' themselves. To this extent, watching such standard-issue Hollywood fare as *Striptease* from the perspective of a transnational audience had the effect, at least, of de-hegemonizing American commercial film product. We made something of these films that wasn't, perhaps, part of them before, imposing our motley viewpoints of the 'local' upon them.

Another Wednesday evening, as a tropical storm assaulted the cinema and forced the peasants peeking through the shutters to huddle beneath enormous black capes, the film was *Jude* (Michael Winterbottom, 1996), based on Thomas Hardy's novelistic exploration of suppressed individualism. Suppressed individualism! That made for a keen discussion in our classrooms the next day about life in the People's Republic of China (PRC), and it is another example of viewer interpretations of cinema as instances of 'transnationalism'. The 'academic' argument of this paper, therefore, must include the suggestion, emerging from my own cinemagoing experiences in Guangzhou, that the myth of Western and American domination is just that, a myth. Even the preponderance of Hollywood product in what passed for the campus cinema was reworked through

the conditions of the everyday lives of our students and, indeed, through our conditions in our shared status of 'identities between cultures'.

This even extends to media beyond film. Hawkers at the on-campus market stocked a good supply of Western rock and pop CDs, with the one drawback that each disc had a 'clip' taken out of it, I assume in order to make the item supposedly unfit for sale. But sold they were, requiring careful estimations by the buyer of which track or tracks (the single or the filler junk) might be rendered unplayable – estimations, let it be said, that were not always wholly reliable. Such 'micro-economic moments' as re-workings of the production-consumption model are just another instance of the strange interplay of the local and the global that often revolves around media and entertainment forms. There are shades here of Jacques Attali's utopian political thesis in *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* that such activities as home music taping 'may create the conditions for a major discontinuity' and 'may be the essential element in a strategy for the emergence of a truly new society'⁴ – a society in which 'everything remains possible'.⁵ Pirated CDs might make us all pirates of the future.

I miss Guangzhou today, not least the Wednesday night cinema screenings, where the interest in what happened in the space off the screen more than made up for the limited nature of the on-screen product; where cinema was thrown into odd circumstances, and also thrown together with a history that, as much as it is authentically Chinese, is also and especially implicated with the history of other places.

But all of this comes back to me in my life in Australia today. For example, in the experiences of my wife, Cher Coad, who as a little girl growing up in Inner Mongolia remembers being passed over the heads of soldiers, to be put down at the front of the audience gathered before one of those makeshift outdoor cinemas, the culture of which persists in my memories of peasants peeking through the shutters of the hallways of learning, only to glimpse Demi Moore's farcical, speeded-up undressing. Professionally speaking, as a writer on film and cultural studies, my year of going to the movies in China is a vital remind-

er of the importance of remaining alert to the 'mutations of difference', wherever and whenever these are to be found, even when they lodge in the midst of apparent sameness and hegemony.

Yes, 1997, the year of my year in China, is best remembered by the world for the celebrations at the middle point of the year of the transition of Hong Kong to Chinese rule. Like everyone else, I loved those fireworks! But, for me, 1997 will always be particularly special for the experience of watching American movies in a cinema about as far from America as it is possible to get, while surrounded by Westerners of many nationalities, and by Chinese students dutifully learning the languages of the West and, all the more for doing so, contributing to the stock of the transnational history of China and Chinese cinema. China and its cinema have been transnational from the very beginning, and the strangeness of that strange country is ultimately the strangeness within ourselves. This is a principle worth recalling, from time to time, in our professional lives as cinemaphiles as much as in our lives of personal relations with others.

I would like to thank Cher Coad and Xin Guan for their generosity in sharing with me their personal experiences of Chinese cinema-going. I, however, am solely responsible for any shortcomings in this article.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Hao Xiaoming and Chen Yanru, 'The Chinese Cinema in the Reform Era,' *Journal of Popular Film and Culture*, 28.1, Spring, 2000.
- ² Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (ed.), *Transnational Chinese Cinema: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1997, p.2.
- ³ *ibid.*, p.25.
- ⁴ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p.133.
- ⁵ *ibid.*, p.148.