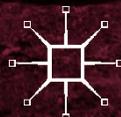


EAST ASIAN POPULAR CULTURE

The Poetics of Chinese Cinema

EDITED BY **GARY BETTINSON**
& **JAMES UDDEN**



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The Poetics of Chinese Cinema

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Introduction: The Poetics of Chinese Cinema

Gary Bettinson

From Russian Formalism and Prague Structuralism to neoformalism and cognitivism, the poetics approach to cinema has crucially advanced the study of popular film—and yet poetics has occupied a relatively marginal place in the study of Chinese-language cinema. Since the 1980s, Cultural Studies perspectives have dominated the field, and the *art* of Chinese cinema has fallen afoul of critical neglect. It is precisely the artistic dimension of movies that poetics—the major research program to which this book subscribes—seeks to illuminate. As schematized by David Bordwell,¹ a poetics of cinema encompasses analytical inquiry (examining a film’s visual and aural style, narrative construction, and thematic expression), historical explication (tracing patterns of artistic continuity and change over time), and spectatorial theorizing (offering an account of the interface between a film’s compositional features and the viewer’s activity). This program has been fruitfully adopted in recent years by scholars of Hollywood cinema,² in ways that enrich our understanding of Hollywood’s stylistic traditions. If we are to achieve a comparable grasp of Chinese cinema—a category encompassing the cinemas of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—then we need to usher in a poetics of Chinese-language cinema. Such is the purview of this book.

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Why is a poetics of *Chinese* cinema important? For critics of a culturalist stripe, Chinese cinema gains much of its interest by reference to social upheavals (e.g. the Cultural Revolution [PRC], the 1997 handover [Hong Kong], or the lifting of martial law [Taiwan]). Chinese films acquire salience for the culturalist by embodying such cultural landmarks. But by analyzing the films in “top-down” fashion, the culturalist subordinates a film’s aesthetic qualities to an a priori conceptual scheme; thus the film’s stylistic construction is of interest only insofar as it reflects or embodies sociological meaning. Poetics inverts this critical emphasis, such that the poetician examines the artwork from the “bottom up”—hence, the critic’s point of departure is not a broad sociological premise but “the principled regularities of form and style we can find in the films” (Bordwell 2001: 9). If existing scholarship on Chinese cinema has overwhelmingly prioritized aspects of culture and society, the poetics approach enables us to put the films themselves at center stage.

This is not to disdain culturalist research, or to deny that culture and society shape filmic construction in important ways. Indeed, culturalism and poetics are not mutually exclusive paradigms; it is feasible, for instance, that a film’s formal design can be usefully elucidated by reference to the social milieu from which it springs. But a film’s compositional features are not wholly determined by cultural factors. Other kinds of factors—technological, industrial, economic, artistic—may be at least as important as social cataclysms in shaping the finished work, and a poetics of Chinese cinema can bring these factors to light. Proceeding from the bottom up, the poetician examines the film’s formal and stylistic patterns, and then asks “what real-world activities could plausibly play causal roles in creating them” (Bordwell 2001 : 9). Without dismissing cultural concerns, poetics puts formal analysis at the heart of inquiry. As such, it shifts the field of Chinese cinema studies toward fundamental yet hitherto neglected or marginalized areas of research. Moreover, it provides new insights that are compatible with already existing studies of Chinese cinema.

At the same time, however, a poetics approach can redress many of the fallacies and misconceptions in the literature. One enduring fallacy is the essentialist notion of a distinctively “Chinese” film style, typically characterized by extended takes, distanced framings, and an alternatively sumptuous or austere emphasis on natural landscape. This characterization, I surmise, is chiefly informed by the Fifth Generation films of Mainland China, whose international profile in the 1980s and 1990s greatly shaped Western perceptions of Chinese-language cinema. Yet the notion of a

quintessentially Chinese film language falters on several fronts. For one thing, it fails to distinguish among the cinemas of the three Chinas, each of which fostered quite distinct aesthetic programs (e.g. meditative editing is hardly a hallmark of Hong Kong's popular cinema). Nor does it acknowledge the stylistic pluralism within each of the cinemas: a Mainland industry that produces both the chintzy *Tiny Times 3.0* and the formally elliptical *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (both 2014) thwarts assumptions of a monolithic Chinese film style. The poetics perspective compels us to treat skeptically such univocal notions of national style and enables us to lay bare, by means of formal analysis, the aesthetic eclecticism of Chinese cinema.

One might counter that the increasing integration of China's movie industries makes prospects for a dominant national style tenable. Whereas the three cinemas had once largely developed on separate tracks, the Mainland's economic rise has borne witness to a surge in pan-Chinese collaborations and Asian talent migrating across Chinese borders. As pan-Chinese coproductions multiply, we might ask: are the cinemas of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China still distinguishable as separate entities? Perhaps a homogenous Chinese aesthetic emerges in this burgeoning joint venture trend, a trend whereby PRC, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese filmmaking coalesces. Yet to argue that these Chinese coproductions evince a national style, one would need to show that they are stylistically of a piece, and this is no straightforward task. *The Grandmaster* (HK-China, 2013), *The Rooftop* (Taiwan-China, 2013), *Love in the Buff* (HK-China, 2012), *Ip Man* (HK-China, 2008), *Red Cliff* (China-HK-Taiwan, 2008), *Kung Fu Hustle* (HK-China, 2004)—which of these coproductions exemplifies Chinese film style? One might reply that they *all* embody a Chinese film aesthetic, but, given the aesthetic diversity on display even in this small sample of films, the concept of a "Chinese national style" becomes baggy, imprecise, and uninformative. Still, a poetics of cinema can bring to light recurring norms shared by some or most of these films; it can determine the extent to which those norms are culturally unique; and it can seek causal explanations for these norms, for instance, by tracing their repetition to practices standardized within the Chinese coproduction system.

The perspective of poetics lets us amend another essentialist fallacy, often tacit in the literature and much discussed in the filmmaking community. This fallacy holds that Chinese storytelling—its norms of narrative plotting, its schemas of visual narration, and, fundamentally, the kinds of stories it elects to tell—does not communicate cross-culturally

to mass audiences in Western territories. (Hence, the efforts by Western distributors, such as The Weinstein Company, to render Chinese imports “accessible” by means of extensive reediting, expository intertiting, and other simplifying strategies.) Yet this view neglects salient counterexamples, including *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *Hero* (2002), *Infernal Affairs* (2002), and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), all of which found commercial success in the West. Worse, it recycles an Orientalist stereotype of Chinese opacity and inscrutability. If we are to demonstrate the cross-cultural intelligibility of Chinese cinema—and here we alight on the terrain of spectatorial poetics—then we would do well to undertake what Bordwell (2001) calls a “transcultural” comparison of Chinese and Western storytelling strategies. We might, for instance, identify transculturally shared stylistic patterns in a Chinese and a Hollywood movie of the same genre, the better to isolate those textual schemas familiar to and comprehended by culturally diverse audiences. In such ways, the poetician can qualify (or disqualify) the cultural essentialism that underlies widely held assumptions about Chinese storytelling and spectatorship.

Poetics can highlight aspects of Chinese cinema neglected in the literature. Slighted by the prevailing sociological hermeneutics is the precise nature of Chinese film practice, the *variety* of craft practices within and among the three Chinas, and the ways in which standardized work routines shape the Chinese film’s style and form. Under what production circumstances are Chinese films typically made? What institutional and economic constraints shape the finished work? What are the characteristic modes of production, and how have they changed over time? These are phenomena about which culturalism has had little to say, but a historical poetics of Chinese cinema can posit, at a broad level, both the institutional factors governing Chinese film production and the systematic craft techniques and traditions that underpin Chinese film style. These broad principles, in turn, constitute a ground of conventions against which the exceptional or maverick case—for instance, the aleatory work habits of Wong Kar-wai—stand out as legitimately distinctive.

Researching habitual practices and institutional norms may also enhance our understanding of different modes of production. The Sino-US coproduction model, for instance, has intensified in recent years, but precisely how this model is constituted remains opaque. (Indeed, there is no uniform coproduction strategy, but several available partnership options.) As the North American film market shrinks and the Mainland market

blossoms, American studios court PRC producers for collaborations and a greater share of the foreign film quota. Consequently, a flurry of official Sino-US movies has emerged in recent years, and altered the landscape of Chinese film production—titles include *The Karate Kid* (2010), *Looper* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014), *Furious 7* (2015), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: The Green Legend* (2016), *Kung Fu Panda 3* (2016), and *The Great Wall* (2016). By contrasting Mainland Chinese and Hollywood institutional norms and working situations, and by examining the formal features of Sino-US films, a poetics approach is best placed to account for the synergies, as well as the points of tension or incoherence, characterizing both the various coproduction systems and the films they beget. Most generally, the formal properties of a Chinese-language film—no matter its mode of production—can be causally explicated, at least in part, by the institutional, economic, and practical specificities of its production.

Culturalists prioritize social reflection exegesis, but there may be other influences bearing on the work besides social ones. Moreover, these influences may inform the film's aesthetic more directly than, say, the Tiananmen massacre, the lifting of martial law, or the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis. A poetics of Chinese cinema—by operating historically, comparatively, and from the bottom up—can expose the pertinent sources from which the work draws, explicating intertextual precursors (e.g. the preexisting filmic styles to which a particular Chinese film is indebted) or cross-media ones (e.g. the influence of landscape painting on Chinese filmmakers' pictorial design). The transcultural dimension of poetics, meanwhile, can shed light on international as well as pan-Asian influences (e.g. Bordwell [2001] proposes that Chinese-language cinemas adopted Hollywood's continuity system as a stylistic point of departure). The poetician's standard set of heuristic devices—the tool of average shot length (ASL), the Formalist concepts of norms, deviations, and backgrounds—is apt to reveal the intercultural flow of cinematic influence and innovation. Further, transcultural analysis acquires additional importance in light of Hollywood's appropriation of Chinese movies. American remakes such as *The Departed* (2006), *The Eye* (2008), and *Tortilla Soup* (2001) invite stylistic comparison with their Chinese-language sources (respectively, *Infernal Affairs*; *The Eye*, 2002; and *Eat Drink Man Woman*, 1994). Likewise, Chinese remakes of American movies—*A Woman, a Gun, and a Noodle Shop*, 2009 (*Blood Simple*, 1984), *Connected*, 2008 (*Cellular*, 2004),

What Women Want (2011/2000), *Bride Wars* (2015/2009)—demand comparative analysis. As the remake trend flourishes, the poetician is provided neat opportunities to discover not only patterns of innovation and indebtedness but also—contrary to the cultural essentialist position limned above—stylistic and narrative schemas that are readily grasped across cultures.

The value of poetics for the study of Chinese cinema obtains, too, in this research program's historical dimension. Though the existing literature contains historical discoveries of enduring import, the heritage of Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese cinemas is far from fully chronicled. The limited availability of certain Chinese films, some of which languish in archives, or lack subtitle tracks, has stymied the progress of Western historians. Many early Chinese-language films have not survived; some that existed may never have been documented. Still today, it is a matter of debate as to when Hong Kong filmmaking began. A historical poetics of Chinese cinema won't resurrect lost films, but its formalist emphasis on historical backgrounds—one aspect of which involves viewing particular films against other related films—encourages scholars to go beyond the canon, examine less familiar artworks, and thereby “fill in” historical lacunas in the literature. Not that the poetician's task is simply to spotlight neglected or forgotten movies. Rather, by charting the development of stylistic norms over time, the poetician can reveal patterns of continuity and change, identify innovations, and mount historical comparisons with other national cinemas (as well as among those of the three Chinas). In such ways, the poetics program makes an important contribution to the historiography of Chinese film.

Perhaps above all, poetics brings us to a clearer understanding and appreciation of the art of Chinese cinema. By placing questions of form and style at the center of inquiry, poetics undercuts the culturalist assumption that a film's interest inheres chiefly in its manifestation of social anxieties and crises. The poetics approach allows us to contextualize Chinese cinema's relation to international film style, laying bare those transcultural artistic conventions on which popular storytelling and cross-cultural comprehension rely. It also allows us to recognize and celebrate the originality of Chinese filmmaking. A poetics can facilitate fine-grained distinctions among the three Chinese cinemas; it can foreground stylistic novelty; and it can shine a light on boundary-pushing films and filmmakers. Not least, it reminds us that Chinese cinema has fostered artistic traditions to match any on the international stage.

POETICS AND PRECEDENTS

The Poetics of Chinese Cinema is the first book to treat Taiwanese, Mainland Chinese, and Hong Kong filmmaking from a poetics perspective. Nevertheless, it builds on a small but seminal body of work. No scholar has contributed more to a poetics of Chinese-language cinema than David Bordwell—indeed, he mapped its terrain. Across a host of publications, Bordwell has mounted historical and theoretical analyses of filmic construction within each of the three Chinese cinemas. He has explored King Hu’s “aesthetic of the glimpse” (2002), tracing Hu’s abbreviated combat scenes to pertinent stylistic traditions and revealing the ingenuity with which the director recasts inherited schemas. He has scrutinized the nuanced staging strategies of Hou Hsiao-hsien, and the laconic gunplay sequences of Johnnie To (2005, 2003). He has examined the house style of the Shaw Brothers film studio and compared the action genre traditions of Hollywood and Hong Kong (2009, 2001a). And he has provided blog commentaries on influential figures such as Ann Hui, Li Han-hsiang, Jia Zhangke, Fei Mu, Wong Kar-wai, and Tsai Ming-liang.³ This body of literature pursues and exemplifies, in various ways, Bordwell’s transcultural poetics of Chinese cinema.⁴

Most extensively, Bordwell has furnished a historical poetics of Hong Kong film. In *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (2000, 2011), he posits a tradition of popular filmmaking typified by a set of (more or less stable) institutional practices, generic conventions, and norms of story and style. At various levels of generality, he details the local, regional, and international contexts for Hong Kong film production and consumption; the modes of film practice and the customary craft habits adopted by local filmmakers; the indigenous “norms of genre, stars, stories, and style” (17); and the ways that these general forces impinge on the films themselves. He alights on striking cases, dwelling on notable films (*Chungking Express*, 1994), directors (John Woo, Tsui Hark), and stars (Bruce Lee). And he crystallizes a set of tendencies peculiar to Hong Kong films, such as episodic plotting, tonal ruptures, pictorial legibility, postsynchronized sound, and sentimentality. At the same time, the Hollywood continuity style serves as a ground of (transcultural) comparison against which the popular Hong Kong movie stands out in relief. Bordwell’s enterprise also harbors an empirical dimension: the book’s theses are buttressed by primary interviews with Hong Kong personnel working at all levels of the industry. By investigating how

Hong Kong films are designed, Bordwell ventures into the territory of actual film production—territory seldom approached by cultural theorists. As such, he provides fresh knowledge and opens up new areas of investigation, unavailable (or at least untapped) in the culturalist program.

In recent years, other scholars have pursued a poetics of Chinese-language cinema. James Udden's *No Man an Island: The Cinema of Hou Hsiao-hsien* (2009) charts Hou's unlikely rise from a moderately popular director in Taiwan's fading commercial industry to one of the most venerated auteurs on the international festival circuit. Udden traces Hou's stylistic and thematic tendencies, now crystallized as authorial traits, to a peculiar confluence of historical factors in 1980s Taiwan. He also critiques the widespread ascription of quintessential "Chineseness" to Hou's aesthetic style, disparaging such views as uncritical and politically problematic. Similarly, in *The Sensuous Cinema of Wong Kar-wai: Film Poetics and the Aesthetic of Disturbance* (2014), I take issue with the dominant approach to Wong Kar-wai's oeuvre—in this case, culturalist criticism—and mount a poetics analysis of Wong's sumptuous yet challenging audio-visual style. This analysis demonstrates that an aesthetic of sensuousness and "disturbance" permeates every dimension of Wong's films, from plotting and characterization to narrational strategy and genre engagement. Emilie Yeh, meanwhile, has investigated both Hou and Wong from the perspective of poetics, sketching the narrative and visual tendencies of the former and the musical practice of the latter (Yeh 2005, 2008). Elsewhere, scholars have gestured toward a poetics of performance.⁵ Mette Hjort (2010), for instance, tracks the performative behavior of Mainland star Ruan Lingyu throughout several scenes from *The Goddess* (1934), effectively demonstrating how Ruan's studied activity works in concert with filmic parameters of editing and cinematography to create meaning and elicit emotion.

Despite these interventions, however, the research program of poetics—as brought to bear on Chinese-language cinema—is in its infant stage. Few scholars explicitly mount a poetics of Chinese film. The present volume, then, is intended as a step further in the development of this research tradition, as well as a fresh perspective within the field of Chinese cinema studies.

AVENUES OF INVESTIGATION

The chapters in this anthology demonstrate the coherence of the poetics program, but they also suggest the variety of directions that a poetics of Chinese cinema might take. Though the chapters are unified by historically