

Chinese Cinemas of Self-Determination: Impacts of Films on Anti-Imperialism and Nationalism

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Abstract. Modern China witnesses a plethora of anti-imperialist and postcolonial themed films, which, in contrary from the former artistic medium, benefitted from evolving cinematic technologies that allow more rapid distribution of information. Consequently, such genre of films triggered multifaceted social impacts across the Sinophones. The late-nineteenth-century semi-colonial China, marked by a profound power imbalance with colonizers, incited widespread public outrage and introspection. With the introduction of cinematic industries in China in the 1920s, filmmakers seamlessly integrated anti-colonial and progressive ideologies into their screenplay, venturing to galvanize Chinese citizens for decolonization and self-determination. Due to the infusion of political rhetoric in films, the medium continuously evoked and prompted the Chinese populace, exerting a monumental influence on Chinese anti-colonial and anti-imperialist pursuits. The activeness of such genres in the present-day Chinese entertainment industry reflects their incremental incorporation into a modern Chinese identity, centering on postcolonial reflections. Accordingly, the author will explore anti-imperialist films from the fledgling Chinese film industry to their recurrent presence in contemporary Chinese cinema, which contributed to the shaping of a postcolonial Chinese identity.

Keywords: film; colonialism; decolonization; self-determination.

1. Introduction

As China, during the Qing dynasty, experienced a series of internal conflicts and imperialist warfare, including the Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion, the nation gradually declined to a semi-colony with its “national dignity” being “humiliatingly affronted [1]”. Imperiled nationhood and loss of regional sovereignties induced greater imperialist interest in the Chinese market, with nations including the United Kingdom, France, and Japan expanding their sphere of influence in the Chinese territories. While China witnessed an influx of foreign powers harming its authority, Chinese citizens also experienced various uncomfortable encounters with their presence. In 1919, the Huangpu Public Garden in the Shanghai International Settlement, for instance, specified that “Chinese and dogs [were] not allowed to enter for recreation”, which was interpreted by the Chinese as highly offensive due to the juxtaposition [2]. Although the imperialist presence in China heightened tensions between the Chinese and foreigners, increased international trade spurred economic growth in port cities and, subsequently, introduced novel technologies that brought recreation, including films and song recordings. In light of these developments, films entered China and a fledgling Chinese film industry slowly emerged, with local productions beginning to feed the Chinese cinema in the late 1920s.

Even before the abundance of early Chinese cinematic artworks, writers and film critics were already concerned with the international image of China portrayed by film productions worldwide. During the early 20th century, the concept of Yellow Peril prevailed in the West, advocating for the potential threat Asia could impose upon the Western countries. In addition, immigration happened after the opening of Chinese borders and seafaring with the Treaty of Nanjing also triggered intensive xenophobia towards the overseas Chinese populations. Consequently, Asian actors mostly acted in derogative, marginal roles in Western films. Likewise, characters associated with Asian ethnicities were also frequently portrayed as villainous, which imagined the villainization of Asian cultures. The Shanghai Film Association responded in 1930 to the 1924 American film *The Thief of Bagdad* with mixed feelings. It stated, “The character of the Mongolian prince in *The Thief of Bagdad* had terrible acting that could precipitate negative impressions in audiences without rich knowledge of the East

[3]”. Like the early film reviewers, as the nascent Chinese cinema continued to develop, film producers and actors began intentionally incorporating elements associated with progressive ideas, advocating decolonization, self-determination, and nationalism.

This article investigates the earlier Chinese cinematic art progressions, centering the impact of films on Chinese decolonization and postcolonial feelings, as the memory of imperialism continued to theme productions from the 1920s to the present-day Sinophone. The first section will expound on Chinese notions associated with national independence and earlier development in the entertainment industry culturally and technologically. Subsequently, the paper will discuss various films associated with progressive messages including social injustice and power imbalance brought by imperialism, with an attempt to mobilize those feelings into war efforts during the Second World War in China. The last section will examine the influence of films on decolonization across the Sinophones, focusing on how producers manipulated the postcolonial sentiments into political support for their then-major events. Eventually, the paper will conclude with the contemporary embodiments of the desire for self-determination, with their lasting existence in the modern Chinese cinema.

2. The Emergence of Chinese Cinemas and Film Cultures

2.1. Early Cinematic Development in China

Early cinematic development in China, most of them in Shanghai, was heavily influenced by years of liberal and progressive cultural movements that happened after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912. In an age of chaotic political and military factions, Chinese cultural revival prevailed and peaked in the 1919 May Fourth Movement during the Paris Peace Conference, when the Chinese population worldwide strived for decolonization, attempting to facilitate the Wilsonian Fourteen Points; namely, point five on an “absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims” concerning “sovereignty [in] the interests of the [local] populations [4]”. During this demonstration, Chinese people, mainly students and intellectuals, protested the decision to transfer control of the Chinese province of Shandong from Germany to Japan, fearing a Japanese attack. The movement facilitated the spread of progressive and liberal ideologies in China, which contributed to the emerging Chinese local film productions [5]. Early Chinese films embraced such ideals and communicated messages of modernity to the audiences. One of the earliest Chinese films, *A String of Pearls*, for instance, encompassed feminism and modern marriages and communicated shifting gender roles in the 1920s middle-class Shanghainese family structures [6]. Nevertheless, mainstream movies during the 1920s remained apolitical. Although few of the Chinese 1920s films had serious discussions of society and politics, it was not until the 1930s that the May Fourth spirit majorly struck the film industry. From 1931 to 1932, Japan occupied Manchuria and attacked Shanghai, which, like the May Fourth Movement, again triggered a national alarm. With those incidents, film producers during the 1930s aimed to incorporate political ideologies into film plots. Liberalism and nationalism immediately predominated in the 1930s films, when films often contained messages of mobilizing the Chinese populace for war relief and efforts.

China, during its semi-colonial ages, was never fully colonized, nor was China controlled by a single imperialist power. Rather, China retained nominal sovereignty over a vast amount of its territories under foreign influence. In the Shanghai International Settlement (1863-1943), for example, American and British nationals had consular jurisdiction and extraterritorialities, as was agreed after a series of treaties after the Second Opium War. Nonetheless, China still had sovereignty over this territory. The power imbalance on Chinese lands, together with an influx of imported Western products into the Chinese market, usually caused uneasiness and apprehension among Chinese citizens. Consequently, following the incessant Japanese attack on China during the 1930s, anti-imperialist and nationalist ideals were preponderated. As sentiments incarnated into screenplays, 1930s films usually spread a zeal of patriotism against invasions and foreign influences.

2.2. Anti-imperialist Longings and Films for Self-Determination

An abundance of anti-imperialist films appeared, starring some of the then-most popular actors. One of such films was *Little Toys* (1933). Sun Yu, a Chinese director who once participated in the May Fourth Movement, and he incorporated his political ideology into *Little Toys*. The film's protagonists, Sister Ye and Pearl, are mother and daughter. They were toy manufacturers during a time when foreign merchandise flooded the Chinese toy market. With Chinese military factions fighting, Sister Ye and Pearl traveled to Shanghai to design new toys and became successful artisans. Eventually, when the Japanese soldiers attacked Shanghai on January 28, 1932, Sister Ye and Pearl contributed to the war effort by working in the Red Cross Society until the Japanese soldiers bombed their ambulance and killed Pearl. A year later, when the war resumed, Sister Ye began mobilizing and asking passers-by around her to contribute to the war effort again, and the film ended with people clapping at her speech to save China [7].

Little Toys reflected the heavy attention on spreading anti-imperialist, nationalist ideals in China. To start, the cast used some of the most popular actors in China, including Ruan Lingyu and Li Lili, which reflected that the film producers attached great importance to the ideologies of decolonization in Manchuria (as the film happened after the 1931 Japanese occupation in Manchuria and 1932 assault on Shanghai) and self-determination (in the embodiment of supporting Chinese instead of imported foreign toys/manufactures). The message of the film called for greater public attention to territorial integrity and local industries. Similarly, people's approval of Sister Ye's speech by the end of the movie also manifested that *Little Toys* strived to mobilize the audiences in support of Chinese efforts to preserve national security in the face of military aggression and political, and economic power imbalance in the market. Therefore, the film producers forewarned and agitated the audiences with the impending danger of losing sovereignty.

Another film that exhibited similar ideals was the 1933 film *Three Modern Women*. Also shot after the 1932 Shanghai Incident and starring Ruan, the film discussed the shifting gender roles of women in China while continuing to advertise war efforts. The plot centered on three women: Chen Ruoying spent all her time in love; Yu Yu spent all her time socializing; and Zhou Shuzhen actively participated in politics in the hope of bettering society. The three women fell in love with the same man Zhang Yu, but Zhang eventually courted Zhou because of her progressive thoughts.

The movie criticized the former two and praised the latter. According to the plot, Zhou Shuzhen escaped Manchuria to Shanghai after the Mukden Incident, following which Japan conquered Manchuria and made the colony its puppet state Manchukuo. Zhou Shuzhen worked as a telephone operator until her participation in a strike caused a dismissal. Nevertheless, Zhou was the only woman among the three who had a happy ending, supporting the by then newly introduced feminist ideals in China [8]. Like *Little Toys*, *Three Modern Women* also explicitly portrayed war and colonization. As the movie suggested, Chinese people needed to be aware of politics and the impaired national independence. The producers specifically made the three women protagonists of the plot and advocated that, regardless of gender, people should address their national perils and stop entertaining themselves.

Similarly, *The Big Road* (1935), another film directed by Sun Yu, communicated a comparable message with different storylines. The screenplay described the ordeal which six highway construction workers underwent for building a road for the Chinese war effort against foreign aggression. As the workers faced a bribed, traitorous landlord who wanted to sabotage the road, they were captured. Although one of them died during the escape, the remaining workers built the road. Once they finished, they were bombarded by Japanese planes; nevertheless, trucks of soldiers started using the road, shipping people to defend against invasions [9]. The essential message of *The Big Road* resembled those of *Little Toys* and *Three Modern Women*: they asked the Chinese nationals to contribute to the war effort and be involved in national defense. The movie also criticized traitors and conveyed hope of expelling invaders to the masses.

The three mentioned propaganda films all exhibited messages of protecting Chinese nationhood. Considering that China adopted a "non-resistance policy" towards the Japanese invasion of

Manchuria, such films better exemplified the emotions among film producers in political Chinese cinematic history. Those films could also be seen as a way of criticizing the inaction of Chinese military forces when facing the belligerents in Manchuria. Films like *Little Toys*, *Three Modern Women*, and *The Big Road* characterized the yearning for full national independence during the 1930s. Emphasizing the struggles China faced during the 1930s, Chinese cinemas facilitated an earlier attempt to excite public opinion, thereby paving the way to the century-long journey of fully shedding China of imperialist influences.

3. Anti-Colonial Films in the Sinophones

3.1. Expressions in the Wartime Cinema

Unlike other countries, such as India or Algeria, where the political entity was mostly controlled by a single force, Chinese decolonization, due to the scattered imperialist behaviors across the nation, happened more gradually. From the first modern colony in the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing to the most recent 1999 Transfer of Sovereignty over Macau and the present-day colonial legacies within Chinese territories, reasserting Chinese sovereignty over lands was a continuous process through various fashions, such as wars and diplomacies. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, after China and Japan openly fought in the Marco Polo Bridge Incident (1937), the non-resistance policy no longer existed in the Chinese government. With the fall of Nanjing in December 1937, China relocated its wartime capital to Chongqing, where pro-war propaganda films became widely produced to further mobilize the already strong public indignation over the Second Sino-Japanese War. Wartime Chinese cinemas featured comparatively more zealous and direct indignation over the trembling Chinese nationhood, galvanizing civilians to contribute at the home front. Such films, to a greater extent, shaped philosophies of and desires for self-determination among Chinese citizens. To acquire more resources in the hope of winning, the wartime Chinese government supported the making and distribution of propaganda films on its territories. Although, during this period, productions were numerous, they nonetheless communicated a general message that all Chinese nationals should try their best to resist invasions.

Before 1941, the Shanghai International Settlement remained moderately independent from Japanese control. Many filmmakers who worked in this region continued their film productions. Although Chinese film producers could not directly convey their anti-imperialist opinions through screenplays, they began filming traditional Chinese stories with allusions to denounce the Japanese conquest and promote Chinese nationalism. One such example was the 1939 film *Mulan Joins the Army*. The plot followed the traditional Chinese folklore of Mulan, a Chinese woman who disguised herself as a man fighting in the army against foreign invasions so that her father would not have to die on the battlefield. However, in the 1939 version, the film staff emphasized the idea of foreign invasion, alluding to their current circumstance in Shanghai [10]. Films like *Mulan Joins the Army* were sometimes used to counter the Japanese propaganda films when Japanese-controlled film corporations advertised for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, a concept in which Asian countries would be liberated from Western controls under the Japanese leadership. The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere was also a propaganda slogan Japan used to minimize local resistance. During wartime, film became a powerful tool to control public opinions between both the Chinese and Japanese sides.

3.2. Impacts and Postcolonial Sentiments in Contemporary Sinophone Cinemas

As World War II came to an end in 1945 and Chinese territories largely resumed peace after 1950, mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong all produced a large number of movies, music videos, and television series in remembrance of the pre-1945 struggles China experienced.

3.2.1 Mainland China

In mainland China, postcolonial films were widespread in genres and topics. Since 1949, due to the prevalence of Communist ideology in mainland politics, China actively participated in the Cold War and many military confrontations. Therefore, unlike other Sinophone regions, mainland cinematography served more directly to elicit popular support for its political campaigns. Such campaigns gradually evolved into the present-day TV series; a genre so popular that it received overwhelmingly popular acceptance in the Chinese entertainment industry. The continuity of cinema advertising for self-determination, nevertheless, reflected a progressing postcolonial feeling from supporting mainland politics to a newly shaped national identity, incorporating memories of the colonial past.

In 1947, the United States adopted the foreign policy of containment, as described by John F. Kennan, “designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world [11]”. Communist China, during the early 1950s, was an ally of the Soviet Union. With the American anti-communist political approach of containment, Sino-American relations worsened in the mainland immediately, and they had a major military confrontation from October 1950 in the Korean War. After July 27, 1953, when the boundary between North Korea and South Korea was established under the Korean War Armistic Agreement, China created films, commending the Chinese war efforts on the Korean Peninsula. One of the most well-known films of this kind was *Battle on Shangganling Mountain* (1956), which acclaimed the endurance of Chinese soldiers when fighting against the American soldiers in the Battle of Triangle Hill [12]. The film premiere, on December 1, 1956, happened with the progression of the Cold War and after the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations, when Chinese Communist leaders disputed over destalinization in the Soviet Union. At this particular time, the movie served to stabilize popular support in the mainland toward the Chinese Communist Party during a turbulent time, by reminding Chinese citizens of the hardships China underwent for national independence. Subsequently, by antagonizing the United States, the mainland Chinese government could also witness continual support to serve the Chinese political plan during the Cold War. The film described the American military activity in the Korean peninsula as imperialism; thereby, the film producers again elicited anti-imperialist feelings among Chinese mainlanders to support their government campaigns.

Productions with such themes were recurrent with an evolving postcolonial sentiment that became assimilated into modern Chinese culture. In 1989, China and Japan collaborated on the Fuji Television movie *Sayonara Ri Kōran*, based on the life story of Yamaguchi Yoshiko. The movies depicted the life of Yamaguchi, a Japanese singer and actress who grew up in Japanese-occupied Manchuria and later worked for Japanese propaganda films in China. After the war, she regretted her behavior and became a politician in the Japanese parliament to better the post-war Sino-Japanese relations [13]. The film was a mutual reflection on the Second Sino-Japanese War, which exhibited a progressively more open-minded and accepting postcolonial viewpoint in mainland China with shared, serious thinking over the imperialist past.

Such ideologies lasted to contemporary China, with incessantly arising commercial TV series portraying the colonial period. This cinematography was so abundant that Chinese cinemas even created a separate genre known as the “Sino-Japanese War shows”. Such popularity also exhibited a continual topic usage and repeated thinking of Chinese mainlanders of the pre-1945 period. The active appearance of such topics in Chinese films and the incorporation of new elements also embodied a more embracing and reiterative component of postcolonial sentiments in modern Chinese identities, based on reflections on breaking free from the imperialist hegemony during colonial ages.

3.2.2 Taiwan

Following the Chinese Nationalist Party’s retreat to Taiwan in 1949 against the Chinese Communist Party, the Nationalist authorities imposed martial law in Taiwan from 1949 to 1987, when artistic productions experienced censorship. During this era, productions that supported the Chinese

Nationalist Party rule or the memory of mainland China were greatly preferred for distributing propaganda and communicating political messages. Similarly, as filming technologies became more developed, films became widely produced, and artists usually created videos for their songs. Subsequently, Mandopop artists in Taiwan sang numerous pro-Nationalist or pro-China lyrics, aiming to popularize the regime in re-conquering mainland China. One of the tactics of propaganda films was reminding the Taiwanese of the colonial and imperialist era - before and during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Likewise, the island of Taiwan itself was a Japanese colony since the First Sino-Japanese War (1895). Postcolonial feelings in Taiwan, consequently, centered heavily on the stories against Japan during the Second Sino-Japanese War, which, to China, was a hard-won battle triggering heavy sentiments. The Taiwanese authorities, subsequently, manipulated the postcolonial and anti-imperialist feelings to maintain popular support for their martial law after the major diplomatic failure in 1971, when the Taiwanese politicians could not hold power in the United Nations anymore. From 1974 to 2011, Taiwanese artists generated a sequence of productions on the National Revolutionary Army storylines during the Second World War.

Propaganda productions in Taiwan peaked during the 1970s and 1980s, when “the General Assembly [of the United Nations] ... decide[d]... to expel forthwith the representatives of Chiang Kai-shek from... the United Nations [14]”. A typical movie was the 1974 *Everlasting Glory*. The movie portrayed the story of Gen. Cheng Tsu-chung, who sacrificed his life to defend China against Japanese invasions [15]. The screenplay of those propagandas was usually straightforward, attempting to espouse patriotism. A more recent propaganda production was the 2011 television series *Soldier*. Much like the 1970s films, the TV series began with the Chinese Gen. Zhang Zizhong during the Second Sino-Japanese War; then, the series followed the Nationalist soldiers during the Chinese Civil War; and the production finished with the modern Taiwanese military forces [16]. Nonetheless, the romantic portrayals of military life had the same aim. That is to say, they want military contributions from the Taiwanese. In Taiwan, all the qualified males needed to experience conscription. Therefore, such idealized and heroic portrayals of military services in television dramas and films might serve the purpose of building popularity and reducing a sense of resistance to this activity.

Songs and music videos also contributed to this ideology. A representative song of this kind was the 1982 song “I Am Chinese” by the famous Taiwanese singer Fong Fei-fei. This poignantly affectionate patriotic song, like films of this genre, also described the Second World War. The lyrics repeatedly reiterated the phrase “I am Chinese”, which also served to endorse the Nationalist policies in Taiwan [17]. Similarly, with the popularization of televisions in Taiwan, performances also became televised, including nationalist songs. Another example was in 1994, when the Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng performed to entertain the Taiwanese army, and the show was in broadcast. In the performance, Teresa Teng sang the 1937 “The Great Wall Ballad”, which described the suffering of Manchurians under the Japanese invasion. Before the performance, she specifically stressed that her parents were Chinese mainlanders who fled to Taiwan after 1949, and she wanted to remind the Taiwanese of the ununified China [18].

Much like the Chinese Nationalist Party’s motive and martial law to serve the Chinese Civil War, the development of cinematic culture in Taiwan followed the same pattern. As the politicians realized the growing power of film cultures, they utilized the force to direct public opinions and carry out the politics. Unlike the traditional books or telegraphs which took relatively heavier expenses and longer time to transmit, the growing film and television industry proved a more efficient tool in communicating ideologies. Thereby, the Taiwanese officials used the postcolonial feelings in cinematic productions to gain popular support during the latter twentieth century. The anti-colonial and anti-imperialist sentiments often represented with aims to cement its claim to sustain the Chinese Civil War, martial law, and, after the abolition, their legacies in the early twenty-first century.

3.2.3 Hong Kong

Different from mainland China or Taiwan, Hong Kong’s sovereignty belonged to the United Kingdom before 1997. With intimate connections with mainland China and Taiwan, and a shared cultural legacy of imperialism and the Second Sino-Japanese War, Hong Kong cinemas, consequently,

generated films of similar themes. However, these productions were more utilized to corroborate a Hongkongers' recognition of Chinese identity and attract the popularity of the 1997 transfer of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to China.

Before the knowledge of the 1997 return, influential Hongkonger actors already intentionally incorporated postcolonial thoughts in their films. For instance, Bruce Lee acted in many productions that stressed a Chinese identity sometimes in colonial settings. One of the most famous scenes alluded to the Huangpu Public Garden in the Shanghai International Settlement, where the park specified "no dogs and Chinese allowed". Interpreted as a humiliation of Chinese nationals in Shanghai, Lee punched the nearby foreign insulters and broke the sign, after which he was escorted away by the Chinese passerby [19]. The allusion to the colonial experience exhibited other postcolonial feelings from the film producers, aiming to break free from colonial control and social inequality in Chinese territories. The movie used heroism, featuring Lee's character in the plot, to publicize resistance towards power imbalance and strive for self-determination.

Productions of this kind existed in Hong Kong but peaked after the 1982-84 political negotiations between Deng Xiaoping and Margaret Thatcher when the Sino-British Joint Declaration was settled in Beijing on the 1997 return of Hong Kong. The treaty triggered immense uncertainties among the Hongkongers, as the established political structures and ideologies were vastly different. Regardless, many famous actors performed and distributed pro-Chinese productions, to some extent appeasing the worrying unsureness of the impending return to China. Following the Chinese intention and diplomatic action for negotiation started in January 1982, Television Broadcasts Limited in Hong Kong prepared the production of the TV series *Love and Passion*, which, like the then mainlander and Taiwanese propaganda films, also emphasized the Second Sino-Japanese War and proudness of a Chinese identity. The overall plot described a romantic story revolving around three families from the 1920s to the Second Sino-Japanese War. Nevertheless, the name of one song in the TV series was "Be a Brave Chinese [20]". The lyrics further strengthened the awareness of a Chinese identity during the Sino-British discussion over the sovereignty of Hong Kong.

Unlike mainland China or Taiwan, post-1945 anti-colonial films mostly featured a reflection on the spirit to challenge colonial control over China, as illustrated by Bruce Lee's films. The post-1982 films, on the other hand, used the politics over Hong Kong's sovereignty to attract attention and audience ratings. Nevertheless, such productions featured a reiteration of the intricate connection between British Hong Kong and China, which paved the way for a smoother acceptance of the region after 1997.

4. Summary

The socio-political cinematic history in China varied across different times and places in the twentieth century with the progression of events happening across the Greater China region. The evolution of the 20th-century Chinese cinemas embodied a reflection of China's obstinate quest for complete nationhood and self-determination. Regardless of public or private commercial sectors, their cinematic productions engaged in varying depths of introspection concerning topics of decolonization and self-determination. Although the intention for such artistic creations varied among regions and politics, they nonetheless described intense, persisting postcolonial feelings in China, which people reflected in different fashions for their aims, functioning as propaganda for the three regions to direct their domestic affairs and cultures based on the yesteryear foreign aggression and power imbalance.

This research investigated the impact of films on Chinese decolonization and existing postcolonial sentiments in modern Chinese cinema. To start, the paper discusses the background of Chinese cinema and an embryonic yearning for complete nationhood in the first section. Topics of the films represented the earlier progressive thoughts in China until the 1930s: Japan's invasion of Manchuria and attack on Shanghai alerted the Chinese population, with filmmakers incorporating direct references to colonization and imperialism to apprise the audiences of the war and elicit war contributions. During the period of active warfare since 1937, Chinese cinema composed more

unmediated propaganda films to attract effort from the home front. These topics perpetuated into post-WWII China when authorities and civilians from each region continued to generate films and art productions to champion their regional policies. This enduring theme persisted and thrived in modern Chinese cinema, which exemplified an integration of postcolonial cognizance in contemporary Chinese identity with the enduring struggle for and contemplations on nationhood and cultural independence.

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