
An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema 1896 - 1937

By Chris Berry

By Zhang Zhen
University of Chicago Press, 2005

It is invidious to have to pick one book when there are so many great books out there. So, first, my apologies to everyone else writing in my field of Chinese Cinema Studies. But Zhang Zhen's *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) is the watershed book for me. When I read it, the penny dropped that things had changed, and in a number of ways. First, it showed that you could study cinema even if most of the relevant films had not survived. Second, that possibility brought home that the days of understanding cinema-as-text were over. Third, the sheer quality of the scholarship made me see that research conditions had taken a great leap forward - to coin a phrase - and we were in an era of new possibilities.

Zhang's book examines Chinese cinema before 1937, when the eight-year war with Japan, which had been bubbling up for a while, finally broke out. People had already written about the so-called Left Wing cinema movement of the 1930s, canonized after 1949. But the very low survival rate of films from the earliest days of Chinese cinema had the earlier period off limits. *An Amorous History* used magazines, posters, diaries and various other materials to write the history that had seemed off limits.

By taking this approach, Zhang's book joined the move away from understanding cinema as a collection of texts and towards seeing cinema as culture. In the case of *An Amorous History*, Zhang effectively argued for the "vernacular modernism" approach pioneered by her mentor at University of Chicago, Miriam Hansen. Understanding cinema as culture seems to me a much more important shift than the ontological fuss over celluloid versus digital and the question of the indexical. Indeed, looking at cinema as a culture rather than as a technology or a material form brackets the importance of those issues and reorients our attention away from questions of essence and towards power relations and social practices again.

Finally, as soon as I started reading *An Amorous History*, I realized this kind of work could not have been done even fifteen years earlier, when I began working on my doctoral thesis. At that time, it took me almost two

years to gain any effective access to the China Film Archive. Although there is hardly a full ethos of public access in the People's Republic of China today, a variety of libraries and archives there, as well as in Hong Kong and Taiwan, are available now. Furthermore, as someone working in an educational culture that imposes arbitrary but rigid completion times on doctoral theses - four years maximum - the magisterial sweep, the incredible detail, and the overall richness of *An Amorous History* bore witness to a golden age of scholarship in the leading universities of the United States, where relatively long term projects can be and are sustained today in a way that was much more difficult before and does not exist elsewhere. Chinese cinema scholarship has been elevated to a whole new level, and *An Amorous History* marked the point where that became visible to me.