Inhabiting Other Lives: Self and Other: Contemporary Chinese Cinema

IDH 2003
Section 51
Class Number 81307
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Thursdays, 2:00 – 4:45 pm
Academic One, room 194 (auditorium)

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This Honors seminar, Inhabiting Other Lives: Self and Other: Contemporary Chinese Cinema, will expose you to issues of human commonality and diversity, and invite you to investigate and to understand the interconnectedness of another culture, time and set of life experiences. In particular, the course will introduce you to contemporary Chinese cinema.

One of the joys of watching Chinese movies is that they open up a new world of exotic traditions; amazing settings; fascinating architecture; strange costumes, objects, and people; and customs you’ve never heard of. You see different moments in China’s cultural history. You read subtitles and listen to the sounds of a language you don’t speak. You get to observe people behaving under extremely different circumstances but acting a lot like you (http://worldfilm.about.com/library/films/brraisetheredlantern.htm).

We will screen at least a dozen films representative of the internationally acclaimed new Chinese cinema. These films from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are in Chinese and subtitled in English. I hope they will help you
better understand this non-Western culture’s history, politics, economy, society, and aesthetic conventions in different decades of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. You will get a sense of China’s struggle to modernize and its attempt to redefine the relationship between individual and society.

This is not a film appreciation course; nor is it a survey of modern Chinese history—although it comprises both of those elements. Rather, we will use the films as starting points for engaging larger topics, such as self and other, gender relations, family, centuries-old tradition versus modernity, feudalism, the strategies of filmmakers in dealing with state censorship, individual versus state, Maoism, post-Maoism, the impact of the Cultural Revolution, concubinage, dining etiquette, diaspora, Chinese opera, gay China, censorship, treatment of children, contemporary Chinese filmmaking, and attempts at defining “Orientalism” or “Chineseness,” among many others. In short, what is Chineseness in the filmic imagination? Who are these people and how are they similar to or different from us Westerners?

In addition to viewing films, we will screen several excellent documentaries that provide a socio-historical context. There will also be guest lecturers—Chinese FIU faculty who have lived under Mao and after Mao, and who can give us insight into the world’s most populous country as it races to prepare for the Beijing Olympics of 2008.

**COURSE OBJECTIVES**

- Learn how a society other than your own addresses human needs and concerns
- Develop an understanding of a non-Western culture’s traditions, beliefs, and values
- Interpret patterns of behavior reflecting values and attitudes of the society
- Develop an understanding of key historical concepts: periodicization, change, continuity, conflict, and complexity
- Develop an understanding of China’s diverse geography and environment
- Develop an understanding of the ways in which culture, gender, and class affect individual and collective identities and experiences
- Develop an understanding of pre-modern and modern Chinese political ideas, institutions, personalities, struggles, and conflicts
• Develop an understanding of political, economic, social and cultural institutions and organizations created by the Chinese
• Learn of beliefs, sentiments, values and issues that unite and divide the Chinese people
• Understand complex relationships between the working poor, middle class society, and the elite, and the role of the Chinese government in the evolution of these complex social relationships
• Acquire a taste for foreign--or at least Chinese--films

TEXTS: I will provide you with a free course packet.

COURSE METHODS
• Film screenings
• Lecture
• Discussion and analysis
• Student critical questions and active participation in discussion
• Library database and Internet research
• Oral presentations
• Formal writing assignments

COURSE REQUIREMENTS
• View all films in class and perhaps out of class
• View documentaries out of class
• Attend all classes
• Actively participate in class discussions
• Submit all work on time

GRADING
• Quiz on China: A Century of Revolution . . . . 10%
• Class participation . . . . . . 20%
• Journal . . . . . . 30%
• Major Project TBA. . . . . . . 40%
COURSE POLICIES

Attendance
Class attendance is mandatory. Exceptions will, of course, be made for illnesses, emergencies, and religious holidays. Excessive absences will result in a lower grade.

Tardiness
Please come to class on time and stay for the entire time. Exceptions will, of course, be made for illnesses, emergencies, and religious holidays. Excessive tardiness will result in a lower grade.

Late Work
Please submit work on time. Exceptions will, of course, be made for illnesses, emergencies, and religious holidays. Excessive late submissions will result in a lower grade.

Academic Integrity
This course adheres to all Honors College and general University rules and regulations regarding academic integrity, by which is meant don’t plagiarize or cheat.

Modification of Syllabus
I retain the right to modify the course syllabus for any reason throughout the semester provided that (1) fair and adequate notice is given to enrolled students either by email or in writing, (2) modifications to the syllabus are not arbitrary or capricious, and (3) students are not unfairly disadvantaged by mid-semester changes to grading standards, attendance standards, or performance measure.
FILMS to be SCREENED
(I may add or delete a film depending upon time, availability, and class interest)

Beijing Bicycle (Shi qi sui de dan che) (China/Taiwan, 2001)
Directed by Wang Xiaoshuai. Just as Guai, a bicycle messenger, makes his final payment for the silver mountain bike loaned by his company, he finds it stolen. After endless searching, Guai discovers his bicycle is now in the hands of Jian, who bought the bicycle with stolen money. Though Guai and Jian finally work out a deal, they find themselves on an unexpected journey of self-discovery. 113 min

The Blue Kite (Lan Feng Cheng) (China, Hong Kong, 1993)
Directed by Tian Zhuangzhuang. “Banned in China, where the director was under close government scrutiny for making the film ‘without permission,’ this film is the most acclaimed and controversial of all of the films to come out of the new Chinese cinema. Told from the perspective of a young boy, Tietou, it traces the fate of a Beijing family and their neighbors as they experience the political and social upheavals in 1950s and 1960s China. Tietou’s parents, a librarian and school teacher, both loyal communist party members, soon learn that even the most innocent criticisms can be interpreted by the party as imperialist propaganda. Over the next 15 years, Tietou observes the adverse effects of party policy on various members of his family. The only image of hope and freedom offered in the film is a blue kite given by his father which he later passes on to the next generation.” 138 min

Chungking Express (Chung-ching sen lin) (Hong Kong, 1994)
Directed by Wong Kar-Wai. Two intertwined romantic tales take place inside the Chung-ching high-rise shopping center in downtown Hong Kong: A policeman falls in love with a snack bar waitress while a house detective gets involved with a female drug dealer. 104 min

Comrades, Almost a Love Story (Tian mi mi) (Hong Kong, 1996)
Directed by Peter Chan. A young woman and a young man (who is engaged to a girl in his hometown) each come to Hong Kong to pursue success. At first perfect strangers, they grow emotionally close as they share trials and joys in their lonesome struggle in an unfamiliar world.
Their individual dreams and ambitions, however, force them to eventually take separate paths in their lives. 116 min.

**Eat Drink Man Woman (Yinshi nan nu)** (Taiwan, USA, 1994)
Directed by Ang Lee. A retired master chef and widower is worried about the future of his three unmarried daughters, who are skeptical about marriage. Yet he himself surprises them with his secret love affair. 124 min.

**Farewell My Concubine (Ba Wang Bie Ji)** (China, Hong Kong 1993)
Directed by Kaige Chen. “Critically acclaimed as one of the best Chinese films, this seductive, award-winning triumph is the compelling tale of two lifelong friends unexpectedly caught in a passionate love triangle with the woman who comes between them. Packed with vivid, provocative imagery throughout, this is a sensual story of love and betrayal.” 157 min

**Happy Times (Xingfu Shiguang)**
Directed by Zhang Yimou (China, 2001)
“Zhao is an aging bachelor who hasn’t been lucky in love. Thinking he has finally met the woman of his dreams, Zhao leads her to believe he is wealthy and agrees to a wedding far beyond his means. Zhao’s best friend Li hatches the idea to raise the money by refurbishing an abandoned bus, which they will rent out by the hour--the Happy Times Hotel--to young couples starved for privacy. Unfortunately, this plan goes awry because Zhao is too old fashioned to allow the couples to leave the bus door closed. Meanwhile, Zhao’s fiancée introduces him to her spoiled son and beautiful blind stepdaughter Wu Ying, whom she sees as a burden. To be rid of the girl, she insists that Zhao take her to the Happy Times, a hotel, and give her a job. Zhao reluctantly agrees, then creates a series of deceptions to keep the girl occupied, including setting her up as a masseuse and enlisting his friends to pretend to be her customers. Everything that is happening between Zhao and Wu is superficially about trickery, but gradually a very real empathy grows between the young woman and the old man.”
Hero (Ying xiong) (Hong Kong, 2002)  
Directed by Zhang Yimou. “The Kingdom of Qin obsessed with conquering all of China had long been the target of assassins throughout the other six states. No matter how hard the King tried, it seemed impossible for him to defeat the three legendary assassins, Broken Sword, Flying Snow, and Sky. Suddenly, an enigmatic hero, Nameless, comes to the palace bearing the legendary weapons of the slain assassins to the King and tells his extraordinary tale sitting only ten paces from the King.”  
93 min

House of Flying Daggers (Shi mian mai fu) (Hong Kong, 2004)  
Directed by Zhang Yimou. “During the reign of the Tang dynasty in China, a secret organization called "The House of the Flying Daggers" rises and opposes the government. Leo is a police officer who sends officer Jin to investigate a young dancer named Mei, claiming that she has ties to the "Flying Daggers" organization. Leo ends up arresting Mei, only to have Jin break her free in a plot to gain her trust and lead the police to the new leader of the secret organization. But things are far more complicated than they seem.” 115 min.

In the Mood for Love (Hua yang nian hua) (France, Hong Kong, 2000)  
Directed by Wong Kar-Wai. “A man and a woman move into neighboring Hong Kong apartments and form a bond when they suspect both their spouses of extra-marital activities in this masterful evocation of romantic longing and fleeting moments in time.” 98 min.

Joy Luck Club (US, 1993)  
Directed by Wayne Wang  
“Through a series of flashbacks, four young Chinese women born in America and their respective mothers born in feudal China, explore their past. This search will help them understand their difficult mother/daughter relationships.”

Ju Dou (China, Japan, 1991)  
Directed by Zhang Yi-Mou and Yang Feng-liang. “The abused wife of a sadistic Chinese mill owner and his overworked nephew fall in love. Only murder could free the lovers from the mill owner's tyranny- or could it?” 98 min.
King of Masks (Bian Lian) (China 1999)
Directed by Wu Tian-Ming
“Wang Bianlian is an aging street performer known as the King of Masks for his mastery of Sichuan Change Art. His wife left him with an infant son over 30 years ago. The son died from illness at age 10. This left Wang a melancholy loner aching for a male descendent to learn his rare and dying art. A famous master performer of the Sichuan Opera offers to bring him into his act, thus giving Wang fame and possible fortune, but Wang opts for staying the simple street performer. Then, one night after a performance, he is sold a young boy by a slave trader posing as the boy’s parent. "Grandpa" finds new joy in life as he plans to teach "Doggie" (an affectionate term often used for young children in China) his art. All is well until Doggie is found out to really be a girl.”

The Last Emperor (US 1987)
Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci.
“A dramatic history of Pu Yi, the last of the Emperors of China, from his lofty birth and brief reign in the Forbidden City, the object of worship by half a billion people; through his abdication, his decline and dissolute lifestyle; his exploitation by the invading Japanese, and finally to his obscure existence as just another peasant worker in the People’s Republic.”

Not One Less (Yi ge dou bu neng shao) (China, 1999)
Directed by Zhang Yimou. “A young woman is ordered to a remote Chinese village to be a substitute teacher. Barely older than her students, the shy girl is charged with keeping the class intact for one month or she won’t be paid. When one of her students disappears into the city to find work, the stubborn teacher is determined to follow the boy and bring him back to school. Once in the city, her simple peasant pleas fall on deaf ears, and only when the local television sympathizes does her search bear fruit.” 106 min.

Pushing Hands (Tui shou) (Taiwan, 1991)
Directed by Ang Lee. “A tai-chi master and widower moves from Beijing to a New York suburb to live with his only son. With a daughter-in-law who has no use for him and an ever-changing society, problems quickly arise. He is forced to call upon his tai-chi teachings and its "pushing
hands” to give him the balance needed to survive in this poignant and comic tale.”

Raise the Red Lantern (Da Hong Deng Long Gao Gao Gua) (China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, 1991)
Directed by Zhang Yi-Mou. “In a sweeping and magnificent tale of passion, aspiration, dreams, and desire set in 1920s China, 19-year-old Songlian has become fourth wife to the wealthy Chen. Yet she must share her husband with his three existing wives. Each wife has her own house on the estate, and each must wait until dusk for the arrival of a red lantern. Where the lantern is carried signifies which wife the master will sleep with that night. The lantern brings with it privileges none of the wives will sacrifice without a fight. When Songlian discovers that the other wives manipulate and cheat their way to win the red lantern, she decides to join in the fight for Chen’s attention. A battle of wills commences that can only bring misfortune to all concerned.” 125 min.

Red Sorghum (Hong gao liang) (China, 1987)
Directed by Zhang Yimou. “The most popular of the Chinese New Wave, this is one of the most beautiful films of recent years. Beginning as a lusty romantic comedy about a nervous bride’s arrival and ensuing seduction at a remote winery, and ending as a heroic and harrowing drama of partisan resistance during the Japanese occupation, the film builds to a spell-binding, explosive climax. This film is a gorgeous fable that will sweep you along with its mixture of violent action, epic lyricism, and tongue-in-cheek swagger reminiscent of Leone and Kurosawa.” 91 min.

The Road Home (Wo de fu qin mu qin) (China, 1999)
Directed by Zhang Yimou. As a son helps his mother arrange for the burial of his father in the traditional Chinese custom of his mother’s village, the beautiful and touching story of his parent’s courtship unfolds. His father was from the city and came to his mother’s village to become the schoolmaster. In the days of arranged marriages, the son discovers that his parent’s marriage was the first marriage based on love. 89 min.

Shower (Xi zao) (China, 1999)
Directed by Zhang Yang. “Mistakenly believing his father has passed away, a bathhouse master’s son returns home and soon discovers the magic of the family business and its importance to the community.” 94 min.
**Springtime in a Small Town (Xiao Cheng Zhi Chun)** (China, 2002)
Directed by Tian Zhuangzhuang. “A lovingly crafted remake of a 1940s classic, *Springtime* explores a love triangle in a provincial town the year after war has ended with Japan. The eight-year marriage of Dai Liyan and Yuwen left them both unfilled and distant. An unexpected visitor arrives from Shanghai, a smartly dressed doctor called Zhang Zichen. He’s an old schoolfriend of Dai Liyan and unbeknownst to her husband, Yuwen’s childhood sweetheart. Delighted to be reacquainted with Zhang, the husband believes that his cultivated guest would be a suitable match for his wife’s lively schoolgirl sister. In turn, Yuwen believes that her former flame could be the solution to her own unhappiness. Elegantly shot in long takes and tracking shots, this is a tightly controlled tale of thwarted desires.”

**The Story of Qui Ju (Qiu Ju da guan si)** (China, Hong Kong, 1992)
Directed by Yi-mou Zhang. “Chinese star Gong Li gives a luminous performance as Qiu Ju, a stoic peasant woman who demands an apology when her husband is kicked in the groin by the village chief. But the chief is a proud man who refuses to apologize, sending Qiu Jun on a futile trek through the complicated Chinese court system. From her small village to a nearby city and finally to the large and impersonal district court, here is a universal battle against bureaucracy and indifference.”100 min.

**To Live (Huo zhe)** (China, Hong Kong, 1994)
Directed by Zhang Yimou, Bin Wang, Xleochun Zhang. “This movie is about the life of a married couple: their fortunes, rise and fall. The film has powerful symbolic and metaphoric connotations. In a smoky gambling den in 1940s China, a drunken young man runs through his family’s fortune, losing their ancestral home and all their possessions. This staggering loss proves to be their salvation…and the first step in a thrilling odyssey of survival that will take them through war and revolution, love and loss, tragedy…and triumph. Through the terrors of China’s civil war, the passions of the communist takeover, the betrayals of Mao’s Great Leap Forward, and the tragic mistakes of the Cultural Revolution, their lives unfold across four decades of momentous change…bound by love, driven by strengths of the human spirit, and touched more than once by the hand of fate.”
Vive l'Amour (Ai qing wan sui) (Taiwan, 1994)
Directed by Tsai Ming-Liang. “Drama without dialog takes place in Taipei, Taiwan, where a strange love triangle develops between a chic, seductive real estate agent, a street merchant and a shy, gay man who spies on the couple’s trysts.” 118 min.

Wedding Banquet (Hsi yen) (Taiwan, USA, 1993)
Directed by Ang Lee. “A comedy about the relationship between a gay Asian American and his Taiwanese parents. In New York, the Taiwanese half of the gay couple hopes to end his parents' matchmaking by announcing that he’s engaged. What he doesn’t count on is that they’ll fly in to meet the bride and plan the nuptials.” 109 min.

Xiu Xiu: The Sent Down Girl (Tian Yu) (China, Hong Kong, USA, 1998)
Directed by Joan Chen. “Between 1967 and 1976, nearly 8 million Chinese youths were "sent down" for specialized training to the remotest corners of the country. The young and beautiful Xiu Xiu dreamt of becoming a horse trainer in Tibet, far away from her busy city home. Her training begins in the isolated plains of Tibet but slowly Xiu Xiu discovers that she is unlikely to ever see her home again without a wealthy sponsor. Her world becomes a horrifying cage, where "patrons" promise her escape in exchange for her sexual compromise.” 100 min.

Yellow Earth (Huang tu ti) (China, 1984)
Directed by Chen Kaige. “One of the debut films of the Chinese New Wave of cinema, this film is a haunting, evocative film set in the barren wilderness of Northern Shaanxi Province in spring 1939. The life of a fourteen-year-old peasant girl is changed forever by the arrival of Gu Qing, a communist soldier who has been sent out to collect folk songs for the use of revolutionary armies. As the young Cui Qiao slowly falls in love with the soldier, she learns from him that she does not have to remain bound to her lonely, traditional life. Inspired into action, she flees from her arranged marriage and escapes across the great Yellow River. This film was created by two of China’s most celebrated young film makers, Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou.”
Yi Yi: A One and a Two (Taiwan, Japan, 1999)
Directed by Edward Yang. “This story follows the individual lives of the Jian family: N.J. Jian, his wife Min-Min, and their two kids, who share their Taipei apartment with Min-Min’s elderly mother. Due to many circumstances, the entire family is forced to re-evaluate who they are and what their lives have become.” 173 min.

DOCUMENTARIES to be SCREENED outside of CLASS
(I may add or delete documentaries depending upon time, availability, and class interest)

Written, Produced, and Directed by Sue Williams

“This powerful program takes a remarkable first-hand look at China’s tumultuous history, examining its social, political and cultural upheaval through eyewitness accounts, rare archival film footage and insightful commentary.

Part One: China in Revolution. This part begins in 1911 with the fall of the last emperor and continues through 1949, highlighting four decades of civil war, foreign invasion and the ascension of rival leaders Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek. Rarely seen photos and film footage—among the earliest ever recorded in China—reveal fascinating details of a long-censored history. Hear the facts and meet the people who experienced modern China’s most violent era.

Part Two: The Mao Years. From the beginning of his rule to his death in 1976, Mao Zedong and his colleagues attempted to forge a new China from a country mired in poverty and devastated by decades of war. Yet the Mao years would bring the new People’s Republic of China little stability. Rare interviews with Communist Part members and ordinary citizens involved with history’s largest political experiment, reveal the turbulence, famine, violent campaigns and purges which destroyed the lives of more than one hundred million people.

Part Three: Born Under the Flag. This part begins with Mao’s death in 1976, continues with the new leadership of Den Xiaoping, and concludes with the struggle of China’s paradoxical goals of economic prosperity and absolute Communist Party control. In the short span of 15 years, China
transformed itself into a never-before-seen hybrid of communism and capitalism. And although it has become the second largest economy in the world, the price has been high. Rare interviews and film footage highlight the Democracy Wall Movement, the establishment of Special Economic Zones and the dramatic student protests in Tiananmen Square.”

**China in the Red** (2003, PBS Frontline video)

“The economic reforms that have brought China economic prosperity now threaten the livelihood of many Chinese workers. The Chinese Communist party can no longer afford to subsidize the factories, and millions of workers are being laid off with no social safety net to catch them. FRONTLINE follows 10 Chinese citizens caught up in the social and economic transformation.”

**The Tank Man** (2006, PBS Frontline video)

“On June 5, 1989, one day after Chinese troops expelled thousands of demonstrators from Tiananmen Square in Beijing, a solitary, unarmed protesters stood his ground before a column of tanks advancing down the Avenue of Eternal Peace. Captured by Western photographers watching nearby, this extraordinary confrontation became an icon of the fight for freedom around the world. Veteran filmmaker Antony Thomas investigates the mystery of the tank man—his identity, his fate, and his significance for the Chinese leadership. The search for the tank man reveals China’s startling social compact—it’s embrace of capitalism while dissent is squashed—designed to stifle the nationwide unrest of 1989. This policy has allowed educated elites and entrepreneurs to profit handsomely, while the majority of Chinese must endure strict political and social controls. Some of these controls regulate speech on the Internet—and have generated criticism over the involvement of major US corporations such as Yahoo!, Cisco, Microsoft, and Google.”

**China’s Lost Girls** (2005, National Geographic)

“To curb the country’s exploding population, China limits most families to one child, or in certain circumstances, two children. Due to cultural, social, and economic factors, traditional preference leans toward boys, so girls are often hidden, aborted, or abandoned. As a result, thousands of girls end up in orphanages across China. Today, more than one-quarter of all babies adopted from abroad by American families come from China—and nearly all are girls. National Geographic and Lisa Ling join
some of these families as they travel to China to meet their new daughters for the first time. Along this emotional journey, Lisa Ling shares in the joy of these growing families and also witnesses first hand China’s gender gap, examines its roots, and discusses its possible repercussions.”