



## Call for Chapters: Contemporary Chinese Art Cinema

A book edited by Flora Lichaa (Université libre de Bruxelles), Ma Ran (Nagoya University), and Seio Nakajima (Waseda University).

This edited volume, to be published in the Routledge Contemporary Asian Societies collection, follows a research workshop on contemporary Chinese art cinema held in May 2021 (see the program [here](#)). From this workshop emerged the conclusion that delineating the borders between Chinese films that should be considered art films and those that should not is extremely challenging given the variety of styles, forms, economic and industrial contexts of contemporary Chinese films that are labelled as such by both the international and domestic industries, audiences, and critics. This diversity is evident in the variety of terms that have been used to refer to Chinese art film, in both English (art, art-house, auteur cinema) and Chinese (*wenyi*, *yishu*, *tansuo*, *zuozhe dianying*).

Because of the contingency and ambiguity of these definition, existing research has mainly considered Chinese art films as those labelled by European and North American film festival programmers and critics. In this sense, the first Chinese films to be “qualified” as such appeared in the context of China’s opening-up and economic reforms in the mid-1980s. Spearheaded by Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* being awarded at Locarno Film Festival in 1985, it also included a series of films that were later known as the Fifth-Generation films (Signer 2017). To name just a few, Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *The Horse Thief* was awarded at Fribourg International Film Festival in 1988, Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* at Berlinale in 1988 and *Qiu Ju* at Venice International Film Festival in 1992, Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* at Cannes Festival in 1993.

This system of evaluation and distinction of art films is not specific to the Chinese case. In fact, since its emergence in Europe and North America in the 1950s, art cinema has developed as “a geographically organized force field, centered around a Euro-American critical and industrial infrastructure” (Galt and Schoonover 2010). Within this infrastructure, European and North-American critics and programmers have selected from worldwide films those they considered as art films based on their personal political and aesthetic criterion. Certain films have thus been legitimized as art films in institutions such as film festivals, specialized film theaters and niche markets, journals and magazines (Andrews 2013).

Academic literature on Chinese art cinema has so far rarely questioned this process of selection. However, Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover point out that this conception of art cinema is problematic in that it perpetuates a unidirectional pattern of development that implies the import of Western cultural values and social practices to the East (in this case, China). They further argue that this conception is no longer relevant since art cinema has become a “global field of

industry and aesthetics” (Galt and Schoonover 2010) composed of multidirectional trajectories between what was considered to be the core (the West) and the periphery (the East).

This idea of multidirectional trajectories is particularly relevant in the Chinese case because, as the research workshop has shown, Chinese art cinema has developed thanks to both global and local factors. In the 1980s, despite the international acclaim the Fifth-Generation directors received, their films were considered, by most Chinese critics, too elitist to respond to domestic market needs (Dai 2009). At the time, the national film industry was facing serious economic crisis due to a drop in cinema attendance following the development of television, as well as to the great success of foreign films (mainly Hollywood blockbusters) that were recently allowed to be distributed in Chinese theaters. In order to be economically competitive, Chinese film studios began to foster the production of high-budget commercial films based on the American model and became reluctant to produce art films with little commercial potential (Zhu 2003). In addition, studios avoided art films because the production process was often delayed by negotiations with the administration to pass censorship. For these reasons, in the 2000s, only a few directors, such as Wang Xiaoshuai and Jia Zhangke, whose films were regularly selected and awarded at international film festivals, managed to produce and distribute their films in the state-controlled market. Apart from these exceptions, Chinese art films were made by independent filmmakers working without support from state-funded studios and were then screened outside state-controlled channels (Lin 2010). Given the monopolistic position of films mainly oriented towards market needs, it may seem surprising that a niche market devoted to art cinema has developed within the Chinese film industry since the 2010s. Produced by local private companies independent from state-funded studios, these art films have managed to be distributed in state-controlled channels such as film theaters, television channels, and streaming websites, thereby highlighting the existence and consolidation of an institutional structure dedicated to art cinema. According to Chinese producers, this process of institutionalization relies both on global (import of European and North American methods of production and distribution) and local (legal and socioeconomic developments in China) factors.

This means that Chinese art cinema has built on cultural values and socioeconomic practices not only imported from the West, but also developed at the local level. All these values and practices now circulate and interact within the global market in multidirectional flows. This book draws on this idea of multidirectional flows to problematize and understand the gradual process of institutionalization of art cinema in the Chinese industry since the 1980s.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- the historical evolution of Chinese art cinema since the 1980s to the present examined from a perspective of institutionalization, crosscutting sectors of production, distribution, and circulation
- the discourse of *yishu dianying* in relation to generational categories of directors (the Fifth Generation, the Sixth Generation, post-80s, 90s, and 00s), genre labels (e.g. *wenyipian*), as well as the complex history of boundary making in relation to outside-of-the-system (*tizhiwai*) independent/underground cinema (*duli dianying/dixia dianying*).
- Debating space/place in relation to the local(ised)/regional and accented filmmaking in Chinese art cinema
- Critical comparative studies concerning the historical and discursive development of Chinese-language art cinema in Taiwan and Hong Kong
- Chinese art cinema in relation to PRC’s cultural policy and creative/cultural industry

- the visions and politics of auteurism, regarding aesthetic and stylistic experimentations of Chinese art cinema
- Chinese art cinema in the global film festival network and arthouse theater circuits

Researchers are invited to submit a chapter proposal (between 300 and 500 words) and a short biography to floralichaa@gmail.com **on or before September 30, 2021**. Authors will be notified by October 31, 2021 about the status of their proposals. Full chapters are expected to be submitted by January 15, 2022.

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