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To cite this article: Shaoyi Sun (2016): Chinese-language film or Chinese cinema? Review of an ongoing debate in the Chinese mainland, Journal of Chinese Cinemas, DOI: [10.1080/17508061.2016.1139803](https://doi.org/10.1080/17508061.2016.1139803)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17508061.2016.1139803>



Published online: 03 Mar 2016.



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Chinese-language film or Chinese cinema? Review of an ongoing debate in the Chinese mainland

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Ever since it is first introduced and then gradually adopted by many in the field of Chinese cinema studies, the term ‘Chinese-language film’ (huayu dianying) has been always contentious, not only because it tends to prioritize language’s role in defining a cinema, thus relegating the ‘Chinese’ films that speak non-Han languages to a negligible place, but also because critics and scholars in the field come from divergent political and cultural backgrounds and thus tend not to share the same view of what constitute ‘China’ and ‘Chinese.’ In one of the earliest publications that propagated the term, Ping-Hui Liao used the phrase ‘huawen dianying’ instead of ‘huayu dianying’ in his long introduction to discuss the collection of essays that critically examine the acclaimed films from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, including such classics as *Yellow Earth*, *The Story of Qiu Ju*, *King of Children*, *Farewell My Concubine*, *Ruan Lingyu*, *The Terrorizers*, *A Brighter Summer Day* and *Banana Paradise*.¹ Despite this, as a less controversial term that encompasses the films produced not only in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, but also in Singapore and other Chinese diasporas, ‘Chinese-language film’ has been gradually accepted by scholars and critics of Chinese cinema from around the world. This is evidenced in both Chinese and English publications, chief among them *Discourses on Contemporary Chinese-Language Film* (edited by Tado Lee. Taipei, Taiwan: China Times Press, 1996), *Legends of the Three Places: Two Decades of Chinese-Language Film* (edited by Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, et al. Taipei, Taiwan: Taiwan Film Institute, 1999), *Ten Directors of Chinese-Language Film* (edited by Yuanying Yang. Hangzhou, Zhejiang: Zhejiang Photographic Press, 2000) and *Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics* (edited by Sheldon Lu and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2005).

But it turns out that the above consensus, reached around the turn of the century and shared by many in the field regardless of their place of origin, is fragile at best. Controversies and debates surrounding the term ‘Chinese-language film’ have struck back with a vengeance during its post-centennial years. Partly due to the frequent academic exchanges between mainland China-based scholars and scholars of Chinese-language film from the United States and the United Kingdom (strangely more often than their counterparts based in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore), these debates have centered on whether the use of ‘Chinese-language film’ is a reflection of Western ‘centralism’ or Americentrism

(translation: applying Western/Anglo-American theory to Chinese film culture analysis from an explicitly dominant Western/American position) and a perceived ‘de-China-lization’ tendency in Western academia. Whereas the controversies have been around for some time, it is not until the involvement of *Contemporary Cinema* (*Dangdai dianying*, one of China’s leading film journals) that the controversy over the use of ‘Chinese-language film’ resurfaces from previously private conversations or academic conferences.² In the fourth issue of 2014, *Contemporary Cinema* featured an academic dialogue between Sheldon Lu, one of the earliest proponents of ‘Chinese-language film’ and the central figure of the current round of the debate, and a mainland Chinese scholar in its acclaimed column ‘Re-writing Chinese Film History.’ In that dialogue, Sheldon Lu argued that there are currently four conceptual models or paradigms (*fanshi*) approaching ‘Chinese’ cinema, namely the ‘Chinese national cinema’ model, the ‘transnational Chinese cinema’ model, the ‘Chinese-language cinema’ model and the ‘Sinophone cinema’ model. These models are being either independently or interchangeably used by scholars and critics of ‘Chinese’ cinema from three scholarly communities: mainland China-based academia writing in Chinese, Hong Kong and Taiwan-based academia writing in Chinese and the overseas academia writing mainly in English.³ Whereas the ‘Sinophone cinema’ model derives from the notion of Francophone and therefore requires a separate examination, both the ‘Chinese-language cinema’ and the ‘transnational Chinese cinema’ approaches, argued Lu, could help us ‘get beyond the singular nation-state narrative,’ ‘expand our scope of vision’ and subsequently ‘untie some tight knots’ in the re-writing Chinese film history project.⁴

The above dialogue has reignited the debate about the notion of ‘Chinese-language film.’ Invited by senior editor Liu Guiqing, five mainland Chinese film historians, three of them coming from the Li Shaobai (one of the authors of the influential multi-volume book *A Historical Development of Chinese Cinema*) lineage, contributed their responding pieces to the eighth issue of 2014’s *Contemporary Cinema*. Not coincidentally, the five contributors represent the two most active and central bases of Chinese film studies, Beijing and Shanghai, with the ones from the ‘Northern Camp’ (Beijing) more critical of the ‘Chinese-language film’ approach, and the ones from the ‘Southern Camp’ (Shanghai) more open and sympathetic toward the use of the conceptual model.⁵ For instance, while acknowledging the contributions made by ‘overseas’ scholars, Li Suyuan, a veteran film historian and author of *A History of Chinese Silent Film*, claimed that their ‘interdisciplinary’ and ‘cultural studies’ approaches have led to the publication/Chinese translation of many books that are more about Chinese politics, culture and society, and less about Chinese cinema or ‘film studies in its strict sense’.⁶ As for the notion of ‘Chinese-language film,’ he writes,

The meaning of Chinese cinema is originally very clear: it includes all the films produced and released in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China. Inhabitants of these three places share the same origin and roots. It is due to China’s societal changes that they’ve gone different ways, thus manifesting some distinct qualities in culture and politics... [But] using “Chinese-language film” to replace “cinema of China” runs the danger of weakening, even subverting the important and leading role China, including Hong Kong and Taiwan, has played, which would ultimately result in “de-China-lization.” This is certainly unacceptable to us. We must be alarmed so as not to let this happen.⁷

As resolute as the above words may sound, the most combative response comes from Li Daoxin, a film historian and professor at Peking University. Speaking with an authoritative tone, Li Daoxin accuses Sheldon Lu of being ‘Americentrism,’ and he alerts the reader that, in the process of re-writing Chinese film history, ‘we must do our best to break loose from the discursive authority constructed by Western cultural theories’.⁸ Although not clearly defined, by ‘Americentrism’ Li not only targets Sheldon Lu, but apparently has the following in mind as well: those who grew up in mainland China but received their graduate education in the West (mostly in the United States), and write on Chinese-language film mostly in English. In Li’s view, these researches, born in the discursive context of Anglo-American humanities and social sciences and responding mainly to the issues concerning Western academia, ‘can be at best regarded as minor “overseas elements” or “foreign background” as compared to the studies of Chinese cinema originated in China. They cannot be taken as the main line of thinking or guiding principle in the re-writing of Chinese film history’.⁹ Because the ‘transnational Chinese film’ or ‘Chinese-language film’ approaches represent an alarming trend of ‘subverting the subjectivity, even legitimacy of Chinese culture and Chinese national cinema,’ Li calls for a ‘re-building of Chinese subjectivity,’ which is crucial for the re-writing Chinese film history project:

Ultimately, Sheldon Lu’s academic confidence not only comes from his dominant Western scholarly background, but also results from the weak position Chinese academia occupies [in the geo-academic landscape], as well as from the hard-to-change marginal place Chinese cinema occupies in the age of globalization... [Despite this], we must be subversive one more time, which is to subvert the already subverted “China” and “Chinese-ness,” and rebuild our Chinese subjectivity. [Only by doing so] can we start to build the base of the re-writing Chinese film history project.¹⁰

The Sheldon Lu–Li Daoxin debate saga continues after this round of exchange of words surrounding the issue of ‘Chinese-language film.’ In the following months, in addition to a responding piece by Sheldon Lu published in *Contemporary Cinema*, which explains a mistranslation and further clarifies Lu’s position as well as his academic background,¹¹ there have been at least three face-to-face occasions during which Lu and Li openly engaged with each other but failed to resolve their disagreement: at the ‘Critics’ Weekend’ Forum at Peking University’s College of Arts on 18 December 2014, at Fudan University’s School of Journalism on 20 June 2015 and at the ‘Cross-Cultural Productions and Overseas Circulation of Chinese Films’ Conference organized by the Shanghai Theatre Academy between 23 October and 25 October 2015.

Amongst the aforementioned three occasions, perhaps the most exceptional one was held at Fudan University’s School of Journalism. Convened by the ECNU-Cornell Center for Comparative Humanities, it was attended not only by four of the original debaters, namely Sheldon Lu of UC Davis, Li Daoxin of Peking University and Shi Chuan and Shaoyi Sun of Shanghai Theatre Academy, but also by Lu Xinyu of East China Normal University and Wei-min Tang of Taiwan’s Fu Jen Catholic University as well as a few panelists from the ACCL (Association of Chinese and Comparative Literature) biannual conference concurrently held at Fudan. At the end of the gathering, it quickly became clear that the debate has gone beyond the ‘Chinese-language film’ controversy and turned into a battlefield between the Chinese ‘New-Left’ and liberal intellectuals.¹² Acting more as a featured speaker instead of a moderator, Lu Xinyu, an ECNU cultural critic known for her New-Left stand, first expressed her admiration of Sheldon Lu’s contribution to

Chinese film and cultural studies, then went on to bring up the issue of ‘minority films’ produced during the 17-year period of Communist China (1949–1966). To her, the ‘new’ minority films made in the 1950s and prior to the Cultural Revolution, which reflect an encouraging practice of the Party’s ‘ethnic equality’ policy after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), are being overshadowed by the notion of ‘Chinese-language film.’¹³ In other words, according to Lu’s ‘New-Left’ point of view, China under Mao succeeded in establishing a ‘new’ Chinese subjectivity, and this ‘trump card’ ought to be kept alive when the PRC sits on the table of negotiation with Taiwan, Hong Kong and the Chinese diasporas:

The effectiveness [of the Chinese-language film approach] lies in the notion’s capability of helping us achieve some kind of the united front. But who is the leader of this united front? It’s like a card game with players from the mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. When it’s about time to show each other’s cards, we [the mainland] would suddenly discover that our cards are all in the control of other players. At this point, where is our own subjectivity? ... Thus, what I want to ask is this: can we separate cultural subjectivity and political subjectivity? If we don’t identify with our own country, then to what degree is it possible to have [our] cultural identity? ... It is not to say there isn’t such a thing called Cultural China, but if we use Cultural China to deny Political China, then it will be impossible for us to understand Political China. In the “Chinese-language film” model, we cannot see the possibility of a proper understanding of the existence of a Political China.¹⁴

Like almost all academic debates, consensus is always hard to reach. Besides the fact that it is almost certain this debate will continue in the foreseeable future, either publicly or privately, there are at least five tentative conclusions coming out of this still ongoing controversy. First, mainland academia is as divided as that of any place, with one group (mainly based in Beijing and with a New-Left background and a latent sentiment of nationalism) vehemently against the use of the ‘Chinese-language film’ model, and another (mainly based in Shanghai and with a liberal stand, many of them, including Shaoyi Sun of Shanghai Theatre Academy, educated in Western universities and becoming bilingual) in support of a more flexible use of a range of different approaches, the ‘Chinese-language film’ model included. Second, although it is somewhat odd to associate Sheldon Lu’s stand with his ‘academic confidence,’ it is no denial that the debate reflects the rapid rise of some mainland Chinese scholars’ ‘academic confidence,’ perhaps an echo to the perceived ‘rise’ of China as well as to the rhetoric of the so-called ‘Three-Confidence’ propagated by the Party/regime: Confidence of the Chosen Path, Confidence of the Political System and Confidence of the Chosen Theory. Third, closely related to or as a result of the second, as the label ‘Americentrism’ indicates, Western theories and values, despite being warmly embraced in the 1980s and 1990s, are increasingly under close scrutiny or even attack amongst some leading scholars in the Chinese mainland. Challenging the ‘Chinese-language film’ model for them also means to challenge the perceived dominance of Western discourse, and it is a ‘battle’ to gain a ‘pure’ Chinese subjectivity and to ‘take back’ the ‘lost’ discursive power/right. A sensitive nose could probably smell a little ‘academic nationalism’ here. Fourth, the debate has gone beyond the disciplinary boundary of Chinese film studies and exemplified the seemingly irreconcilable disagreement between the Chinese ‘New-Left’ and liberal intellectuals. Whereas the New Left in the West represents a critical and progressive force in opposition to the established capitalist system, ironically, New Leftism in the PRC, due to the current regime’s anti-West and nationalistic rhetoric (no matter how superficial it may sound), oftentimes finds itself in line with the authoritarian

regime. Defending the ‘minority policy’ of the Party is only an exemplary case at hand. Last but not least, no matter how impossible and untimely it is to some, the ambitious project of writing a ‘comprehensive’ history of Chinese cinema has been already underway. This is viewed by some mainland film historians as a ‘moral obligation’ and a strategic maneuver to ‘outsmart’ their counterparts living in Taiwan, Hong Kong and abroad. How ‘comprehensive’ will it be? It will certainly include films produced in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and even those made in the Chinese diasporas and with Hollywood. Most interestingly, as Li Daoxin suggested at the Fudan gathering, they will all be lumped together under the all-encompassing phrase ‘Chinese cinema’ (Zhongguo dianying), no plural form allowed.

Notes

1. Liao, Ping-Hui. “Introduction.” In William Tay, ed. *Cultural Criticism and Chinese-Language Film*, 9–34. Taipei, Taiwan: Rye Field Publishing Company, 1995. Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this piece, book and article titles included are this reviewer’s.
2. To name just a few, such conferences include the Second Global Chinese-Language Cinema Forum held at Peking University in November 2011 and the ‘Chinese-Language Cinema: The Crossing-Border Flows of Image, Capital, and Culture’ Conference held at Shanghai University in December 2013.
3. Lu, Sheldon & Li Huanzheng, “Overseas Chinese-Language Film Studies and the Issue of Re-writing Chinese Film History: An Interview with Sheldon Lu.” *Contemporary Cinema*, Vol. 4, 2014, pp. 62–63.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 62. Sheldon Lu himself has an interesting take on the ‘Sinophone’ cinema/culture model. For details, see his review of Shu-mei Shih’s *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations Across the Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Accessed 26 October 2015. <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/book-reviews/visuality-and-identity/>
5. Major arguments of the ‘Southern Camp,’ represented by Shaoyi Sun and Shi Chuan, two film scholars from the Shanghai Theatre Academy, can be found in their co-authored piece titled ‘A Responding Dialogue on “Overseas Chinese-Language Film Studies and the Issue of Re-writing Chinese Film History: An Interview with Sheldon Lu.”’ *Contemporary Cinema*, Vol. 8, 2014, pp. 58–64.
6. Li, Suyuan, “Equal Dialogue and Mutual Promotion: Chinese Film Studies Inside and Outside China.” *Contemporary Cinema*, Vol. 8, 2014, p. 46.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
8. Li, Daoxin, “Re-building Chinese Subjectivity and Re-writing Chinese Film History: Reflections and Critique of Sheldon Lu’s Transnational Cinema and Chinese-Language Film Discourse.” *Contemporary Cinema*, Vol. 8, 2014, p. 53.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
11. Lu, Sheldon, “Transnational Chinese-Language Film Studies and Its Accepting Context: Responses and Discussions.” *Contemporary Cinema*, Vol. 10, 2014, pp. 27–29.
12. An edited version of the dialogue transcript was published in *Contemporary Cinema*. For details, see *Contemporary Cinema*, Vol. 10, 2015, pp. 48–56.
13. Lu’s evaluation of ‘minority film’ was quickly disputed by Sheldon Lu and Shi Chuan, who argued the ‘minority films’ produced during that period are aimed at propagating ideological messages of the Party and have nothing to do with the minorities themselves or with the so-called ‘ethnic equality.’ Their stand is more clearly articulated in Yingjin Zhang’s article ‘From “Minority Film” to “Minority Discourse”: Questions of Nationhood and Ethnicity in Chinese Cinema.’ *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Spring, 1997), pp. 73–90.
14. *Contemporary Cinema*, Vol. 10, 2015, pp. 53–54.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by the Shanghai “Peak & Plateau” Disciplines [grant number SH1510GFXK].