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Once Upon A Time In China



Synopsis

From Jackie Chan to Ang Lee, from Supercop to Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Chinese cinema has truly arrived in the United States. Whether one is speaking of Jet Li martial arts blockbusters, historical epics like Chen Kaige's Farewell My Concubine, or evocative art films like Edward Yang's Yi Yi and Wong Kar Wai's In the Mood for Love, the astonishing variety, quality, and inventiveness of movies from the three filmmaking regions of Greater China have caught the imagination of film buffs and Hollywood studios alike, ensuring that more and more works from these dynamic industries will find an eager American audience. But this startling diversity springs from common roots. Once Upon a Time in China is the first time that the unique cinemas of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Mainland have been explored in parallel, showcasing the feuds and family ties, the epic confrontations and subtle machinations, through which contemporary Chinese film has evolved. With wit and a true passion for the subject, author Jeff Yang, former publisher of aMagazine -- the nation's premier Asian American periodical -- and coauthor of action icon Jackie Chan's autobiography, offers a colorful journey through the history of Chinese cinema, its standout stars, moguls, and icons, and more than 350 of its most distinctive works.

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Customer Reviews

Yang, the founder of the Asian-American periodical aMagazine, fell in love with the "guilty pleasure" of Chinese movies as a child, when his uncle took him to see "epic tales of blood, thunder, and magic." His account, enlivened by his innocent enthusiasm and his eye for pertinent detail, begins with a 1905 one-reeler, Dangjun Mountain. With a keen historical perspective, Yang introduces such

early film icons as Ruan Lingyu, a "mistress of melodrama" who starred in the eerily prophetic *Suicide Contract* and then killed herself. He describes the evolution from women's pictures to martial arts movies, from the late 1910s to today. Action star Chang Cheh said in the 1960s that he wanted to put the spotlight on "real men who'd tear off their own legs and gleefully use them to beat their enemies to death," and this macho stance is reflected in *Enter the Dragon* and others in the Bruce Lee series. Yang crisply chronicles Lee's career from his minor Hollywood success, loss of the lead in TV's *Kung Fu* and eventual Hong Kong stardom. The contrast between the "vengeful, stone-faced" Lee, who died of cerebral edema at 32, and the mischievous, clownish Jackie Chan provides enjoyable reading. Yang also extensively covers John Woo's "bullet-riddled mayhem," the popularity of Hong Kong sex films featuring Chinese mythology, and a battle against piracy that made Chan take to the streets in protest. Capsule reviews offer an all-inclusive portrait of releases over half a century, and Yang clinches his case by reminding readers "they've had only the merest taste of the banquet that is yet to come. Save room for dessert." Photos. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Savvy film buffs know that Chinese directors are responsible for a disproportionate number of the most highly praised and entertaining recent movies. Others wishing to explore Chinese cinema's staggering variety will do well to consult this valuable guide. After a single chapter on the first half-century of Chinese film, Yang offers a decade-by-decade look at the cinematic output of the mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Hong Kong's crowd-pleasers, particularly the kung fu classics of the 1970s and the "poetic violence" gangster films of the '80s, predominate, but other trends get their due, including the Fifth Generation mainland directors of the '80s, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, and the New Taiwanese Cinema, also of the '80s, exemplified by Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-Hsien. The book's second half contains succinct, informative capsule reviews of nearly 300 films. If Yang's treatment seems somewhat cursory, that may be the result of trying to chronicle three separate national cinemas. Hardcore cineastes may want more scholarly coverage, but for most filmgoers, this is just the ticket. Gordon Flagg Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Using the title from a Tsui Hark directed movie starring Jet Li (and a plethora of sequels) Jeff Yang, author of *Eastern Standard Time* and coauthor of the Jackie Chan autobiography *I Am Jackie Chan*, attempts to pen a "... comprehensive guide to the unique cinemas of Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Mainland...". While ultimately Yang fails in his thesis he did write and collaborate with many

co-writers to create a well thought out albeit terse primer on the cinema of these three cinemas (134 pages). It is followed by a Capsule Reviews section (135 pages) that gives a summary overview of pertinent films discussed in the book or, I suppose, considered important by Yang. This book does a good job of succinctly stating the origins of Chinese Film, the important companies such as Cathay, Shaw Brothers and MP&GI, the importance of Mandarin and Cantonese cinema, TVB, Triads, important actors such as Jackie Chan, Stephen Chow (Chiau), Michael Hui and directors as Chang Cheh, Zhang Yimou, Tsai Ming-liang, Wong Kar-wai and Wong Jing and many more. In fact the book works well as a "cliff notes" version of these cinemas with a particularly strong emphasis on Hong Kong cinema. There is mention of many genres and his writing is strong enough that I wished there was more material to peruse. The essays interspersed throughout the book on specific topics such as Wong Fei Hung, The Shaolin Temple by Linn Haynes, Jin Yong by Peter Nepstad and Category III Erotica by John Charles help tremendously in keeping the book interesting as well as informative. Unfortunately, the Capsule Reviews are probably the least important part of the book. It does not always enough detail to enlighten or enhance your viewing, misses some important HK genre pictures like Sammo Hung's Prodigal Son and Spooky Encounters and ends a lot of the reviews with "Reviewers called it..." with a particular point of view without naming any reviewers and many times being the antithesis of what many critics actually stated about the film (like the comments on The Story of Qiu Ju). If you can find this at a good price and you are looking for a good overview of a vast cinema than this will be a good purchase. Otherwise there is a plethora of books that are more focused on Asian cinema. For further study on Taiwan auteurs I would recommend Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island by Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh and Darrell Davis. For more in depth study on Hong Kong film I still recommend Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions by Stephen Teo. I still have not read a good book dedicated to Mainland China cinema though.

In the U.S., Chinese film first turned many mainstream heads in the year 2000, with the release of Ang Lee's kung-fu blockbuster *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. But the story of Chinese cinema actually goes back to 1896, when one-reel films were introduced to Shanghai--and a decade later, movies had established themselves in China for good. Jeff Yang devotes the first part of his book "Once Upon A Time in China" to a whirlwind tour through a century of Chinese cinema. Reaching from the first silent films to notables of 2003 (the book's year of publication), Yang crams a lot into his brief (less than 150 pages) history. The trade-off is that actors, films, and--especially--politics fly by. Yang has the (correct) sense that the history of Chinese cinema has been dramatically shaped by the history of China itself, as various wars and regime changes shifted the "cinematic center of

gravity" back and forth between the Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. But space constraints make it hard enough to include the convoluted formations and dissolutions of China's major film studios. The greater sweep of history remains mostly implied throughout, and as a result readers with no knowledge of modern Chinese history may feel a bit lost for context. More than half the book is taken up by a collection of "capsule reviews" introducing dozens and dozens of films from every era surveyed by the book. These reviews, while interesting, could have been more helpful. For example, movie listings could have included Chinese titles, which would have aided in locating more obscure films. (As it is, the reviews include English title, year of release, director and main cast credits.) The reviews are rarely less than glowing, and Yang simply cites "reviewers," without indicating whether these are from the time of the movie's release (useful context for older films) or contemporary reflections. Readers should also be warned that the summaries routinely reveal endings and/or major plot twists. The book concludes with a few pages of bibliography and web links. The listings are disappointingly sparse, but this is as much a reflection on the current state of Western scholarship on Chinese cinema as it is on Yang's work. This book may come up short for readers seeking academic or scholarly insights into Chinese film, but for newcomers who want to get oriented, this is an excellent resource.~

Perhaps the best place to read a good overview of Asian film for a beginner. It also helps that the editor has chosen a who's who of writers to do bits on different topics.

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