Remapping Contemporary Chinese Cinema Studies*

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Abstract

This essay aims to rethink and remap contemporary Chinese cinema studies. In the past few years there have been many new developments and experiments in the film scenes of mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and the Chinese film industries are undergoing dramatic restructuring. The authors argue for an understanding of “Chinese cinema” in close reference to the recent advent of global cinema. Such understanding also has to take into account the internal stratification among various film practices, no longer organized only according to its specific cultural geography (mainland, Taiwan, and Hong Kong) but also according to different modes of filmmaking and different sectors

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of the industry and culture. The authors believe that scholars can continue to use the notion of “Chinese cinema” as a meaningful concept. However, rather than understanding it as a single and self-sufficient system, as the idea of a national cinema tends to assume, they argue that in the age of flexible production Chinese cinema must also be seen as something more flexible, multiple, and open—an internally stratified but interconnected combinatoire with dynamic participation in global cinema.

This essay is a part of a larger research project that we are undertaking. It aims to rethink and remap contemporary Chinese cinema studies from a new angle, focused on production more than textual characteristics or consumption. In our larger project, we hope to trace the new industrial structure and culture of the current Chinese cinema and to put forward a new academic model to analyze such changes. Here we want to explain why we believe this work is necessary and to outline our initial thinking. It is, in a sense, a position statement.

We believe that in the last few years there have been many new developments and experiments in the film scenes of mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and that the Chinese film industries are undergoing dramatic restructuring. Scholarly studies of Chinese cinema have certainly registered that change is happening, but they have been slow to produce appropriate new frameworks for critical analysis. Also, globalization has put the topography of cinema as a cultural industry and social institution on the research agenda again.1 As has been widely noted, national cinema—the taxonomic organizing principle of cinema studies—has come under question.2 Calls for attention to cinema as transnational have proliferated. Within Chinese cinema studies, Sheldon Lu’s 魯曉鵬 anthology Transnational Chinese Cinemas marks the moment when this paradigm took hold. He characterizes the anthology as “a collective rethinking of the national/transnational interface in Chinese film history and in film studies” and argues that “the study of national cinemas must then transform into transnational film studies.”3 With the recent growth of Chinese cinema studies, we have seen many attempts at using the transnational perspective to study the meanings and the production of Chinese films. However, much of this scholarship is caught in an either—or tension between the framework of seemingly universal globalization and the localness of the Chinese cinema, and a dangerous tendency toward the dichotomization of the