

The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century, edited by Zhang Zhen. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007. 448 pp. \$94.95 (Hardcover), \$26.95 (Paperback). ISBN 9780822340539 (Hardcover), 9780822340744 (Paperback)

These days, academic presses are prone to seek manuscripts that are pithy. While this may produce more tightly edited works, the cynic in me believes the move towards shorter books is motivated more by saving money than by any loftier goals of concision. As a reader, I sometimes am left wanting at the end of a recently-published scholarly book. Clocking in at 447 pages, with a lengthy bibliography and appendix, Zhang Zhen's edited work on recent cinema from the People's Republic of China (PRC) dispels any such feelings. Featuring twelve different perspectives from some of the leading voices in Western-based Chinese film criticism, this is a book into which the reader can really sink his/her teeth. The general theme, that the generation after the auteur "Fifth Generation" Chinese filmmakers has been *decidedly more urban in its consciousness, is well-focused. It allows the various authors the ability to use it as a compass while each explores her or his particular subject, be it strictly within the frame set out by the editor or be it comparative with films and filmmakers of other generations or interests. This work would be highly useful in the classroom, for it touches upon, to one extent or another, all major PRC filmmakers who have emerged since 1989.*

The essays run the gamut of approaches, covering a wide range of films by the most recent Chinese filmmakers as well as making comparisons in some cases to Fifth Generation filmmakers, films of the 1930s, some more commercially-driven works, and to a small extent films from Taiwan, Hong Kong and the rest of the world. Some chapters, such as those by Yingjin Zhang (*Dirt*), Jason McGrath (Jia Zhangke), Shuqin Cui (Ning Ying), Bérénice Reynaud (Zhang Yuan), and Xueping Zhong (*Mr. Zhao*) focus on one filmmaker or film. Others, such as those by Augusta Palmer (*Beautiful New World* and *Street Angel*) and Zhang Zhen (*Lunar Eclipse* and *Suzhou River*), compare two films. Still others, such as those by Chris Berry (documentary), Sheldon Lu (film and contemporary art with respect to the theme of demolition), Yomi Braester (demolition and documentary style), Linda Lai (the walker/drifter motif), and Yaohua Shi (the representation of police in contemporary film with comparison to 1950s cinematic representations) are more thematic. All chapters are

thoroughly researched and thoughtfully conceived. Most use sophisticated film and cultural theory. Some tend towards more detailed filmic analysis (McGrath, Cui, Shi, and Zhang Zhen). Theorists whose names pop up most frequently are people such as Deleuze, Bazin, Boym, Benjamin, De Certeau, Abbas, and even Kracauer. I was mildly surprised to see no mention of Lacan or Metz, or of the film apparatus, and wondered if this signified the fact that Chinese film studies has moved beyond psychoanalytic and semiotic approaches or whether the nature of the "urban generation's" films themselves had predetermined that departure.

Zhang Zhen deserves credit not merely for organizing the conference and film festival from which this collection germinated but for ensuring its lasting value by assembling this volume with an introduction that rigorously surveys the main issues confronting PRC film and succinct introductions to each of the chapters. Her own chapter on the doppelgänger effect in two recent films is equally substantive and perceptive and makes reference to a number of other films that employ this technique. I would add one to her list: Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Good Men, Good Women*, a film the directors Wang Quan'an and Lou Ye are sure to know. Jason McGrath's reading of Jia Zhangke's films stood out in my opinion as a chapter that was tautly analysed and erudite while also conscious of its implications for other chapters in the book. His application of Deleuze's notion of "time-image," where realistic film depiction is stretched so far it appears highly aestheticized and thus transforms into its opposite, is a trenchant point that he extends backward to the work of Hou Hsiao-hsien, an acknowledged influence on Jia. Chris Berry's chapter on documentary is a handy overview that also provides a four-point rubric (memory/experience of June Fourth, contemporary city life, spontaneous shooting free of oppressive voice-over narration, and imbrication with television production) for what recent documentaries share in common. He also remarks that documentary and Chinese *cinéma vérité* are for the most part different, and that therefore the notion of *xianshizhuyi* 現實主義 carries a different meaning in each of the two respective contexts. Yinjing Zhang's chapter features an illuminating quadra-partite schemata for classifying the various different types of films produced beginning in the early 1990s: films made with politics in mind, commercial motivation, high art or auteur, and films on the margin. In his effort to historicize the Sixth Generation, Zhang also musters Paul Pickowicz's influential definition of postsocialism as a structure of feelings that can only spring from societies that have undergone an extended historical period of state socialism.

More dialogue between the various chapters, which in several cases intersect, discuss the same films, or utilize the same concepts, approaches or terminology, would have created greater overall continuity. The chapters by Lu and Braester, for example, partially overlap and would have benefited from intellectual interchange. Reading Braester's summary of Zhang Yang's *Shower*, for example, right after reading Lu's exposition of the same film, appeared like a tedious rehash. Three of the authors (Lai, Cui and Reynaud) invoke the image of the *flâneur*. Several (Berry, Braester, Shi) address the blurred boundary between documentary and feature film. These instances suggest that even more insight could have come from the authors reading each other's works and completing their own final drafts with other viewpoints in mind.

Another question, which ironically is also the book's chief asset, is the theme of the "urban generation." One wonders whether Zhang Zhen's demarcation is too procrustean, considering she draws hard and fast distinctions between it and the slightly earlier filmmakers of the Sixth Generation (not to mention the Fifth Generation). Is determining the historical evolution of film (generation) in terms of space (urban) quite so simple? What of prior filmmakers who utilized the urban setting as a canvas for their films (as Braester observes)? What of filmmakers who continue in their prime, whether they be Fifth Generation or commercial directors such as Feng Xiaogang (left out of the appendix in the back)? This "generational" prism can become hackneyed if not subjected to the same critical examination as the films and filmmakers. "Generations" seem to pass quicker and quicker in China with each passing decade. A generation used to be twenty years. Now it seems to be about five or at most ten. These taxonomies are so snugly woven they may burst their seams. But one cannot deny that Chinese film of the last decade has been characterized by independence from the state apparatus, a reaction to some fundamental changes in the system of film production in China and the role of the state, as Zhang Zhen notes, a general grittiness emblematic of *cinéma vérité*, settings in the urban milieu, longer takes and other innovations, and cultural subversiveness. And this, I surmise, is what Zhang Zhen means by casting these ten or twelve years as "the urban generation."

The absence of Chinese characters is a major deficit of this book not easily countenanced. With the profusion of film terms, such as "on the scene" 現場, "on the spot" 紀實主義, "leitmotif" or "main melody" 主旋律, "police and criminal films" 警匪片, "illustrated lecture" 專題片, as

well as film titles, other terms and sayings, and the names of filmmakers which, because of the large number of homonyms in Chinese, one cannot guess with accuracy, this book would be a more useful research tool with a character glossary. In particular, the appendix of filmmakers and films is diminished in utility because Chinese characters are missing. In one case, the typographical error in the romanized Chinese film title for *Keep Cool and Don't Blush* (it should be *bubianse* but is written *bubianshi*), without the characters, is bound to send more than one undergraduate on a wild goose chase. Finally, some of the endnote and bibliographical references for Chinese publications are cited with the English title only, as if written in English. This will make it difficult to locate those works. These criticisms notwithstanding, Zhang Zhen's collected volume of essays on recent Chinese films is packed with copious information and penetrating observations and will be of benefit to any one of a number of different sorts of reader.

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Political Rights in Post-Mao China, by Merle Goldman. Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, Inc., 2007. 80 pp. US\$10.00 (Paperback). ISBN 9780924304544

Merle Goldman's *Political Rights in Post-Mao China* offers an excellent overview of attempts to assert political rights in contemporary China. As would be expected from someone whose career has shed so much light on China's intellectuals, this book devotes the most pages to intellectuals, but also considers the middle class, workers, farmers, and religious believers. Her conclusion is that a small but highly influential segment of the Chinese population now act like citizens and expect to be treated as such. Those who want more detail should turn to her recent book, *From Comrade to Citizen: The Struggle for Political Rights in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), but Professor Goldman has packed a great deal into these 75 pages, and her brevity makes this book an excellent choice for situations where more pages are not possible.

The perspective is from the bottom-up. There is some discussion of historical antecedents and the increasing importance of institutions like the