Distributing Chinese Films Online for Research and Teaching: Needs, Platforms, and Opportunities

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No more showing the DVD in the classroom
Film needs:
A researcher-educator’s perspective in 2022

• Online copies of films
• Acceptable image and sound quality
• Available on demand (time & location)
• Subtitled in English
• Low or no cost to students or instructors
• No legal liability for instructor
Two examples of my dependence on libraries

Thanks, U.C. Berkeley C.V. Starr East Asian Library!
Thanks, Columbia University C.V. Starr East Asian Library!
How can we make Chinese films more available – via either password-protected or public online platforms?
Outline

1. Introducing the Chinese Film Classics project
   • Website & YouTube channel

2. What about films still under copyright?

3. Online film publishing trends in the teaching/research community
   • What can libraries do?

4. Further viewings and readings
Chinese Film Classics

A resource on early Chinese cinema

25+ subtitled films

- Laborer’s Love 勞工之愛情 (1922)
- Love and Duty 勝愛與義 (1931)
- The Peach Girl 桃花泣血記 (1931)
- Spring Silkworms 春蚕 (1933)
- Playthings 小玩意 (1933)
- Daybreak 天明 (1933)
- Song of the Fishermen 漁光曲 (1934)
- Sports Queen 體育皇后 (1934)
- Goddess 神女 (1934)
- The Great Road 大路 (1934)
- City Scenes 都市風光 (1935)
- Song of China 天倫 (1935)
- New Women 新女性 (1935)
- Song at Midnight 夜半歌声 (1937)
- Street Angels 鳥路天使 (1937)
- Hua Mu Lan 木蘭從軍 (1939)
- Princess Iron Fan 鐵扇公主 (1941)
- Love Everlasting 不了情 (1947)
- Long Live the Missus! 大大奧婆 (1947)
- Spring River Flows East 一江春水向东流 (1947)
- Spring in a Small Town 小城之春 (1948)
- Wanderings of Three Hairs the Orphan 三毛流浪記 (1949)
- Crows and Sparrows 黑鷹與麻雀 (1949)
Laborer’s Love 劳工之愛情 (1922)  
Laborer’s Love (Laogong zhi aiqing, 1922) is the earliest known extant complete film made by Chinese filmmakers.

An Untold Tale of the Borderlands 殭邊外史 (1926)  
Li Minghui stars as a peasant woman who escapes an arranged marriage to join her true love on the borderlands.

Red Heroine 紅俠 (1929)  
A poor young woman trains in magic martial arts and revenges her father and her village in this silent wuxia film.

Woman Warrior White Rose 女俠白玫瑰 (1929)  
In this partially-extant silent action film, a female athlete becomes a swashbuckling hero and saves the family herding ground from a gang who plans to sell it to foreigners.

https://chinesefilmclassics.org/films/
Collaborations with film archives

Love and Duty 戀愛與義務 (1931)

The film:

Unrestored film published with permission of the Taiwan Film and Audiovisual Institute 國家電影及視聽文化中心
https://chinesefilmclassics.org/love-and-duty-1931/
Films for teaching culture...

Hua Mu Lan 木蘭從軍 (1939)

The film:

Cantonese actress Nancy Chan (Chen Yunshang) stars as Mulan in this live-action film made in Shanghai during the third year of China's war against Japan. A young woman takes...
Spring River Flows East 一江春水向東流 (1947)

The film, in two parts:

Part 1: “Eight Years of Separation and Chaos” 八年離亂

Part 2: “Before and After the Dawn” 天明前後

https://chinesefilmclassics.org/spring-river-flows-east-1947/
...comparisons between Chinese and other cultural contexts

*The Haunted House*, staircase sequence 1:

[Video]

*The Haunted House*, staircase sequence 2:

[Video]

https://chinesefilmclassics.org/course/module-1-laborers-love-1922/
Clips enable study of both film form and industry trends

*Song at Midnight* 夜半歌聲 (1937) opening credits

The fan motif bookends *Long Live the Missus! 太太萬歲* (1947)
Free online course:
22 video lectures on 11 films

Course
Chinese Film Classics: Course Overview

A free, self-paced online course
This course offers an introduction to eleven of the best extant films made in mainland China nationalizing the film industry. What did early Chinese films look like? What stories did Chinese auteurs of early Chinese cinema tell? How does early Chinese cinema relate to Hollywood, European cinema, and Chinese cinema history? If you’re curious about questions like these, this is the course for you.

Each of the eleven modules of this course:
- One Chinese film (see list below), with English subtitles
- Two video lectures analyzing the historical, cultural, and cinematic significance of the film
- Basic information about the film's production, cast, and crew

Video lecture 1: “You have a body – put it to work!”
Sports Queen 體育皇后, 1934

Contents:
- Plot summary (3:30-8:25)
- Star actor Li Lil's healthy, athletic, playful, sexy persona
- China's emerging sports culture
- Storytelling: the coming-of-age narrative of Sports Queen

Video lecture 2: Bodies and shapes in motion

Also available on the Modern Chinese Cultural Studies YouTube channel
Modern Chinese Cultural Studies channel

FILM-RELATED PLAYLISTS:
• Chinese Film Classics
• Chinese Film Classics – online course
• Best of early Chinese cinema
• Sounds and songs
• How-tos from early Chinese cinema
• Gags and special effects
• Shared motifs – China, Hollywood, Europe
• Early Chinese animation
Playlists arrange short film clips thematically
What about films that are still in copyright?

Options:

- Subscription services (Criterion on Demand, etc.)

-Rentals on GooglePlay, YouTube
  - Selection is poor

- Institution-based, password-protected digital repositories
Online film publishing trends in the teaching/research community

ACCESSIBILITY ABOVE ALL

• Most instructors are unlikely to return to the “show the DVD in the classroom” model
• Students want/expect on-demand film availability
• Institutions increasingly expect flipped classrooms
• Grant funding (for both research and teaching) increasingly emphasizes open-access publication
• Modular, modular, modular!
What can libraries do to increase accessibility?

• Advertise to instructors which Chinese films are available (esp. with subtitles) via subscription services
• Liaise with Chinese-language film archives about accessibility, educational rights, and platforms
• If allowable by law, create a password-protected repository of digitized films accessible to members of your institution
• Track when Chinese films enter the public domain
A modest proposal

Create a **shared, inter-institution repository of Chinese-language films** (and other audio-visual materials) accessible to researchers, instructors, and students – starting with a core collection of the most commonly-taught films.
Further viewings

• Chinese film repository: Chinesefilmclassics.org
• Chinese films & film clips (Modern Chinese Cultural Studies YouTube channel): https://www.youtube.com/c/ModernChineseCulturalStudies
Further readings about the Chinese Film Classics project

New Online Teaching Resources for Early Chinese Cinema

The Chinese Film Classics Project is a research, teaching, and translation initiative aimed at making early Chinese cinema more accessible to the general public. The centerpieces of the project are two interlinked web resources: (1) the website chinesefilmclassics.org and (2) the YouTube channel Modern Chinese Cultural Studies (https://tinyurl.com/4zk6wevb). These sites currently feature twenty-four Chinese films released between 1922 and 1949 with complete English subtitles; over 150 film clips, organized into playlists; and a semester-long online course on Chinese film classics, with a pair of video lectures on each of eleven films. Both online resources are free and do not require login or registration. Additional translated films, film clips, and related materials will be added on an ongoing basis, thanks to contributions from scholars and students around the world.

These films, and the related teaching/learning aids, comprise a valuable resource for educators teaching film studies, Chinese language, translation, popular and mass culture, cultural history, social history, political history, and more. Additional information about the project and the resources can be found at https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/eaa/archives/new-online-teaching-resources-for-early-chinese-cinema/
Abstract

The Chinese Film Classics project, launched in 2020, is an online research and teaching initiative aimed at making early Chinese films and cinema history more accessible to the general public. Led by Christopher Rea at the University of British Columbia, the project is centered on the website http://chinesefilmclassics.org and the companion YouTube channel Modern Chinese Cultural Studies. These new platforms feature long and English translations of critical works on Chinese culture.

https://journals.publishing.umich.edu/gs/article/id/1709/
Please write to me with your comments and questions!

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CHINESE FILM CLASSICS