

Commercializing Ideologies: Intellectuals and Cultural Production at the Mingxing (Star) Motion Picture Company, 1922-1937

After the Western invention called cinema was introduced to China in 1896, it gradually became one of the most popular entertainments among ordinary people. At the same time, it also attracted intellectuals and businessmen who wished to disseminate and promote their ideologies through the new medium or to engage in this new profitable enterprise. The Mingxing (Star) Motion Picture Company (hereafter Mingxing), founded in 1922 and forced to close down in 1937 due to the Sino-Japanese War, has generally been considered a pioneer and representative of the early Chinese film industry. This research project aims to explore the multiple dimensions of cultural production by different groups of intellectuals at Mingxing within the commercial and socio-political context of the 1920s and 30s in China.

According to the prevalent views on the history of film in China, Chinese early cinema was merely a speculators' device to make money. Being strictly market-oriented, it was considered "low-class" entertainment aimed at pleasing mass audiences with film adaptations of "outdated" moral stories or popular love fictions. Intellectuals guarded their distance to the metier of early film until the 1930s, when several May Fourth intellectuals initiated the so-called "Left-wing cinema movement" and began to utilize this new device to disseminate modern ideas such as revolution, emancipation of women etc. Through an extensive exploration of original sources, I argue that besides the left-wing intellectuals there were popular fiction authors such as the "Mandarin ducks and butterflies"-group as well as "right-wing" intellectuals who also played important roles in promoting similar new ideas through film production at Mingxing. However, film-making activities of all these three groups were also driven by commercial forces. Zheng Zhengqiu, a co-founder and "spiritual leader" of Mingxing wrote: "it has long been our principle of film-making to combine 'commercialism' with 'conscience'" (Zheng Zhengqiu, "Zhongguo yingxi de qucai wenti" ("The problem of how to select materials for the Chinese films"), in Mingxing tekan (Mingxing special issue) 2, June 1925). Thus, it becomes clear that it was indeed the tension between money-making and an awareness of "conscience" meaning the responsibility to spread "correct" ideologies widely , rather than the commonly assumed ideological conflicts alone, which determined Mingxing's cinematic production and the intellectuals' activities at Mingxing.

Instead of the often preferred approach to read what the "authors" produced, this project is aimed at a detailed exploration of why and how films were produced. Behind this approach lies the notion that film history should be much more than "texts" and "authors". Texts and authors should not be examined in isolation from aspects such as the industrial apparatus of film production, distribution and exhibition, the economic situation of the filmmakers, political and social networks, to name only a few. Based on such an exploration, this project seeks to shed light on the complex interactions among different groups of intellectuals during China's chaotic Republican period, and on their commitment to the early popular cultural industry which has long been ignored by elitist discourses.