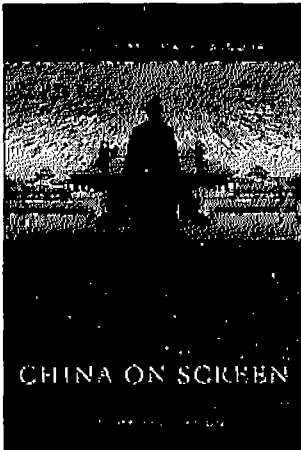


A BOOK REVIEW:

CHINA ON SCREEN: CINEMA AND NATION

**Reviewed by
G.M. Adhyanggono¹**



**CHINA ON SCREEN
CINEMA AND NATION**

Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar

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¹ **G.M. Adhyanggono, S.S, M.A.** <adhyanggono@yahoo.com> +6281228029666 is a lecturer at the Faculty of Letters, Soegijapranata Catholic University (SCU) and a research fellow of Java Institute in the same university. His research interest is in literature, film, and folklore.

This book examines some of the many and complex ways the national shapes and appears in Chinese films. The core argument of this book is twofold. First, the national informs almost every aspect of the Chinese cinematic image and narrative repertoire. Therefore, Chinese films—whether from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the diaspora, or understood as transnational—cannot be comprehended without reference to the national, and what are now retrospectively recognized as different Chinese cinematic traditions have played a crucial role in shaping and promulgating various depictions of the national and national identity. Second, as the challenge of locating Jackie Chan's *Rumble in the Bronx* and *Rush Hour* demonstrates that the national in Chinese cinema cannot be studied adequately using the old national cinemas approach, which took the national for granted as something known. Instead, the concept of national here needs to be approached as contested and construed in different ways. Therefore, it should be understood within an analytic approach that focuses on cinema and the national as a framework within which to consider a range of questions and issues about the national.

Interestingly, this book also gives description on the importance of the ideas on the national and the modern territorial nation-state to Chinese. Historically speaking, the emergence in seeing those concepts pivotal to Chinese is due to the the warships that forced “free trade” on China in the mid-nineteenth-century opium wars. The concepts of the national and the modern territorial nation-state were part of what Berry and Farquhar (2006) called “Western package of modernity”. When Chinese grasped the enormity of the imperialist threat they realized that they would have to take from the West in order to resist the West. The nation-state was a key element to be adopted, because this modern form of collective agency was fundamental both to participation as a nation-state in the “international” community established by the imperialists West and to mobilizing resistance. Berry and Farquhar (2006) also show how

Chinese make a strategy to embrace Western concept of modern nation-state, which at the same time eventually confirms their identity as being distinct from the West.

This book also speaks of an explanation on how the so-called Chinese national cinema may emerge. Once, it might have been possible to produce a list of elements composing something called “traditional Chinese culture” or “Chinese national culture,” or even some characteristics constituting “Chineseness.” Then scholars could have tried to see how these things were “expressed” or “reflected” in Chinese cinema as a unified and coherent Chinese national identity with corresponding distinctly Chinese cinematic conventions. This would then constitute a “Chinese national cinema.”

Interestingly, China has been through numerous territorial reconfigurations over the last century-and-a-half, and has spawned a global diaspora. This is the circumstance from which this book wants to put its basic premise, namely how to rethink the cinema's connection to the national and ways of studying it. This book attempts to answer this question. Berry and Farquhar (2006) seem to have posited their argument for the abandonment of the “traditional” national cinemas approach and its replacement with a larger analytic framework of cinema and the national. Instead of taking the national for granted as something known and unproblematic—as the older national cinemas model tended to—their larger analytic framework puts the problem of what the national is—how it is constructed, maintained, and challenged—at the center. Within that larger framework, the particular focus of this book is on cinematic texts and national identity.

Berry and Farquhar (2006) intend to introduce transnational cinema study for understanding the national cinema. The term *transnational* is usually used loosely to refer to phenomena that exceed the boundaries of any single national territory. However, there

is a tension around the term, which stems from its relation to the idea of “globalization.” In many uses, “transnationalism is a process of global consolidation” and transnational phenomena are understood simply as products of the globalizing process. However, they both do not want to be trapped in this homogeneous globalization, instead they reinstate the idea to understand globalization in this study as a phenomenon that also takes into account the particular places and times in which globalization itself operates; the particular people it affects, and the particular ways it is constituted and maintained. In other words, the idea of transnational itself cannot be explained with talking about locality and heterogeneity, rather than only about universalism and homogenization which can affect a cultural product, including cinema.

The focus on China in Chinese film studies precludes assumptions about global universality. The book puts its weight on discussing the transnational as a larger arena connecting differences, so that a variety of regional, national, and local specificities impact upon each other in various types of relationships ranging from synergy to contest. Then, it further leads the discussion into an ethnic nation and a nation-state, which whatsoever still concern the concern the idea of nation as coherent unity.

Berry and Farquhar (2006) mention that there are three major outcomes which are relevant to the above issue, namely: 1) Nation state is not universal & transhistorical, but a socially and historically located form of community in Post-Enlightenment Europe; 2) If it was then seen as something fixed and unified, it was because there was suppression imposed on the existing potentials differences; 3) To suppress them, then recitation of stories and images took part. It proves *how the concept of nation is a matter of narration. It is narrated.*

Relying on the idea that national identity in cinema studies is as multiplied, dynamic and contested form, and not as something fixed,

unified and unchanged form, then this book also highlights how localities may amalgamate with the imported/borrowed concepts (globality/universality) as can be indicated from the content of each chapter. Chapter 1 explains that the topics of each chapter emerged in the process of exploring both the Chinese and English-language writings on Chinese cinema, and the films themselves. The most significant and consistent intersections with the national formed the basis for the following seven chapters. In chapter 2, the discussion centres at the intersection of cinematic time and the time of the nation. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the intersection of the national with indigenous and imported cultures to produce distinctive modes of cinema opera and melodramatic realism. Chapters 5 and 6 examine the intersection of gender and the national in the production of modern Chinese femininity and masculinity. Chapter 7 extends that discussion into the intersection of the national and ethnicity in Chinese cinema, and our final chapter returns to the transnational to examine how the national is recast in a globalizing cinematic environment.

Finally, I strongly recommended this book to those who are interested in the study of film, literature and folklore – or to anyone who is interested in ethnic, social and historical studies – or humanities in general.