

# Short Essay



# Love and Duty

## Translating Films and Teaching Online through a Pandemic

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### 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 two platforms together host new English translations of over two dozen Republican-era Chinese films, over two hundred film clips organized into thematic playlists, and a free online course of video lectures on Chinese film classics. This essay tells the story of how the Chinese Film Classics project grew from being a book project into a multiplatform translation, teaching, and publication project during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online teaching and social media publication involved multiple global storytellers: filmmakers, educators, translators, students, and the broader Internet public. How might moving things online change, or improve, the practice of cultural history? Rea highlights in particular the practical considerations facing the translator and gives examples of how, in a social media context, some of the stories are told not by creators and audiences but by data analytics.

**Keywords:** Chinese cinema, online teaching, translation, cultural history, YouTube

To be a cultural historian is to confront profound storytelling problems. In books, in articles, and in the classroom, we try to persuade our audiences to care about events of the distant past. Which are “relevant”? Wars may be an easy sell. But what about events that are less momentous? Or nonevents? What about the feel, texture, or other intangible qualities of a bygone culture or a particular mode of expression? More generally, why should the storytelling preoccupations or styles of any bygone era matter to us, especially when we have much more pressing things to worry about—like a pandemic?

Having taught Chinese cinema for over a decade at a large, public university in Canada—mostly to students from China or of Chinese descent—I engage in, and with, multiple layers of storytelling. The historian in me is motivated to explain cinematic storytelling on its own terms; that is, in relation to the possibilities and constraints of a particular era or context—what I’d call the *integrity imperative*. Why do certain scenes in 1920s films use a color filter? Because color cinematography was not yet available, and filters were cheaper than hand tinting. Why do characters in *The Great Road* (*Dalu*, 1934) refer to the invaders not as “Japan” but as “the enemy”? Because of Nationalist government policy. Why does the woman warrior break into song at three moments in *Hua Mu Lan* (*Mulan congjun*, 1939) (see figure 1)? Because musicals were a lucrative genre for Chinese filmmakers in the 1930s. Historians take this type of essential contextualization for granted.

The storyteller in me is aware of a second imperative derived not from the source materials but from the audience: relatability. Why should inhabitants of the twenty-first century care about the stories Chinese filmmakers told nearly a century ago? Even students who identify as Chinese are several generations removed from the Republican era. Few know much about the Japanese invasion of China, much less about how it impacted the Chinese film industry. Which “national crisis” (*guonan*) is being invoked in *Wild Rose* (*Ye meigui*, 1932)? If you don’t know, the storytelling might fall flat.

With foreign-language cinema, the art form that bridges between the two imperatives of integrity and relatability is translation. Most extant Chinese films made up to 1949 have not been translated into English, meaning



Figure 1: Mulan singing in *Hua Mu Lan* (1939). *Source:* Author's collection.

that a key element of their storytelling is unavailable to people without Chinese proficiency. While working on *Chinese Film Classics, 1922–1949* (Columbia, 2021), I began translating Republican-era films. So far, I've translated twenty films and edited five other translations, my goal being to make these films not just accessible and comprehensible but engaging. This essay explores how multiple types of global storytelling—by filmmakers, translators, educators, students, and the public—have intersected in the ongoing experiment that is the Chinese Film Classics project.

## Pandemic-Accelerated Storytelling

The best way to tell stories about film, to me, is to use film form itself. For an audience, reading or listening to someone talk about a film is less satisfying than watching a video that makes use of sound, image, and text to illustrate

ideas. So, when I started writing a book about early Chinese films, I decided to create videos about those films simultaneously.

Thanks to University of British Columbia (UBC) grant funding, I was able to produce video lectures for an envisioned online course on Chinese film classics, focusing on the decades between the 1920s and the 1940s. The book I was writing focused on early Chinese films and their surrounding industry context, such as contemporaneous European and US films and Chinese film periodicals.

For the course, I decided to cover eleven of the fourteen films I discuss in the book—enough for a semester. For those chapters, I drafted the video lecture scripts simultaneously, following a two-part structure for each chapter, which resulted in two video lectures per film.

I did much of the drafting using voice-to-text software, instead of typing, to achieve a more conversational style of writing. (Fact-checking, footnoting, and other scholarly work was mostly done the traditional way.) My scholarly storytelling was also shaped by performing for the camera. I spoke every word aloud and edited down my drafts to achieve a standard length of roughly fifteen minutes per video. Storyboarding and video postproduction—especially the addition of film clips, stills, and other images—inspired me to write the book as part of a media ecology, which also includes the original films, clips from those films, and the video lectures.

Then, during postproduction, the pandemic hit. Everyone would be teaching online—I had two film courses of my own just two months away. No more screening the film in the classroom; all of them would have to be available online to students who had been sent home. Some were scattered across Canada; others were in China, Japan, South Korea, the United States, Hong Kong. I hit pause on editing the video lectures and switched to translating and subtitling films for online publication.

Between March and April 2020, I translated ten films and posted them on a YouTube channel I had originally created in 2017 for posting research lecture videos, *Modern Chinese Cultural Studies*. I now repurposed that platform to focus on cinema. I worked closely with UBC doctoral student

Liu Yuqing, who created subtitled MP4 files based on my translations. I knew that cinema instructors around the world would also be needing online teaching materials. So once the films were published, I informed colleagues at other institutions.

*Chinese Film Classics, 1922–1949* is my ninth book, and when I began writing, I felt like I was already familiar with best practices for nonfiction storytelling. Immersing myself in film translation and in audiovisual digital production of video lectures made me more attuned to the multiple voices that tell stories about cinema history. Translators render stories comprehensible to new audiences. Instructors interpret and contextualize. Audiences, too, become storytellers. Students don't just passively watch films but find their own meaning in them and write commentaries, including in course assignments. Then there is the global audience for online films, such as YouTube viewers.

The films, clips, lectures, and other videos I've posted on YouTube and <http://chinesefilmclassics.org> since 2020 have garnered over 250,000 views from viewers from over eighty-five countries. Here are a few things this multifaceted production process has taught me about global storytelling.

## Translator as Storyteller

In silent films, there is no sound to translate, only the text on-screen. One surprise for first-time viewers of Chinese silent films is that many include bilingual title cards in Chinese and English. Films like *Woman Warrior White Rose* (*Nüxia bai meigui*, 1928), *Two Stars* (*Yinhan shuangxing*, 1931), and *Song of China* (*Tianlun*, 1935) sought to tell stories to a global audience.

The challenges for the translator of films (silent or sound) are several. How to achieve precision in representing meaning? How to represent the distinctiveness of the idiom and avoid flattening different registers of language? How to represent archaic terms? Few Chinese people in 2021 speak the same way speech is represented in a silent film from 1927. But



Figure 2: Shop signs in *Laborer's Love* (1922). Source: Author's collection.

to render 1927 speech in 2021 vernacular could result in anachronism. Finally, how to fit all of the text into the frame without occluding the original image?

My policy is to translate everything—every line of dialogue, and every shop sign, letter, or other text on-screen. In *Laborer's Love* (*Laogong zhi aiqing*, 1922), the earliest known surviving Chinese-produced full film, I translated the signs in the fruit seller's shop (see figure 2), the doctor's office, the tea shop, and the All-Night Club, including the auspicious composite character 招財進寶 (“May riches arrive at this shop”), and the medical practitioner's self-flattering couplet, “Serving humanity with a benevolent heart/Reviving the aged with miracle hands”<sup>1</sup>.

1. *Laborer's Love*, directed by Zhang Shichuan (Shanghai: Mingxing Film Company, 1922).



Figure 3: “At last, a victim!” (but only in English), in *Laborer's Love* (1922). Source: Author's collection.

In silent films containing original Chinese *and* English bilingual title cards, I retranslate the Chinese when the meaning of the original English differs from the Chinese or is archaic, incomplete or misleading. In some cases, the original translator made a deliberate move to render the English differently than the Chinese, as when a man arrives at a clinic in *Laborer's Love* and the doctor says, “At last, a victim!” (The “victim” turns out to be not a patient but a con man; see figure 3.)

Then there are matters of tone. Take *Crows and Sparrows* (*Wuya yu maque*, 1949), a film about a struggle over housing set in Civil War–era Shanghai shortly before the Nationalist exodus. How would a midranking Nationalist officer in the late 1940s speak to a subordinate in Nanking? How about his mistress in their Shanghai love nest? Yu Xiaoying, Mr. Hou's kept woman, speaks in a mixture of Mandarin and Shanghainese and once jokes that the Mandarin word for penicillin—which she has never heard before—has a more deadly sound in Shanghainese: “Dead man coming up” (*pei ni si ren*).<sup>2</sup> The transliteration is voiced first by Yu, who is accepting it as a deposit for an apartment purchase, and later by her serving girl, Ah Ying, who later steals it to save a dying child. To capture the speaker's ignorance,

2. *Crows and Sparrows*, directed by Zheng Junli (Shanghai: Kunlun Film Company, 1949).

the homophone that the joke turns on, and to highlight the item's key role in the plot, I translated the term as *pay-nee-shee-ling*.<sup>3</sup>

One partially extant silent film that I am currently translating is *Cave of the Silken Web* (*Pan si dong*, 1927), whose story is adapted from the Ming novel *Journey to the West*. That special-effects-intensive film was lost for over half a century, until a copy resurfaced in Norway. Staff at the National Library of Norway generously shared not only a high-resolution digital copy of the film but also the English translation they had commissioned of that copy's Norwegian subtitles.

While translating *Cave*, I discovered that some of the Chinese title cards appear in the wrong place. A few appear in multiple places, and others do not make sense in relation to the action. This corruption of the text was likely caused during the film's journey abroad, because the Norwegian text added to those title cards usually does not match the Chinese. In some cases, like the example shown below, the Norwegian translator added jokes based on their own understanding of the plot.

The eventual published version will have intertitles with four texts: Chinese, English translation of the Chinese, Norwegian, and English translation of the Norwegian—a crowded frame but also a unique document that will allow audiences to see how the Norwegian and Chinese meanings differ from each other (see figure 4). This is where online viewing is superior to traditional screening; if needed, one can press pause or rewind.

As we saw with *Laborer's Love*, film translation and subtitling are not just a matter of rendering the meaning of the words but also of representing fonts and typography and placing text at the correct part of the frame in the subtitling process so that it appears visually appropriate and meaningful. The opening credits of *Love and Duty* (*Lian'ai yu yiwu*, 1931), for example, feature the United Photoplay Service (*Lianhua*) logo as a life preserver surrounded by four slogans (see figure 5).

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3. Read the translated film script and watch the film here: Christopher Rea, trans., "Crows and Sparrows (1949)," MCLC Resource Center Publication, April 2020, <https://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/crows-and-sparrows/>.

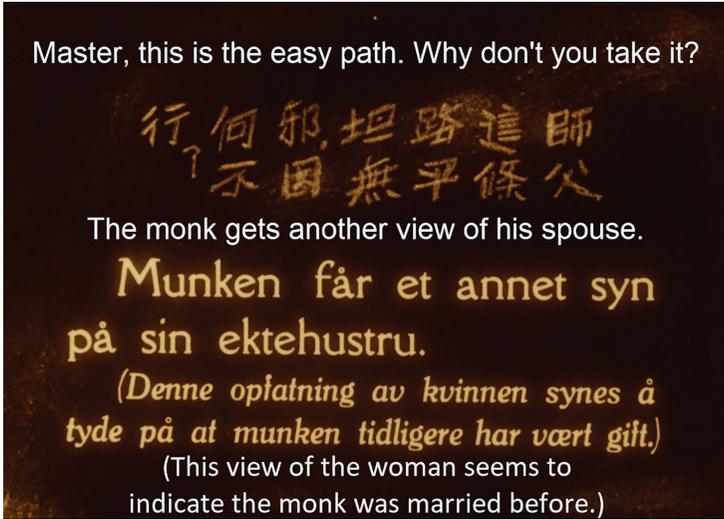


Figure 4: Four texts on one title card in the Chinese Film Classics project version of *Cave of the Silken Web* (1927). Source: National Library of Norway/author's collection.



Figure 5: The UPS logo in *Love and Duty* (1931) shows a high-flying company offering a life preserver to the Chinese film industry, surrounded by four corporate slogans. Source: Taiwan Film & Audiovisual Institute/author's collection.



Figure 6: Font design and placement in the title cards highlights significant phrases in the title cards of *Spring Silkworms* (1933), including this pun “PAWN [Pon] my word—selling cocoons, of course!”  
 Source: Author’s collection.

*Spring Silkworms* (*Chuncan*, 1933), adapted from the Mao Dun story, represents all dialogue and narration in title cards and emphasizes key terms by rendering them in larger font or with special placement: PAWN, MONEY, HOPE, FEAR, FATE. The result is a stylized effect that mimics “louder” sounds visually and exaggerates allegorical meanings. At one point in the dialogue, a friend asks the lead farmer “Tongbao, will you be selling cocoons or spinning silk at home yourself?”<sup>4</sup> The larger font draws attention to a pun on a key word in Tongbao’s response, which I rendered in figure 6.

In summer 2021, I commissioned Cambridge University PhD student Nick Stember to translate *Wild Rose* (1932), starring Wang Renmei. The film features a pair of funny secondary characters, played by veteran character actors, skinny Han Langen and fat Liu Jiqun. Han plays Lao Qiang 老槍, which, according to *Shanghai Slang Illustrated and Explained* (*Shanghai suyū tushuo*, 1935), is Shanghai slang for an opium pipe—an object consistent with Han’s emaciated physique. I therefore suggested that the character’s name be translated as Opie.

4. *Spring Silkworms*, directed by Cheng Bugao (Shanghai: Mingxing Film Company, 1933).

Liu Jiqun's character is referred to in the credits as Ah Gang 阿戇, which is a familiar form of Gang da 戇大. The subtitler, Liu Yuqing, who is writing a PhD dissertation on Chinese pidgin English, especially from the Shanghai region, pointed out that Gang da is a pidgin term, a transliteration of the English word "gander." Gander in 1930s Shanghai was slang for idiot or dupe, as in *silly goose*. After some discussion, we agreed that the slang term is too archaic, and that if we called Ah Gang "Gander," English and Chinese viewers alike would be unlikely to catch that it means fool. Nick elected to translate the name as Dopey, to make a rhyming pair with Opie.

Of course, it is not just the translator—working decades later—who imagines, represents, and mediates as part of the storytelling process. *Wild Rose* (1932), *Daybreak* (*Tianming*, 1933), and *Sports Queen* (*Tiyu huanghou*, 1934) all feature representations of the life of a girl in the Chinese countryside. Their screenwriter-director, however, was a US-educated, city-dwelling man. Sun Yu made his own decisions about what he wanted a country girl to say and how. Lin Ying in *Sports Queen*, for example, comes across as a vehicle for castigating urban inequality when she remarks, "I think Shanghai is an odd little place. Some places people live are as big as royal palaces, while others are as filthy as dog houses! The people are odd too! Some are thin as skeletons, and others as fat as pigs!"<sup>5</sup>

## Instructor as Storyteller

My four most recent film courses have been entirely online, and the teaching and learning has been primarily asynchronous—the pandemic norm. Only about a fifth of the teaching hours were synchronous, with live

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5. *Sports Queen*, directed by Sun Yu (Shanghai: United Photoplay Service, 1934).

conversation between students and instructors, in various time zones. So, like many instructors, I am learning to adapt my storytelling for a virtual classroom.

Many of my students are from China or speak Chinese, but most are unfamiliar with modern Chinese history. When I am preparing to lecture on historical context, I typically preface it with an upgraded pop quiz: When was the Chinese Communist Party founded? What were the dates of the Anti-Japanese War? (A tricky one!) When was the People's Republic of China founded? Many, sometimes most, students get the answers wrong. So, my video lectures identify the reference to the 1931 Yangtze-Huai River floods in *The Great Road*, which includes actual footage from that tragedy, and an allusion to the Second Republican Revolution of 1914 appearing in the horror-musical film *Song at Midnight* (*Yeban gesheng*, 1937). Students might have heard about the Mukden Incident of 1931, but would have to do some historical sleuthing in order to identify just how many films from the Republic of China make reference to that historical event, from *Wild Rose* (1932) and *Playthings* (*Xiao wanyi*, 1933) to *Spring River Flows East* (*Yi jiang chunshui xiang dong liu*, 1947).

Similarly, only a minority of my students have any background in film studies. I ended up creating three YouTube playlists with different types of video lecture: (1) Chinese Film Classics includes a pair of video lectures on each of eleven Republican-era films; (2) Chinese Film History (currently unlisted, not public), includes lectures on films and filmmakers after 1949; and (3) Film Form (also unlisted) focuses on topics such as mise-en-scène, diegetic versus nondiegetic sound, synchronous/nonsynchronous/off-screen sound, framing, editing, montage, auteur theory, genre, categorical form, and a variety of other concepts. In all, I ended up producing fifty to sixty video lectures. Video scripting, filming, and especially postproduction quadruple (at least!) the amount of time spent on each lecture. Still, for the instructor-storyteller, it can be a major time saver in the long run.

## Student as Storyteller

What I learned from surveying students is that they did not mind that the production value of my videos was often low. Many reported that they found the self-produced videos showing PowerPoint slides with my voice-over easier to follow than some of the talking-head videos with professional production values.

Students told their own stories about Chinese films partly through assignments. They wrote sequence analysis essays and also created video essays—one analyzing a single sequence from a film and another answering a research question they developed using my YouTube archive of 250-plus films and clips.

These video-production assignments prompted students to tell stories about film storytelling. They also forced students to learn about cinematic storytelling through basic webcam filming (ah, self-framing!) and using video-editing software. Filmmaking lesson #1: a three-minute video essay can take hours to script and produce.

At the end of the course, each student had to create a one-minute video in which they recommend to their classmates one film not on the syllabus and explain why they consider it artistically or historically important. During our student film festival, each student responded to a video essay made by a classmate. This added a recursive peer-review structure to the whole storytelling enterprise: student comments on film, classmate comments on peer film-about-film, and then the instructor grades both of them.

This storytelling form of pedagogy drew out student talents and experiences that I had not known existed before the term began. One student in my History of Chinese Cinema course had worked for Zhang Yimou on the set of *Shadow* (*Ying*, 2018). Another student in Chinese Film Classics, a professional videographer, volunteered to lead a bonus session to help students learn how to use video-editing software to create their video essay assignments.

According to entry survey responses, many students had never watched a black and white film before, and most had never seen a silent film. By the end of the course, students had not only gained exposure to both but also practiced new cinematic storytelling techniques and gained a new appreciation for the transformative power of editing.

## Netizen as Storyteller

Teaching early Chinese films online has involved what I call *playlist pedagogy*: I create a YouTube archive of films, film clips, and video lectures, arrange them into playlists, and then decide which to make available only to students in my courses (unlisted videos) and which to make public.

One of the benefits of the YouTube channel is that the channel host can track viewer behavior. I can see when the average viewer stops watching a particular video. If I see that students are not watching the video lectures to the end, I can adjust future quiz questions to encourage them to do so. The analytics keep students honest and provide insights to instructors about their products and their audience.

Equally valuable has been the unexpected feedback that I've received from people around the world in the form of YouTube comments. In September 2020, I published my translation of the earliest surviving *Mulan* film, the live-action *Hua Mu Lan* (1939).<sup>6</sup> Dozens of viewers wrote notes of appreciation, many claiming that they preferred it to Disney's 2020 live-action *Mulan*.

One specialist in the history of Chinese music, the director of a Chinese music ensemble in the United States, responded to the "Sounds of early Chinese cinema" playlist by writing extensive comments on multiple

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6. Tiffany Crawford, "UBC Professor Translates First Surviving *Mulan* Film from the 1930s," *Vancouver Sun*, September 1, 2020, <https://vancouver.sun.com/news/ubc-professor-translates-first-surviving-mulan-film-from-the-1930s>.

videos about the composers, arrangers, and librettists of their soundtracks. His comments about Huang Zi, Nie Er, Tian Han, Wang Luobin, Wei Zhongle (Wei Chung-Lo), and other composer-performers supplemented my original video descriptions. I have also received private emails from instructors who are using the films in their courses, from translators interested in contributing to the project to composers specializing in creating soundtracks for silent films. I have also heard from descendants of Chinese filmmakers, such as a producer of *Spring River Flows East*, who grew up in the United States not speaking Chinese and had been unable to fully appreciate their grandparents' work until they found my translations on YouTube.

I also hear from students asking questions about the films, such as this one about Eileen Chang's (Zhang Ailing) first-produced screenplay *Love Everlasting* (*Buliao qing*, 1947),<sup>7</sup> a film which presents a sympathetic view of romantic longing between a young woman and a married man:

Hi, I just wonder why the movie is called "Love everlasting"? I saw the love affair between the leading actor and actress, and it is more like Mr. Xia cheated in his marriage and attempted to have another relationship with his daughter's tutor. How come is the relationship everlasting?

I replied:

One interpretation might be that this is a love ("qing," or emotional connection) that is not constrained by societal conventions or institutions like marriage, and that the feeling outlasts the relationship. They won't stop loving each other, even though they part. Beyond these two people, one might even say that—whether society approves or not (and there are

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7. Modern Chinese Cultural Studies, "Love Everlasting 不了情 (1947) with English Subtitles," YouTube, September 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gjdbOeOs7Y&feature=youtu.be>.

a lot of disapproving voices in this film)—“qing”/love always follows its own rules.

The commenter responded:

Many thanks for sharing this view, which is really informative. I can understand that the leading actress confronted the dilemma over how to justify the relationship with Mr. Xia due to her moral code or exterior social norms. Actually, I am not a conservative person who fights for traditional moral principles and condemns her romance with Mr. Xia. Maybe Eileen Chang did not clearly explain why Mr. Xia felt lost and found out it is hard to maintain the relationship with his wife, or how is the marriage going to end. Thus, I cannot really stand on the same foot either with Mr. Xia and the girl (leading actress in the film). Perhaps true love should exist beyond the social norm and expectation from society or perhaps it is just a temporary love affair between those two characters.

Viewers tell stories about films based on individual or cultural perspectives. YouTube analytics, as mentioned above, tell stories too, especially about macro trends in viewer demographics and viewing habits. *Wanderings of Three-Hairs the Orphan* revealed two surprises after I published my translation on March 23, 2020. First, it quickly became one of the most popular videos on the channel, with over 19,000 views as of December 2021. As *Wanderings* is the only film I've tagged “Made for kids,” I speculate that the kid-friendly setting is one factor in its popularity. Second, many viewers of *Wanderings* have been in the Philippines, and one of the most popular searches leading people to the Modern Chinese Cultural Studies channel has been “Sanmao Tagalog.” I would welcome research into why Sanmao (Three-Hairs) is so popular in the twenty-first-century Philippines.

We hear a lot about digital literacy being higher among the younger generation. But in my experience as a professor, a filmmaker, a YouTuber, and now a TikToker (@christophergrea; @chinesefilmclassics), I've discovered that wading into new modes of storytelling—long form and short form—have benefits for teaching, research, and public conversation about cinema. We always need more translators. And I encourage my fellow cultural historians to do more experimenting with social media when telling stories about the storytelling of the past.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Chih-Ting Timmy Chen for inviting me to contribute this article and the many scholars around the world who contribute to the Chinese Film Classics project.

