

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AND FILM STUDIES FACULTY MEMBER, DR. PAUL PICKOWICZ



In Spring Quarter 2019, Prof. Paul Pickowicz (History Department) taught for the very last time his well-known course on Chinese cinema (HIEA 133). In addition to teaching the course at UCSD for over 20 years, he has taught the course in Germany, China, and Scotland. The course is called Cultural History of 20th Century China and it focuses on the glory days of Chinese silent cinema in the 1920s and early 1930s. In addition to viewing and discussing 16 films produced in Shanghai (the Hollywood of China) during this period, four groups comprised of ten students each will actually make four 20-minute films based on the Chinese films they see in class. Students do all their own acting, cinematography, and direction. The four films will be screened for the first time at the Golden Chopsticks film gala and awards ceremony scheduled for Saturday, June 8, 2019, starting at 3 p.m. in the Atkinson Auditorium. This will be the last Golden Chopsticks gala and will be open to the public.

Film Studies Faculty Director, Allan Havis, recently interviewed Distinguished Professor of History and Film Studies Faculty, Paul Pickowicz, on his impressive career in Chinese history. See full interview below:

1. What was the inspiration for launching your Chinese silent cinema course 25 years ago?

This is a history course on Shanghai in the 1920s-30s. Students see 15 Chinese silent-era films made at that time. I'm very interested in visual sources, so I wanted to ask students "What can we learn from film sources that we can't learn from more conventional sources?" Then, one day, I got a strange idea. I told students they would be much better at learning from these old films if they had to make films of their own. So, I formed groups of 8-10 students and said, "I want each group to make a 20-minute film that resonates in terms of aesthetics and content with the old Chinese films you are seeing." Students did their own acting, directing, and cinematography. The result was fascinating black & white, silent films with music and subtitles. Making their own films changed the way students learned from the old films. We celebrated each year by staging a mock Oscar event called the Golden Chopsticks Film Gala, a wonderful festival attended by hundreds of people. Everyone got dressed up and a panel of faculty judges selected Best Actress in a Lead Role, Best Director, Best Film, and so forth. Great fun! Students liked the novelty of the teaching method.

2. Which film from China's early cinema history stands out in achievement and importance?

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*This is a very tough call. There are so many outstanding titles. My personal favorite is *The Goddess*, made in 1934 and starring Ruan Lingyu, China's most unforgettable silent-screen actress. It's an absolutely riveting masterpiece that follows the daily trials and tribulations of a Shanghai prostitute. It advances the highly provocative argument that this nameless prostitute is far superior, in moral terms, to the shallow, arrogant, middle-class urbanites who take such delight in scorning and ridiculing her.*

3. You have used the Golden Chopsticks concept in many locations around the world, most recently at the University of Heidelberg, [Germany](#). How does the idea travel so readily?

Yes, after 2000 this history course began to get a lot of attention because of the unusual teaching methodology I was using. I was invited to teach it at the Univ. of Edinburgh in Scotland, the Univ. of Heidelberg in Germany, and most interesting of all, at East China Normal Univ. in Shanghai itself where I taught the course in Chinese. It works everywhere because students, even in China, have not seen any of these films and are blown away by their remarkable quality. Initially, their expectations are low. How good could a silent film made in China in 1928 really be? Then they can't believe what they see. A student in my class in Shanghai once burst out, "These films are better than the ones we have now!" And whether they are in Heidelberg, Shanghai or La Jolla, making their own films does indeed help students better understand the historical value of the old films. Students everywhere could see that hot button issues facing China in the 1920s, including migration, gender relations, and demands for justice, are still worldwide issues today. And, I must confess, the idea travelled well because the Golden Chopsticks Gala at the very end is one of those special moments students never forget.

4. Does Donald Trump have a China problem? Is that a problem only film can solve?

Yes, Trump has a China problem. And his counterpart in China, President Xi Jinping, has a USA problem. In fact, sad to say, for virtually the entirety of my professional life in China studies (I joined the UCSD faculty in 1973), US-China relations have been troubled and tense at the state-to-state level. But there's good news! In my experience (my first visit to China was in 1971), relations between ordinary citizens of America and China have been consistently open and warm. Yes, it's possible that film can ease the tensions that define the tensions between government leaders. As a first step, Trump and Xi should sign up for my class!

5. If reincarnation really is a thing, and you come back fifty years from now, will you be a filmmaker or a historian or a hedge fund broker?

*I don't know anything about economics, so you won't see me managing money. That leaves historian or filmmaker. Fortunately, you don't have to choose between the two! You can be both at the same time. As an historian, I've loved exploring all aspects of China's twentieth-century history. And I've also made two documentary films as associate producer: *China in Revolution, 1911-1949* and *The Mao Years, 1949-1976*, both with Ambrica Productions in New York. So, in 2069, when UCSD's Fifteenth College is launched (I predict it will be called Havis College), I'll still be a filmmaker and an historian who gives students a rare opportunity to be dazzled by Shanghai films of the 1920s and 1930s and to present their own films at Golden Chopsticks! What could be better?*

6. In all the wonderful years of Golden Chopsticks, was there a student film that shocked or upended you? If so, can you please explain?

*This is by far your most difficult question. You've really put me on the spot. I love all the films made over the last 25 years! But if you force me, I'll highlight *Melody of Tears* made back in 2008. It upended*

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me in many ways. It's a sad but beautiful melodrama about Shanghai musicians and their painful encounters with the mean streets of the emerging global metropolis. Lots of gangsters. A guy named Joseph Ho did all the remarkably subtle cinematography and he wrote an original musical score to accompany the film. When the film was screened at Golden Chopsticks, Joe and the others actually performed the music live as the picture was being screened! Joe went on and got a PhD in history and is now a professor in Michigan who does cutting edge research on - - you guessed it - - visual culture! The fantastic lead actress, Lilian Loh, was also the director of the film. She won Golden Chopsticks for Best Director that year. Talk about talent! After UCSD she went on to Cornell Law School.

7. There are nearly 30,000 undergraduates at UCSD and just under 30 who declared the film studies minor. What's up with that????

This is going to change. And it won't take until 2069! Faculty (including me) and college advisors have simply not done enough to get the word out. Students will be highly receptive to the idea that it doesn't matter what your major is (engineering, economics, business, philosophy, etc.), you can benefit enormously from insights about the human condition that you gain from film studies. It's the perfect interdisciplinary minor.

Dr. Pickowicz, who retired just under three years ago, has donated his 25-years of course related materials, including a complete collection of student-made films, to the UC San Diego Library. Fortunately, he has continued to teach the course (*HIEA 133, Cultural History of 20th Century China*) once a year for three years as an Emeritus Professor. A film made locally by UC San Diego students called, "[Ocean Embrace](#)," demonstrates the superb quality of work students achieve in the course. Dr. Pickowicz has expressed the generous goal that in the years ahead he will guide the campus library to organize the collection in ways that will make it easier for others to use the invaluable material.