

NOTE

ROMANIAN FILMS IN CHINA (1953–1963)

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Abstract

On 5th October 1949, a few days after the foundation of the People's Republic of China, Romania officially established diplomatic relations with the new regime. Since then, friendship and cooperation have always been the main themes between the two countries. In August 1953, a Romanian film was shown for the first time in China (*Viața învinge/Life Triumphs*, directed by Dinu Negreanu). During the next years, the distribution of Romanian movies continued at a sustained rhythm. With the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)¹ and the enhancement of censorship to the utmost, the domestic film production decreased dramatically, while bringing new movies from abroad was no longer permitted. However, a number of Romanian films released prior to 1966 remained among the few foreign movies that were still circulated throughout the country. From the late 70s to the early 90s, about forty new Romanian films were distributed in China.

This paper focuses on the Romanian films screened in China from 1953 to 1963. As some of the first and most popular foreign movies which could be seen by the local audience, they demonstrate the typical characteristics of the Chinese cinematographic culture during that decade.²

Keywords: Romanian cinema, art and propaganda, film market in China.

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¹ The Cultural Revolution, formally the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, was a socio-political movement in China, initiated by Mao Zedong to regain total control over the Party and to keep the nation in a state of “perpetual revolution”. Intellectual and artistic milieus, as well as traditionalist and religious ones were massively purged, and the whole population was affected. In this period, most films, domestic or foreign ones, were banned as they were considered “bourgeois”.

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Foreign Films from the “Same Camp”: the Distribution of Romanian Films in a Particular Context

In the early period after the foundation of PRC, some successes have been achieved in domestic economic construction; however, on the other hand, the threat of war still seemed on the doorstep. Chinese people was greatly inspired by slogans such as “Go all out to build Socialism”, “Defend your motherland” and “Destroy the enemy”, etc. The love for “comrades”, as well as the worship of “heroes” thus became the most important elements in Chinese people’s value system, which reflected through the foreign films imported by China during this period: *Lenin in October* (1937) and *The Battle of Stalingrad* (1949) from the Soviet Union, *Teen Guerrillas* (1951) and *Return to Front-line* (1951) from North Korea, *Vstanou novi bojovnici/New Fighters Shall Arise* (1950, directed by Jiří Weiss) from Czechoslovakia and many other films from Hungary or Poland, all of them coming from countries in the “same socialist camp”. Romanian films were no exception. Furthermore, the friendly relationship between China and the Soviet Union helped Romanian films to quicken their pace on Chinese screens. The Sino-Romanian Cultural Cooperation Agreement, which came into force in 1952, made the bilateral exchanges and cooperation in the cultural field develop extensively and deeply. The revolutionary theme and also the stories of pursuing a better life in Romanian films were in accordance with China's importing policies of foreign films at that time. Not surprisingly, a great number of Romanian films were introduced in such particular context.

The first Romanian film screened in New China was *Life Triumphs* from 1951 (directed by Dinu Negreanu). On this occasion, the China Ministry of Culture held a grand premiere in the Capital Cinema of Beijing in August 1953. The audience from the two countries comprised over 1000 people, including famous Chinese writers, dramatists, directors, and the ambassador along with the embassy staff of Romania in China.³ In the years to come, Romanian films were frequently shown, mainly historical films and anti-fascist war films, together with cartoons and children’s movies.

From 1953 until 1963, twenty-six Romanian films – most of them illustrating the doctrine of socialist realism – were dubbed and released in China. After the screening of *Life Triumphs*, the Chinese audiences could watch during this period *Mitrea Cocor* (directed by Victor Iliu and Marietta Sadova), *În sat la noi/In Our Village* (directed by Jean Georgescu and Victor Iliu), *Răsare soarele/The Sun Rises* (directed by Dinu Negreanu), *Afacerea Protar/The Protar Affair* (directed by Haralambie Boroş), *Alarmă în munți/Alarm in the Mountains* (directed by Dinu Negreanu), *Fetița mincinoasă/Little Liar* (directed by Ion Popescu-Gopo), *Pe răspunderea mea/On My Responsibility* (directed by Paul Călinescu), *Rîpa dracului/The Devil's Ravine* (directed by Jean Mihail), *Citadela sfărîmată/The Broken Citadel* (directed by Haralambie Boroş and French filmmaker Marc Maurette), *La Moara cu noroc/The Mill of Good Luck* (directed by Victor Iliu), *Nufărul roşu/The Red Water Lily* (directed by Gheorghe Tobias), *Ciulinii Bărăganului/Baragan Thistles* (directed by French filmmaker Louis Daquin), *Dincolo de brazii/Beyond the Fir Trees* (directed by Mircea Drăgan and Mihai Iacob), *Mingea/The Ball* and *Furtuna/The Storm* (both directed by Andrei Blaier and Serbian refugee Sinisa Ivetici), *Portretul unui necunoscut/The Portrait of an Unknown Man* (directed by Andrei Călăraşu and Gheorghe Turcu), *Avalanşa/The Avalanche* (directed by Gheorghe Turcu), *Valurile Dunării/The Danube Waves* (directed by Liviu Ciulei), *Darclée* (directed by Mihai Iacob), *Setea/Thirst*

³ “The first Romanian film dubbed in Chinese released in China, the Chinese Ministry of Culture Held a Premiere”, *People's Daily*, 22 August 1953.

(directed by Mircea Drăgan and Mihai Iacob), *Porto-Franco* (directed by Paul Călinescu), *Străzile au amintiri/The Streets Remember* (directed by Manole Marcus), *Lupeni 29* (directed by Mircea Drăgan), *Tudor* (Part 1 & Part 2, directed by Lucian Bratu)⁴.



Fig. 1 – Still frame from the movie *Alarm in the Mountains* (1955).

The theme of the films can be roughly divided into three types. Firstly, the films which set typical examples for all walks of life, or the films which glorified historical personalities, such as *Darclée* (1962) and *Tudor* (1962). The former describes the artistic achievements of a renowned opera singer and her dedication to Romania, and the latter depicts the uprising of the Romanian people against the feudal oppression of Turkey in 1821, building up a heroic image of the national warrior, Tudor.

Secondly, we mention the films which emphasized the solidarity between the army and the people, and describe their joint efforts in the anti-fascism struggle, such as *The Sun Rises* (1954), *The Danube Waves* (1959) and *Beyond the Fir Trees* (1957). In 1959, an author wrote – apparently with strong emotion – in his review of *Beyond the Fir Trees*: “The misfortune and awakening of the hero strongly indicate the evil of Hitler's aggression. History is merciless and undeniable. As long as the enemy attacks, tens of millions of people will take up arms to fight against them.”⁵

⁴ The English titles are informal translations from Romanian (source: IMDb.com). During the 50s and at the beginning of 60s, Romanian films were usually distributed in countries from the “socialist camp”; a few of them were also screened in other European countries, such as France, Italy, Sweden, etc., but not in Great Britain or in USA. Hence, the lack of official titles in English.

⁵ Hu Jian, “A Man's Awakening – An Introduction to the Romanian Film *Beyond the Fir Trees*”, *Film Art*, no. 2, 1959, pp. 13–14.

Thirdly, Chinese audiences were shown propagandistic films which speak highly of people's enthusiasm for overthrowing the old society and contributing to the new life. *Mitrea Cocor* (1953) and *In Our Village* (1951) fall into this category.



Fig. 2 – Cristea Avram as Giraltoni and Silvia Popovici as the title role in *Darclée* (1962).



Fig. 3 – Emanoil Petruț as the title role in *Tudor* (1962).



Fig. 4 – Still frame from the movie *In Our Village* (1951).

As for the character's image-building, Romanian films establish great heroes and pay more attention to human nature. According to the Chinese summary that appeared in the printed materials of the time, *The Danube Waves* (dubbed in Chinese in 1961) depicts communist Toma, embarked under false pretences on a barge carrying weapons and ammunition for the Nazis in August 1944; his secret mission is to deliver the lethal "merchandise" loaded on the barge to the local anti-fascists fighters. In fact, the film is much more than that: a tragic love story in times of war, a triangle of characters that reminds of the classical film *Casablanca*... Toma is shadowed in the movie by the other male character: Mihai, the captain of the barge (masterly played by Liviu Ciulei), who was ordered by the Germans to make this transport just after he had married young beautiful Ana. She accompanies her husband in the dangerous travel along the mined Danube, and her presence aggravates the rivalry and suspicions between Mihai and Toma. The captain of the barge was not the "tall, big, and perfect" type of hero familiar to Chinese audiences at that time. He was sincere, patriotic and loyal; when he discovers the real identity of Toma, he helps him to accomplish his mission, and dies heroically in the fight with the Germans. His "weaknesses", such as his coarse language, abrupt manners, and the sometimes erotic behavior, made him more a charming man of true nature than a great hero high above routine life. He was asked to collect debt; after being refused by the debtor, he returns to Toma with his own money and at the same time warns Toma quite aggressively that he doesn't want to be bothered again with such chores, which, in fact, shows that Mihai is honest, righteous and amicable. The image-building of Mihai was a breakthrough for Chinese audiences: he is not perfect, but he is real, and thus he gets more emotional approval.



Fig. 5 – Liviu Ciulei as Mihai and Irina Petrescu as Ana in *The Danube Waves* (1959).



Fig. 6 – Lazăr Vrabie as Toma in *The Danube Waves*.

In the “red era”⁶, the films in China were highly homogeneous, regardless of domestic or foreign ones. In this context, Romanian films stood out, brought brand new aesthetic experiences to Chinese audience. The movie *Little Liar* (*Fetița mincinoasă*, 1956) by Ion Popescu-Gopo – a master of Romanian animation – was adapted from Andersen's fairy tales; it combined animation, puppets and live actors in a new way and was distributed in China just the following year after its premiere in Bucharest. As the first color film in Romania, the movie for children *The Red Water Lily* (*Nufărul roșu*, 1955) was also dubbed in China in 1959.

The comedy *Protar Affair* (*Afacerea Protar*⁷, 1956) and the psychological drama *The Mill of Good Luck* (*La Moara cu noroc*⁸, 1955), both nominated for the Golden Palm Award of Cannes Film Festival, were shown in China even if they carried no strong ideological marks. *Protar Affair* was released in Romania and China in the same year.

Nonetheless, selection at major international festivals has not been always a passport for Romanian films in China; the diplomatic relationship between the two countries and Romania's political stance are the fundamental issues.



Fig. 7 – Still frame from the movie *Protar Affair* (1956).

⁶ The “red era” is a term that usually designates the period between 1949 and 1976, namely between the proclamation of PRC by Mao Zedong and the year of his death, when the Cultural Revolution – started in 1966 – came to an end.

⁷ An adaptation of the play *Ultima oră/Breaking News* by Mihail Sebastian, written in 1944 and staged for the first time in the autumn of 1945.

⁸ An adaptation of the short novel *Moara cu noroc* (1880) by Ioan Slavici.

*The Uprising (Răscoala*⁹, 1965), a film which describes the uprising of Romanian peasants in 1907, was not shown in China, although it won the award for debut at Cannes Film Festival in 1966. The plot of the film itself seemed quite adequate to China's ideological requirements; however, the situation had changed. In the middle of 1960s, because of the Sino-Soviet split, coupled with the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, China stopped the distribution of new Romanian films.

Promotion and Reception of Romanian Films in China

From the founding of New China up to 1966, various ways of film promotion were employed, which applied to Romanian films as well. Generally speaking, on-the-spot advertising and social publicity are the two main channels; the former indicates the promotion at the screening place and the latter, far from it.

On-the-spot advertising was different in the countryside and in the city. In remote desolate rural areas, projection teams were sent, with the projectionist commenting plots for audiences before screening, and many open-air cinemas became a shared memory of a whole generation. In the cities, three main ways were used: broadcasting before screening, handing out film promotional brochures to audiences and putting up hand-drawing posters on the walls or in the windows.



Fig. 8 – Chinese promotional drawing for the film *Porto-Franco*¹⁰.

Social publicity includes film exhibitions, advertisements in newspapers and magazines, and reviews in film periodicals. During the ten years from 1953 to 1963, the “Romanian Film

⁹ An adaptation of the novel *Răscoala* (1932) by Liviu Rebreanu.

¹⁰ The movie – an adaptation of the novel *Europolis* (1933) by Jean Bart – was released in Romania in 1961, and in China the next year.

Week”, film receptions, premieres and other activities were held frequently. In addition to the premier of *Life Triumphs*, “Romanian Film Week” was held in 20 cities in China such as Beijing, Tianjin, Taiyuan and Shanghai. The event started on 30 December 1954, the anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of Romania, and ended on 12 January 1955. During the Film Week in Beijing, Romanian films had been shown 95 times and watched by 57900 spectators. The rate of attendance reached 61.8%. In the following two years, each film screened during the “Romanian Film Week” was seen by more than 500 people on average.

Neither creating heroic utterances like “Annihilated Fascism, freedom belongs to us”,¹¹ nor setting up heroes who would rather die than surrender, the overall tone of Romanian films is distinctive from other foreign films because of the different cultural background, customs, aesthetic attitudes. The Chinese audiences even joked that Romanian films are only about “hugging and kissing”, which was refreshing for an audience intoxicated by “fighting to death” films. After all, life is life, ordinary people is ordinary. Romanian films at that time appealed to a great number of Chinese audiences; from state leaders to peasants, from artists to laborers, all could get their own inspiration from these films.

¹¹ The lines come from Albanian film *Njësi guerril* (*The Guerilla Unit*, 1969), directed by Hysen Hakani.

