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Question 1

**“All through this long, boring, convoluted, confusing, feeble attempt at a historical epic …I didn’t think that Jackie Chan would be involved in a Chinese Communist propaganda film.” Does “1911” (2011) deserve this criticism? How has your understanding of the 1911 revolution been influenced by this movie?**

MODERN CHINA: PLURALISM, AND BEYOND TERRITORIALITY

02.108

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‘1911’ commemorates the Xinhai revolution by portraying it as a rebellion against the monarchical despotism of the Qing. It attempts to pull its viewers in via having a star-studded cast, but consistently lacks characterization of key members such as Sun Yat-sen or Huang Xing. However, Yuan Shikai stands true to life as a manipulative and ambitious general, and the Qing as depicted corrupted and weak. Western involvement is minimal, and so are leaders from the Tong Meng Hui. In the following essay, I shall break down the themes of this movie, depicting the characters involved in 1911 and their actions in history.

‘1911’ is a form of political education, to influence the public to an ideal. Thus, it contains recurring themes of nationalism and patriotism. This is seen as the Xinhua News Agency featuring quotes from the première about how viewers are ‘inspired’ by the 72 martyrs in the film (Ma, 2011). Notably, the communist historiography views 1911 as the ‘overthrow of a feudal political order’ that acted as the foundation for communism. (Dirlik, pg. 216) The purpose of this film is to glorify the revolution and to politically justify inheriting its ideals by the Communists. Thus, it consistently intersperses facts that break the momentum of the film but add to the film’s historical accuracy. While crude, ‘1911’ is a product of China’s existing propaganda system: persuasion and not force, (Brady, pg. 71), a means for “political education” (Brady, pg. 74) with the content monitored by the propaganda department (Brady, pg. 74). Thus, ‘1911’ uses popular actors to attract the common citizen while tapping into nostalgia for the passion of the revolution. (Brady, pg. 75)

This film needed to show the need for revolution and chose to depict the decay of the existing Qing power structure as a reason. Within the movie, the Qing court was corrupt, weak and incompetent at controlling the country, contrasting with scholarly young students passionate for the revolution. This need for dichotomy simplifies the 1911 revolution’s events for the viewer at the cost of eliminating the historical accuracy that the movie tries to portray. The narrative that the Qing was backward and thus inferior to the Western Powers accepted by both the Kuomintang and Communists (Elman, pg. 169) and thus heavily prominent in the film. Ironically, it is the Qing’s call for reformation and the breakneck speed at which organizational and constitutional challenges cropped up that led to its downfall. (Dirlik, pg. 220) By eliminating the examination system, the Qing had deprived local gentry of access to the Imperial court, leading to “disorder in its exploitative activities” (Dirlik, pg. 220). Commercialization brought about the alliance between merchants and gentry (Dirlik, pg. 219) which created a public sphere of interaction where political opinion can be formed. (Habermas, pg. 176) This created avenues for dissent and the revolutionaries were able to establish their organizations based on the common ground between the educated social leaders with no government inclinations and the radicals who wanted change. (Esherick, pg. 154) While the movie intends to suggest to the viewer that the revolutionaries were reformists who were disgusted by the weakness of the Qing in dealing with the Western powers, it failed to include the sociological pressures that the Qing court experienced.

The film intended to provide a manicured image of Sun, fit for the political narrative of 2011, imposed on the public by the state-backed film studio and screenwriters. (Ergenc, pg. 229) Sun Yat-sen was “a source of legitimacy in both mainland China and Taiwan” (Ergenc, pg. 239) and thus this film attempts to shape the collective memory of the Xinhai Revolution by using him as a symbol to “channel patriotic feeling”.(Ergenc, pg. 240) Thus, they mention Sun’s high prestige overseas, given his entrance in the movie to intervene in the Qing’s Four Nations Loan. He made alliances with the Western and Japanese imperialists to secure his schemes, (Esherick, pg. 145) and invited them to feast upon China in the film despite Sun decrying China as a ‘hypercolony’ in his writings (De Bary, pg. 321) His eloquence pushes overseas Chinese to support him in his fund-raising efforts, and is held in the film to be ‘selfless’ to Yuan Shikai’s derisive laughter. This overly optimist film depicts Sun as an excellent speaker and a visionary, befitting the Communist historiography as a figure for “transformation and construction of the new China” (Ergenc, pg. 239). The state benefits from Sun being depicted in this manner as Sun provides “openness to continuous interpretation” and thus can be “easily manipulated according to the needs of the moments, geography and group of people in need of a mobilizing hero.” (Ergenc, pg. 240) This film thus exemplifies Berger’s view of how the political narrative attempts to influence the collective memory, especially since collective memory as history has died is replaced by collective memory as narrative. (Ergenc, pg. 228)

The movie had directly linked the Wuchang uprising as the success of efforts by the Tongmenghui in spreading the revolution. In contrast, the Tongmenghui’s members were a minority representation of Qing’s imperial subjects, and suffered “minimal local support” (Zarrow, pg. 35), reflecting the class division between the urban student revolutionaries and agricultural poor. (Esherick, pg. 155) The secret societies that participated had “[seen] some potential political or economic advantage to be derived from their participation” (Esherick, pg. 175) and the Overseas Chinese saw opportunity once the Qing government was overthrown (Zarrow, pg. 32) Sun won support not just through his eloquence, but because there were interested parties who found his revolution as a means to advance their interests. In the end, the Wuchang Uprising was initiated by a separatist group (Esherick, pg. 149) which was financially and operationally separate from the rest of the Tongmenghui (Esherick, pg. 150) Before 1911, the Tongmenghui and its subsidiaries were focused against the Qing court, but once the main threat was gone, the Tongmenghui splintered into its subgroups, with Sun unable to unify the Tongmenghui under a single banner. (De Bary, pg. 320) This was due to the loyalty of the Tongmenghui members to their province rather than to the central leadership. (Esherick, pg. 148) The Communist Party needed legitimacy as inheritors of the Tongmenghui’s revolutionary legacy, thus it was necessary to remove unwanted distractions such as disunity in the Tongmenghui. Likewise, the rest of the Tongmenghui core members are given bit-roles and barely speak in the film itself as they are not central to the task of glorifying the revolution and Sun.

Both Sun and Huang Xing are portrayed as being closely allied together, even sharing a fictional countdown using pocket watches. Huang was indeed one of Sun’s closest allies prior to 1911. When fund-raising, Huang was included as one of Sun’s supporters in the Penang fund-raising campaign (Yen, pg. 191) and even leading the campaign once Sun had to leave (Yen, pg. 192). Huang Xing believed in Yuan (Li, 196-7) and tried to “enrol Yuan Shikai’s entire cabinet in the Kuomintang” (Esherick, pg. 198), contrary to the movie’s portrayal of refusing to accede to Yuan Shikai’s demands. The disparity is explained by who portrayed Huang: Chan himself. It behoves for Chan to have his character be sympathetic: Huang’s actual wife is not shown in the film and thus Xu is not Huang’s mistress onscreen, with them leaving together at the end of the film. Historically, Huang and Xu had met not as part of a paper marriage, but when Huang had fled to Guangzhou after the failed uprising, where Xu had escorted him to Hong Kong (Lee, pg. 607). In addition to training as a doctor, Xu had sponsored the establishment of hospitals, assisting Huang in charge of warfare and eventually becoming his assistant and secretary. (Lee, pg. 607) In real life, Huang was not only educated in Japan but had achieved *Jinshi* status at 22, proving to be both well-educated in both classical education as well as modern warfare. As a testament to their close friendship, Huang persuaded Sun into keeping the compromise between the revolutionaries and Yuan (Lin, pg. 352) and at appeasing Yuan’s growing appetites, contrary to his outright rejection in the movie. However, these relationships are flattened along with the other personages of this film to save time but inevitably reduces the complexity of their characters.

Huang tells Sun that his role is not to fight but gather funds and support for the revolution before leaving for China to lead the Second Guangzhou Uprising in the movie. As a result of his oratorical skills, Sun’s main role was to cultivate support with the leaders of the local Chinese communities, setting up bases in colonial cities with an ethnic Chinese conclave. (Yen, pg. 178) Sun found that the Overseas Chinese provided “a major financial source for the revolution” (Yen, pg. 180) More importantly, despite the failure of his multiple revolutions, and the undermining of support by the anti-Sun faction in the Tongmenghui, Sun was still able to maintain the connection with the overseas Chinese and was able to raise 50 000 dollars (Yen, pg. 192) despite not guiding the fund-raising campaign himself. However, other than the announcement of the failure of the Guangzhou revolution, the movie does not show the presence of the Overseas Chinese nor their efforts to raise funds on Sun’s behalf. The Chinese government did not see the need to feature a populace that they had not needed to target in the course of making this film and thus other than the scene set after the failure of the Second Guangzhou Uprising, they are only seen but never named.

Unlike Huang and Sun, Yuan Shikai is depicted as ambitious and as cunning as he was in real life. He shows his close ties with the Western world through the heavily ornamented train carriage car when travelling to the Manchu court as well as his new house upon being visited by the British Ambassador, and his attention to detail via the management of his image as he cuts his queue in front of the news cameras, glibly replying that “A revolutionary has to have a revolutionary look”. However, what stands out most of all is his ambition. Yuan demanded to be made prime minister and blackmailed the Manchu court with the revolutionary army (Lin, pg. 347) When he turned to the rebels, he negotiated with them lenient terms for the emperor’s abdication, and eventually was promoted to president of the republic. (Lin, pg. 355) The movie accurately displays Yuan’s political acumen at making sure that he would not be disposed of once the rebels were gone, and the ease at which he manoeuvres his opponents in the Manchu Court and the republican government, most notably the intimidation of the Empress Dowager into abdication. His close ties with the Western world are represented in the form of the English Ambassador offering to act as a go-between with the revolutionaries to “protect British interests”. This was needed as the revolutionaries gained support (Lin, pg. 349), with the same Ambassador offering mediation between Yuan and the revolutionaries (Lin, pg. 350) Yuan was the ideal figurehead for the imperialist as he was a ‘strongman’ as opposed to the decidedly anti-imperialist bent of the revolutionaries. (Lin, pg. 356-7) Thus both sides needed their respective support bases, but Yuan proved to be the better representative as the Western powers had financially interfered in the revolutionary government’s affairs (Lin, pg. 359). This reliance on foreign intervention was notably *not* depicted in the movie despite occurring just one month after Wuchang, more likely to avoid displaying the humiliation of the republican government at the hands of the Western powers.

In all, one can see the various aspects that the film attempts to portray: its patriotic and revolutionary themes, the nationalism as well as the documentary-style adherence to accuracy. However, most Western reviewers feel that the screenwriters are trying too hard to inject a propagandistic agenda at the expense of the quality of entertainment. The personages are flashed across the string at dizzying speed, and the characters require intense study before one can understand, and even at that point, the stereotypical clichés do not tie well with the need to portray as a serious film. The film’s need to justify its political views with facts causes it to meander with no climax, leading to the above quote. It is no wonder that Western audiences hoping to see quality action-comedy are left disappointed by this movie.

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