***Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945**,*
by Weihong Bao.
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Weihong Bao's *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China 1915-1945* innovatively combines a rigorously researched history of cinema in early 20th-century China with audacious theorizations on reception and spectatorship, affect theory, and media genealogy. Bao's ambitious study aims to integrate elusive dynamics and intangible materials into a historical reconstruction of Chinese cinema's numerous permutations from the silent era to World War II. While performing close readings of contemporary media theory, Chinese film reviews and journals, and key sequences of surviving films, posters and photographs, Bao also teases out the impact of discourses and practices infrequently seen as cinematic. Her case studies, in fact, cover an eclectic range of objects and contexts including irretrievably lost films, affective and somatic structures of experience, hypnotism, peep shows, glass architecture, and performative displays of destruction. Consequently, while this study is firmly entrenched within contemporary academic discourses on modern China, Bao's innovative and exacting rethinking of key categories of analysis in the humanities such as medium, affect, intermediality and spectatorship should resonate across a vast range of scholarly disciplines.

Bao's coinage of the term "affective medium" approaches the cinematic medium not as a structure undergirded by a single teleological quality or fixed set of operational procedures; "instead, it poses itself a supramedium—a mediating environment yoking technological, natural, and human forces, constituted by (yet at the same time covering up) the interdependence between affect, mediation, and media institutions" (17). Rather than situating medium-specificity or medium-consciousness against a notion of intermediality, therefore, Bao examines how the cinematic medium in China was socially structured by its interactions with competing media institutions. Given the ambitious scope of her study, Bao persuasively theorizes and establishes the interacting material, incarnate and affective convergences that give rise to dynamics of intermediality within the context of early Chinese cinema.

Moreover, in a striking and original move, Bao articulates an alternative approach from recent media history that has privileged the recovery of obsolete or dead media in a progressively expanding accretion of errant timelines for contemporary media platforms. Bao articulates the notion of cinema as an "affective medium" to bring into view its "false or camouflaged continuities" (5). This approach enables her to interrogate, rather than merely dispel, the enduring and operative influence of the myth of an underlying systematic unity in shaping the political hopes and social aspirations that have clustered around different media as tools to harness a mass subjectivity. At the same time, Bao's approach also opens up a critical space wherein the complex and heterogeneous channels of social, technological and corporeal interactions that structure any singular 'medium' are individuated and

As the title suggests, fire—a force that is both object *and* process, enveloping *and* destructive, material *and* intangible—acts as an emblem for this volatile conjoinment of affect with medium as critical concepts. As this book richly demonstrates, fire has a particularly labile relationship to different facets of cinema's emergence and development in modern China. It alternately symbolizes the combustible nature of film stock; the pervasive, ineffable nature of affect in Chinese film criticism; the vitality of animation; and the patriotic fervor as well as foreign threats to the nation. Fire also recurs as an important element of mise-en-scène in the films Bao addresses, such as the heroic "fiery films" subgenre or propaganda films reflecting the atrocities of war.

While fire was indubitably a pervasive attraction in modern Chinese cinema, some readers might feel apprehensive about its viability as a category of analysis given its conceptual flexibility and numerous metaphorical inflections in Bao's study (the same misgiving about generality, in fact, frequently leveraged against the "affective turn" in the humanities). But Bao approaches the parameters of her objects of inquiry as expansive and mutable precisely to hold such flexibility to productive and engaging scrutiny. This approach enables her to explore the ways in which a medium or a foundational theoretical concept in film theory is not merely a "mediating environment" but also already internally mediated by ceaselessly shifting practices and discourses. One of the most audacious and challenging aspects of this work, in fact, is its generative skepticism towards the givenness of seemingly stable and transparent conceptual categories and media formations. Consequently, Bao brings into view the variabilities and mediated constructions of various cinematic media in relation to different regional contexts, historical events, and technological developments. This approach extends beyond the motif of fire or the categories of medium and affect to comprise a vast list of key critical terms and structuring binaries in media studies, including the distinctions between archaeology and genealogy, the virtual and the material, the immersive and the enframed, as well as exacting qualifications on notions of the *dispostif*, transparency, and embodied spectatorship.

Bao's notion of an affective medium unsettles the categorical coherence of media formations by foregrounding the importance of affect to the constitutive sensorium of any technologically-mediated practice, thus generating "a notion of the medium as a *mediating environment* that not only redraws individual medium boundaries in an empirical sense but, in an attempt to transcend such boundaries, exploits the continuity between space, affect, and matter while reconnecting body, collectivity, and technology" (6). This critical intervention, however, is not unilateral, for if affect expands Bao's articulation of the medium into an immersive environment shaped by multiple forces, affect itself is also qualified and nuanced as structurally embedded and manufactured by a range of political and media institutions. By reading affect through the optic of media ecology, Bao's work acts as a corrective to the vagueness of much affect theory which often displaces analysis at the level of structure to highly particularized and subjective descriptions. In contrast, Bao's study treats affective immediacy as a phenomenon that is not extra-discursive but highly mediated by a range of different political and media institutions, thus participating in the so-called

"affective turn" while also striving to ground some of its claims into legible social, aesthetic, or technological formations.

Each of the subsequent chapters make intricate arguments based on the relationship between cinema's interactions with other domains of Chinese modernity. For instance, in the section devoted to the notion of "resonance," Bao focuses on the popularity of *fiery* films, a subgenre of martial arts movies featuring dynamic physical feats and sets in flames (none of these films have been preserved, prompting Bao to turn to the ephemera and historical context around them in order to situate their aesthetic and social significance). Bao analyzes the popularity of these films as articulations of a new, anti-colonial national paradigm called *neoheroism*, wherein an emerging interest in the technical virtuosity of the actor's kinesthetic body was symbolically aligned with emerging technologies. Her analysis of how the actor's body in martial arts films blurred the boundaries between technique and technology extends to her inquiry on affect and corporeality in the experience of the spectator. In fact, Bao situates cinematic spectatorship within the context of other technological discourses that would have shaped visual experience in the 1920s such as incipient wireless networks, the radio, television reception, and hypnotism. Bao argues that like the cinematic medium, the spectator's body should be understood as an "intermedial" locus wherein the industrial, technological, and somatic rhythms of different technologies converged, thus instating an affective field where an emerging modernity was viscerally felt. The interplay between emerging media (and its then imaginary horizons of future possibility) gave rise to a new paradigm of embodied subjectivity wherein distinctions between self and other, addresser and addressee, spectator and image were radically unsettled into the quasi-continuum of a new, technologically-mediated environment. Here Bao's deployment of affect bolsters her expansive examination of how interacting international, transregional, and vernacular media networks forged a modern public sphere. It also provides a persuasive and evocative valence for tackling how the cinematic medium has been historically articulated, not only through its empirical limits but also for the fantasies of transcending those very limits it inevitably inspires.

Fiery Cinema has a chronological and extensive filmography that acts as a useful map for both new and seasoned students of Chinese cinema. While the book omits a complete bibliography, Bao's endnotes provide a lucid and engaging analysis on the vast amounts of texts she mobilizes. Furthermore, this volume is richly and usefully illustrated with posters, advertisements and photographs that help evoke the sensorium of Chinese modernity Bao painstakingly recreates. While rigorously argued and solidly entrenched in meticulous archival research and historical reconstruction, Bao's thinking is characterized by a peripatetic vitality that ceaselessly draws surprising and persuasive connections between seemingly unlikely but always conceptually illuminating terms and contexts. Ultimately, the notion of the "affective medium" at the core of this important study is not so much a conflation of these two terms but a discursive *topos* wherein Bao teases out the conceptual overlap between these categories in a mutually-illuminating interplay. Bao thus produces a genealogy not only of Chinese cinema but also of a technologically-engineered affect as it was being actively theorized in politically-

orientated discourses on aesthetics in early 20th-century China, expanding the geopolitical territory of how the field of media studies historicizes and deploys the affective turn.

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