From Rebels to Rickshaws: Early Cinematic Representations of the Chinese

One of the most pervasive stereotypes about China during the mid- to late nineteenth century was its association with stasis. European and American commentators consistently harped on the way in which the “sleeping giant” or the “sick man of Asia” (as China was sometimes called) not only embodied the ethnographic past in its fullest sense—in the sense of the anachronistic time of the Other—but also steadfastly refused to change. Karl Marx, writing on the opium trade and the related conflicts between Europe and China in the New York Herald in 1858 encapsulated this viewpoint when he labeled Celestial Empire “the representative of the antiquated world,” describing China as “vegetating in the teeth of time.” Of course, Marx proved wrong in his prediction that China’s conflict with Britain and France over opium would result in a cataclysmic reaction that would set this “semi-barbarian” civilization into motion again. Yet his synthesis of traditional notions of Asiatic despotism and newly emerging capitalist and evolutionary conceptions of development laid bare what most

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Europeans and Americans perceived as the fundamental conflict between East and West: a Western embodiment of speed as a principle of generation and progress and a Chinese embrace of slowness and stoppage, which allowed China to resist incorporation into new global (and imperial) networks.

As a result, technology—and principally technologies of speed, including the telegraph—became the touchstones of the West’s encounter with China during this century. Steamships were, to some degree, behind the gradual expansion of the treaty port system, which licensed the West to penetrate for the first time deep into the interior of China and to fantasize about its “carve up” into colonies and spheres of influence.

Thus the contrast Europeans and Americans drew between the steamer and the sampan was a metonym for the march of progress in China. Railroads, with their similar grafting of time and space along a continuum of geographic control, were a similar “transfer point.” Official resistance on the part of the Chinese authorities to their construction was viewed through prism of this contest between stasis and change. As John Thomson, one of the most influential foreign photographers of China, exhorted in his 1898 work *Through China with a Camera*, “The great trunk railway piercing the most populous part of the Empire, will prove of incalculable service, not only in opening new fields for commerce, but in breaking the fetters of superstition which for centuries have bound China and her people.”

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These words are Thomson’s conclusion to his introductory sketch of the country. The sketch was a narrative that was intended explicate in words the underlying ideology behind his images of the region—an ideology characterized by Thomson’s “hope that China may awake from her lethargy before it is too late, and pursue a policy of progress and enlightenment, and so banish for ever her antiquated usages and bring herself abreast of the times” (17). Pitting the freedom of movement against the conceptualization of stasis as imprisonment, China is both bound to and bound by a past that stymies forward motion. It is only the Western penetration of the hermetically sealed world of China—by the “piercing” railroad and the puncturing camera—that opens up the possibility replacing stagnation with flow, and antiquity with modernity.

With its publication date of 1898, Through China with a Camera offers at best a felicitous accident in its union of the train and the camera. Yet it is hard not to see the specter of a new technology here, the motion picture, and the invocation of its famous “birth” in the Lumière brothers’ film about a train arriving at its terminus. This specter is especially evident in one of Thomson’s photograph, which shows boys on a street in Peking looking into a kinetoscope. Thomson’s book, therefore, serves as a perfect backdrop for understanding how early films about China invoked the ethnographic imagination—or, conversely, elided it—in order to bolster political and social understandings of China as oppositional and antithetical to Western modernity. In
short, in the contrast it drew between the progressive motion of the European or American and the anachronistic motion of the Chinaman, films about the Chinese from the turn of the century thus captivated audiences with images of the exotic world it recorded, while at the same time cinematically recasting notions of Oriental stasis and decadence and encoding what Johannes Fabian calls the “denial of coevalness” within this new visual medium to justify a civilizing mission.

The moving film camera arrived in China almost simultaneously with its start in Europe. Its role was firmly implanted in 1900 when the Boxer Rebellion erupted in the north of China. This was one of the first conflicts ever to be recorded in motion pictures—the others were the Spanish American War (1898) and the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). As a result, the new medium was used extensively to visualize current events for consumers back home. In particular, these films promoted an openly imperialist gaze, especially by concentrating on the machinery of the foreign presence in China—i.e. the military—over and above ethnography. The films also worked by reinventing the form of the military panorama, which had historically been used to represent China to the West in earlier conflicts. These panoramas, as Alison Griffiths notes, “laid claim to the historical and geographical real through an indexical bond, premised on their status as topographically correct and authentic reconstructions of battles, landscapes or ancient antiquities such as the Acropolis in Athens”; like their

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later moving counterparts, they also put audiences in the position of historical
witnesses or war reporters.  

There was, of course, no footage of the most famous event of the Boxer Uprising, the “55 Days at Peking” in the summer of 1900. During the “Siege of the Legation,” Europeans and Chinese Christians were holed up in the British embassy and successfully resisted attempts to annihilate them at the height of the anti-foreign agitations, which were tacitly supported by the Chinese government. However, British and American companies heavily filmed allied troop movements both during the relief effort and during the occupation of China that followed. These companies sent back innumerable newsreels of only a few minutes duration. This footage constructed modernity through fixed-camera and panned shots that showed the troops parading in full uniform in front of (or from left to right of) the camera, which situated itself in the putative space of the invaded Chinese. Set in barren scrubland outside the urban space of Beijing, these films effectively eliminated the Chinese presence in order to assert motion as a spectacle of Western military prowess—as an invasion of motion and energy on the static and contained Chinese populace. Because of distribution patterns that saw Edison films released in Britain and major British films released in the States, these films work collectively to build an unannounced opposition between the West and China in which the difference between Americans and Britons are elided through their

solidarity in opposition to the Chinese. This consolidation of the Western spectator is further supported by the fact that the relief force in China was a multinational one.

(The films I have found to date concentrate almost exclusively on British and American troops and seem also to overlook the other Asian power involved, the Japanese, who were a major player in the relief.\textsuperscript{5} Japan, however, was seen to be modernizing along appropriate lines, and by the camera was not so shy about recording Japanese troops during the Russo-Japanese War four years later, where, by contrast, the Japanese military is sometimes filmed as surpassing the peasant-like Russians.\textsuperscript{6} Japan’s defeat of Russia in this conflict bore out these filmmakers’ picture of the war.)

The American Mutoscope and Biograph’s 1903 film of the “6th Cavalry Assaulting the South Gate of Pekin” offers a good example of this method.\textsuperscript{7} Shot from behind the lines, the film opens with troops running up to edges of a wall. It then shows the troops lying down to fire. Then the cavalry comes, with flags flying. The mounted men make a spiral and head towards gate. Nowhere are the Chinese present in this scene, and the gate evoked both in the title and at the end of the footage, bolsters this sense of division between European space and the formerly inviolable space of

\textsuperscript{5} An exception to this rule is the two-reel film “Cossack Cavalry” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1903), FLA 3331. This film shows Cossack troops moving forward but similarly participates in voiding the Chinese.

\textsuperscript{6} Elite Russian units were also admired, however. See “Russian Sharp Shooters (Russo-Japanese War)” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1904) FLA 3841.

\textsuperscript{7} “6th Cavalry Assaulting South Gate of Pekin” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1902), Motion Picture and Television collection, Library of Congress, FLA 4078.
Peking, a place by definition intended to be impervious to outside influences. Although modern viewers might be tempted to read against the grain and see the Sixth Cavalry as the barbarians outside the gate, the filmmaker’s intent was clearly to demonstrate the successful overcoming of Chinese resistance—a resistance configured as walls, stones, gates, and other inanimate marks of division which are literally static, as well as insufficient barriers to the march of progress.

Even more startling is AMB’s “The Forbidden City, Pekin.” This film consists of interior shots of the Forbidden City, devoid of all human activity. China has truly been vanquished, its geography now a place of blankness for the West to occupy. Once the icon of all that was mysterious and impenetrable about Chinese culture in traditional, textual travel narratives, the camera has now not only broken the Forbidden City’s bounds of prohibition and opened its space up to scrutiny, but also effectively turned it into a monument, a thing of the past. It reconstructs time, from a linear Western perspective, and according to which the secrets of the past become knowable to an audience far removed from the spectacle itself.

If the Chinese are conspicuously absent in these films, Indian soldiers are not. Quite a number of these films show the movement of Indian troops, yet another way of highlighting the glories of empire writ large in the successful routing of the Boxers and their supporters within the Qing government. Narrative accounts of the Rebellion reveal that the Indian, specifically turbaned Sikh soldiers, were one of the things that

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8 “The Forbidden City, Pekin” (American Mutoscope and Biograph Co, 1903), FLA 4142.
most frightened the Chinese populace when the allies had invaded—they had some conception of white people, but often not of South Asians. That they are so prominent in numerous films and the actual subject of works such as AMBCO’s “The Bengal Lancers” (1903) and “Charge by the 1st Bengal Lancers” (1903) is indicative of the way in which these films served as documentaries of the new landscape of post-Boxer China by explicitly grafting imagery of the British imperial order onto it. Pre-Rebellion films had also focused on Indian soldiers or policeman in the context of Hong Kong and Shanghai, making these new films quite literally an extension of structures of governance and power by simply extending and recapitulating imagery in the newly subdued territory inside China “proper.” (Edison’s 1898 “The Shanghai Police,” for instance, features mounted Sikhs and Sikh bobbies marching in formation alongside British officers to show the processes of order at work in an already colonial portion of China.)

Also part of this genre of Boxer Rebellion shorts were reconstructed films of moments of conflict, such as James Williamson’s “Attack on a China Mission” and Thomas Edison’s 1900 “Bombardment of Taku Forts, by the Allied Fleets (Boxer Uprising, China),” the latter contrasting Western motion in the form of the battle

9 “The Bengal Lancers” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1903), FLA 3587; “Charge by 1st Bengal Lancers” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1903), FLA 3143. See also “Fourth Ghorkas” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1903), FLA 3577.
10 “The Shanghai Police” (Thomas A. Edison, 1898), FLA 3230. See also “Sheik [sic] Artillery, Hong Kong” (Thomas A. Edison, 1898), FLA 4303.
steamer with the archaic, slow-moving sampan in order to underscore the principle that speed was modernity, and modernity was decisive. The film, which uses models of ships to portray the battle, again leaves the Chinese people out of its representational strategy, which reduces the landscape the machinery of motion in order to foreground the spectacle of modern warfare being modeled.

In Williamson’s “Attack on a China Mission,” cultural accuracy is by no means a priority, even though putting the Chinese in an abject position is of paramount importance. A similar technique is used in another British film from 1900 entitled “Boxer Attack on a Chinese Missionary Outpost.” This short sequence, also a re-enactment, opens with a missionary reading a book at a small table in front of his house; his wife and daughter emerge from the house, say goodbye and head off into area to right of frame. The missionary keeps reading. He then looks up and stands up worriedly, as wife and child rush back. He escorts them inside. Enter the first Boxer, whom he tries to fend off with his chair. Other Boxers emerge, and he fights them with walking stick. Then the Boxers try to take off his wife and daughter. All of a sudden, soldiers appear in the background and fire at Boxers. They come forward,

11 “Bombardment of Taku Forts, by the Allied Fleets (Boxer Uprising, China)” (Thomas A. Edison, 1900), FLA 4979; “Attack on a China Mission” (James A. Williamson, 1900), in Early Cinema: Primitives and Pioneers, Vol. 1, (London: British Film Institute, 1994). Edison’s film was practically an example of early animation in its filming of toy boats against a Chinese set.
12 “Boxer Attack on a Chinese Missionary Outpost” (1900), British Film Institute collection, London.
make sure the missionaries are okay, and the wife and daughter go back inside. The soldiers go after the rebels and hold down one who tries to escape.

I give this blow-by-blow plot summary to emphasize a couple of points: First, the principal spectacle here too is the final abjection of the Chinese, couched in a narrative of triumphal imperialism which itself is embedded in a subtle narrative of sexual danger (why else are the wife and daughter being carted off by the Boxers?). Second, also being foregrounded is the prowess of the soldiers, who enforce British protection and honor codes far beyond the putative boundaries of their empire. Finally, the film underscores the way in which the domestic nature of the scene—the missionary family at home, at leisure, etc.—performs the function of naturalizing the foreign and of justifying the Western presence in a foreign landscape. As with the troop movement films, this re-enactment also voids the landscape of the Chinese. Even though missionaries are ostensibly in China to convert and/or help the local people, the Chinese are conspicuously absent from the domestic setting being represented and only enter the scene in the form of threat, chaos, and bloodthirstiness. China belongs to the missionaries, not to the Chinese. (In fact, within the diagesis of the film, their attack is not only wholly unsuspected in the bucolic domesticated setting of the film, but it is also unmotivated.)

Another re-enactment film from 1900 is Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon’s “Beheading of a Chinese Boxer.”¹³ This film shows the execution of a Boxer by Chinese

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¹³ “Beheading of a Chinese Boxer” (Sagar Mitchell and James Kenyon, 1900), British Film Institute.
soldiers. His head is chopped off with a large sword and hung on a stake stuck into the ground. What is most interesting about this film is its titillating value: it highlights the alterity of the Boxer, symbolized in his pigtail (which is stretched out by a soldier before his head is lopped off) and turns the queue, one of the foremost images of Chineseness familiar to Westerners, into a symbol of his deviant behavior.

Early films about China also turned around a second axis of representation, the representation of motion and the act of travel itself. This axis manifested itself in the adaptation to local conditions of the more well-known films about trains, automobiles, and horse carriages that were the staple of film viewings in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the Chinese context, there were instead myriad shorts made by major American and British companies about rickshaws or “wheelbarrows” in action. Such films drew China into Western consciousness as a potential destination for tourism (by representing white people riding pedicabs to or from hotels and other popular tourist destinations); they also allegorized the unequal relationships between colonizers and colonized through issues of motion and travel (by contrasting the Western bodies at leisure in rickshaws and the laboring Chinese bodies at work pulling them).

Often set along the Bund or other parts of European Shanghai and often given titles such as “Shanghai Street Scene,” these films converted the “Chinaman” into an
integral part of the conveyance machine that was the rickshaw. With their consistent plot of rickshaws coming from a distance towards a fixed camera (often sited at an intersection and subsequently disgorging European passengers), these films mimicked the conventions of Western-set films about the arrival of trains or the motion of carriages. (A case in point is American Mutoscope and Biograph’s 1902 “Arrival of a Train at Tsen-tsin,” which pays homage to the Lumière brother’s famous film.) In so doing, these texts highlighted the reduction to the mere mechanical of the subaltern human figure. They also further established the contrast between the modern city, symbolized by the European quarter of Shanghai as well as by the European gentlemen-passengers, and the archaic presence of the colonized (or semi-colonized), symbolized by the decrepit rickshaw man whose perpetual movement dehumanizes and exoticizes him but also demands the spectator’s compassion.

A rare film of this genre which includes no European participants to help orient the viewer within the spectacle is AMB’s “Street Scene, Tien-tsin.” Early in the film, a rickshaw carrying two Chinese gentlemen comes towards camera. This moment is followed by a rickshaw holding sacks, amid much movement and men sweeping.

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14 Edison produced two films with this title at the end of the nineteenth century. See “Shanghai Street Scene, No. 1” and “Shanghai Street Scene, No. 2” (Thomas A. Edison, 1898), FLA 4451.
15 See, for instance, “The Burd [sic], Shanghai” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1903), FLA 4404.
16 “Arrival of Train at Tsen-tsin [sic]” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1902), FLA 3339.
17 “Street Scene, Tien-tsin” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1902), FLA 3316.
Although the film highlights movement within the Chinese setting, it ultimately places this movement in a context of anarchy and congestion that are suggestive of primitiveness and lack of control in contradistinction to the orderly motion of carriages and the purposeful movement of European riders of rickshaws in other films.

At the same time, films about rickshaws constructed iconic images of “foreign” China—notably, Hong Kong, the international areas of Shanghai, and the treaty ports—through their depiction of the busy streets and entertainment areas of the international settlements. And like films of Europeans on camel rides in front of the pyramids, these shorts recreated for spectators an iconic activity of the experience of traveling to the East. Edison’s 1898 “The Shanghai Police,” mentioned earlier, shows mounted Sikh officers riding into the camera, followed by British bobbies. Rickshaws traverse the camera right to left, as the police move towards it, back to front. The film presents a visual picture of British order, combined with a pleasing and exotic city that is buzzing with activity and modern motion.

There is one final axis of representation that should be mentioned here; this is the genre of ethnographic vignettes that record a “typical” activity for the viewing public. This form of representation, while rarer than the troop movement flicks or rickshaw reels, is also the one most closely allied with traditional travelogues. In fact, it works by actualizing narrative descriptions. Edison’s 1902 “Chinese Shaving Scene” is a case in point. It shows a Chinese barber and his client—a scene presumed to be typical of what the traveler would witness were he or she to actually go to Cathay. Interestingly, many films of this sort were actually filmed in New York or San Francisco and show Chinese
communities abroad, a peep into another world within the spectator’s own. Such films are, in effect, a massification of the popular Chinatown tours, which attracted many American and European visitors to these cities in the late nineteenth century.

Such ethnographic films—which would reach their culmination in works such as the 1915 “A Trip through China,” replete with street scenes, sampans, and turbaned police officers—show how the new medium of film grappled with the notion of travel literature and sought to care a place for itself within this genre. These films recognized various principles inherent to the genre and attempted to insert themselves within it. Travel literature, and travellers’ tales in general, offer a specific formula for introducing audiences to materialities with which they presumably are not familiar. The genre offers vicarious experiences and explanations of places, peoples, events, and architectonics outside the realm of day-to-day life of its intended reading subjects. It may or may not explicitly exoticize, but the premise is that renders the unfamiliar accessible and mediates between other world’s and the narrator’s own. It may or may not be implicitly colonial, but it certainly engages in a hierarchical presentation of cultural difference and imposes, through the medium of the writer or narrator, a binary system of distinctions between the culture of the observer and the culture of the observed. These distinctions are often hidden under the educative goal that the genre espouses—its professes to teach readers about the culture or politics or lifestyles of another place, whereas its real explicative function often has more to do with the place

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18 “A Trip through China” (Director Unknown, 1915), FLA 1877.
the writer comes from, rather than where that writer goes (hence the ability of a single
travel writer to move with ease across different cultural geographies without requiring
any specialist knowledge of the terrain being covered.)

Finally (and in keeping with my more general argument about the role of film
broadly in structuring the relationship between the Western viewer and the Chinese
landscape), as a genre, travel writing prioritises motion over stasis. In specific, it
narrates the trajectory of an individual’s movement through geographical space. Often
this movement is part of a narrative of personal growth, travel writing performing the
same role as the Bildungsroman in fiction. This narrative of growth is always about the
growth of the writer or narrator within the context of her or his own culture—it is never
primarily about the host culture—and therefore always cements the egotism of traveller
and his or her culture at the expense of the cultures literally being traversed by the
course of the narrative.

As visual analogues to travelers’ tales in written form, early ethnographic films
about China and the Chinese thus provide an important window into the expansion of
tavel at the beginning of the twentieth century. Not only do they reveal how an
emerging technology of recording participated in the globalization of tourism during
this period, but they also constitute examples of how a new form of “armchair”
traveling developed out the mechanical reproduction of the very act of motion itself.

Like the other axes of cinematic representation discussed here, these early
ethnographic films were ultimately about using new tools to promote old ideas. From
Marx’s theory of vegetation to the vignettes of “A Trip through China”—which
juxtaposes imagery of Chinese temples, markets, and boatpeople with a “Review of the Shanghai Volunteers who offer their services for the protection of Shanghai” — the formula was essentially the same: to provide visual proof for L.P. Hartley’s now hackneyed maxim that the “past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

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