

·176· THE BOXERS ON THE SILVER SCREEN:
The Red Lantern (1919), *Alarm in Peking* (1937) AND
55 Days at Peking (1963)*

The first ‘Western’ narratives of the Boxer War appeared well before the fighting was actually over.¹ Although this should caution us against assuming a clear-cut transition from event to memory, it was firstly the relief of Beijing on 14 August 1900 and, more importantly, the formal conclusion of the war through the Boxer Protocol of 7 September 1901 that allowed the retelling of the calamitous and harrowing occurrences. Novels, popular histories and short films repackaged an event that had been experienced as open and ongoing into coherent plots, complete from beginning to end. In so doing, they created a mainstream that increasingly (and narrowly) identified the Boxer War with

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¹ Arguably the first book-length fictional treatment that takes the diplomatic and military conflict into account (though not the first on the Boxers) is Julian Croskey, *The S. G.: A Romance of Peking* (Brooklyn, NY: Mason, 1900), published even before the siege of the Legations Quarter ended. Four German dime novels were serialised in the summer and autumn of 1900. See Jacqueline Young, “Rewriting the Boxer Rebellion: The Imaginative Creations of Putnam Weale, Edmund Backhouse, and Charles Welsh Mason,” *Victorian Newsletter* 114 (2008): 22–6; Dietlind Wünsche, *Feldpostbriefe aus China: Wahrnehmungs- und Deutungsmuster deutscher Soldaten zur Zeit des Boxeraufstandes 1900/1901* (Berlin: Links, 2008), 295.

the siege of the Beijing Legations Quarter from late June to mid-August 1900.² There are obvious reasons for this: not only did the siege offer the requisite dramatic ingredients for its emplotment, from a vague sense of danger to a triumphal last-minute rescue. More importantly, the Boxer War was seen as a reincarnation of the Indian Uprising, the memory of which was centred on the sieges of Kanpur and Lakhnau. When after 1900, some novelists simply filled old plot-structures of the ‘Mutiny’ with new, Boxer-related content,³ this became the starting point of a lasting narrative tradition. In this essay, I examine how feature films inserted themselves into this tradition. I shall argue that they offer variations on a common theme, with specific outcomes being influenced both by narrative precedent and the context of the time of production.

I deliberately exclude from my analysis the newsreels and filmic re-enactments produced during or immediately after the war, and which included subjects that tended to be marginalised in subsequent fictional retellings, such as the capture of the Dagu forts by Allied fleets, or attacks on missionaries.⁴ Of the three feature films produced between the 1910s and 1960s, two have

² I cannot give a full bibliographic overview here. For an analysis of near-contemporary novels, see Shih-Wen Chen, *Representations of China in British Children's Fiction, 1851–1911* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), esp. 129–30; Ross G. Forman, “Peking Plots: Fictionalizing the Boxer Rebellion of 1900,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27 (1999): 27–48; and Yixu Lü, “German Colonial Fiction on China: The Boxer Uprising of 1900,” *German Life and Letters* 59, no. 1 (2006): 78–100. More recent historical fiction includes Gerhard Seyfried, *Gelber Wind oder Der Aufstand der Boxer* (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn, 2008) and the two-volume graphic novel by Gene Luen Yang, *Boxers & Saints* (New York: First Second, 2013). For examples of popular histories, see Peter Fleming, *The Siege at Peking* (London: Hart Davis, 1959); Jean Mabire, *L'été rouge de Pékin* (Paris: Fayard, 1978); Henry Keown-Boyd, *The Fists of Righteous Harmony: A History of the Boxer Uprising in China in 1900* (London: Leo Cooper, 1991). A recent documentary film is Tilman Remme (dir.), *Gefangen in Peking—Aufstand der Boxer*, director: Tilman Remme, production: Uwe Kersken, which was broadcast by the TV stations ZDF (Germany) and ARTE (Germany and France) in 2008; see the Internet Movie Database at <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1247270/> (accessed 26 July 2018).

³ Ross G. Forman, *China in the Victorian Imagination: Empires Entwined* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 101–2.

⁴ See Stephen Bottomore, “Filming, fake and propaganda: The origins of the war film, 1897–1902” (doctoral thesis, Utrecht University, 2007); Stef Franck, “Boxer Rebellion Novelties,” in *To Dazzle the Eye and Stir the Heart: The Red Lantern, Nazimova and the Boxer Rebellion*, ed. Stef Franck (Brussels: Vlaamse Dienst voor Filmcultuur, 2012), 99–122; Frank Gray, “James Williamson’s ‘Composed Picture’: *Attack on a*

recently been the object of some attention, mostly from film scholars rather than historians of China.⁵ The three movies are:⁶

The Red Lantern

·178· (USA, 1919), director: Albert Capellani (1874–1931), production: Richard A. Rowland (1880–1947) and Maxwell Karger (1879–1922), screenplay: June Mathis (1887–1927) after the novel of the same title by Edith Wherry (1858–1961);⁷

Alarm in Peking

(Germany, 1937), director: Herbert Selpin (1904–1942), production: Eduard Kubat (1891–1976), screenplay: Walter Zerlett-Olfenius (1897–1975) in collaboration with Selpin;

55 Days at Peking

(USA, 1963), director: Nicholas Ray (1911–1979),⁸ production: Samuel Bronston (1908–1994), screenplay: Philip Yordan (1914–2003) and Bernard Gordon (1918–2007).

China Mission—Bluejackets to the Rescue (1900),” in *Celebrating 1895: The Centenary of Cinema*, ed. John Fullerton (Sydney: Libbey, 1998), 203–11.

⁵ For *Red Lantern*, see the various contributions in Stef Franck, ed., *To Dazzle the Eye and Stir the Heart: The Red Lantern, Nazimova and the Boxer Rebellion* (Brussels: Vlaamse Dienst voor Filmcultuur, 2012). For *55 Days* see Yao Bin, *Quanmin xingxiang zai Meiguo: Yibetuan yundong de kuaguo yingxiang* (Beijing: Shijie Zhishi Chubanshe, 2010), 166–71; Naomi Greene, *From Fu Manchu to Kung Fu Panda: Images of China in American Film* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 120–34, with a focus on the Cold War context; a brief analysis of one key scene can be found in James L. Hevia, *English Lessons: The Pedagogy of Imperialism in Nineteenth-Century China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 327–8.

⁶ I am using the following editions: Albert Capellani (dir.), *The Red Lantern* (1919; Brussels: Vlaamse Dienst voor Filmcultuur, 2012), DVD – this accompanies the collection by Stef Franck, ed., *To Dazzle the Eye and Stir the Heart: The Red Lantern, Nazimova and the Boxer Rebellion* (Brussels: Vlaamse Dienst voor Filmcultuur, 2012) –; Herbert Selpin (dir.), *Alarm in Peking* (1937; Wiesbaden, Germany: Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Stiftung, 2014), DVD – the Film Archives Department of the Federal Archives in Berlin (Bundesarchiv – Filmarchiv) holds a copy of the movie, which I have also seen; Nicolas Ray (dir.), *55 Tage in Peking* (hereafter: *55 Days*), with German and English audio tracks (1963; Dortmund: e-m-s New Media AG, 2002), DVD.

⁷ Edith Wherry, *The Red Lantern: Being the Story of the Goddess of the Red Lantern Light* (New York: Lane, 1911).

⁸ It appears that much of the footage was not shot by Ray, but by his assistant Andrew Marton (1904–1992), who also was responsible for some substantial alterations to the screenplay, some of which are discussed below. See Andrew Marton to Paul Kohner,

All three movies broadly fit Natalie Zemon Davis's definition of historical film in that they combine a "fictional plot" with "a historical setting intrinsic to the action."⁹ They are thus formally different to mere 'costume dramas,' which exhibit only tenuous links between action and historical setting. However, all three productions take liberties with the historical facts, albeit in varying degrees. And the way they combine individualising 'romance' centred on love interests with elements of 'spectacle' emphasising extrapersonal forces and the broader historical setting results in fairly mainstream, star-studded romantic dramas.¹⁰ In this respect, the different national contexts matter very little: in terms of genres, there existed a remarkable similarity between 1930s German cinema and Hollywood productions.¹¹

There appears to be a broad consensus amongst theorists of film on history that historical movies say more about the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they were produced than about those they depict. As Leger Grindon has argued, the historical film has "political aspirations" in that it uses the past to respond to the social context of the present. Elisabeth Bronfen makes a somewhat more nuanced case, stating that the images and narratives from the motion picture industry "reconceive the past according to the cultural needs of the present, [...] reimagining and reconceptualizing history from the position of the contemporary now."¹² In somewhat normative

17 November 1962, Margaret Herrick Library (hereafter: MHL), Andrew Marton papers, box 6 f. 73; Marton to Samuel Bronston, 10 January 1963, *ibid.*; Bronston to Marton, 9 February 1963, *ibid.*, Kohner to Marton, 14 February 1963, *ibid.*

⁹ Natalie Zemon Davis, "Any Resemblance to Persons Living or Dead: Film and the challenge of authenticity," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 9 (1988): 270. Leger Grindon, *Shadows on the Past: Studies in the Historical Fiction Film* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994), defines the historical film as one that has "a meaningful relationship to historical events" and "engages with history." As Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2007), 26, points out, non-fictional and fictional elements often overlap in the historical film, but she somewhat misreads Davis's definition.

¹⁰ For a definition of 'romance' and 'spectacle', see Grindon, *Shadows on the Past*, 10–6; for a discussion of the 'mainstream' historical film, see Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 29–30, 50–61.

¹¹ Obvious exceptions were Nazi propaganda films, as well as a few social themes, e. g. the role of women; see Stephen Brockmann, *A Critical History of German Film* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 138–40.

¹² Elisabeth Bronfen, *Specters of War: Hollywood's Engagement with Military Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 2–3; Grindon, *Shadows on the*

fashion, Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Rosenstone have advocated a type of film that leaves the past its distinctiveness, lays bare the constructedness of cinematic and other historical narratives, and furthers an understanding of history's multiple dimensions; their approach makes most existing productions appear deficient.¹³ One response to their criticisms would be to regard films as a commercially viable element within a broader social-cultural memory that involves negotiations between various social groups on how to understand their common past.¹⁴ Even so, a merely presentist understanding of historical film is reductionist and insufficient to capture the complex relationship between historical films and the past they re-enact.

This essay engages with those complexities. Its aim is to provide a comparative, explicitly diachronic analysis of the three films on the Boxer War. As well as offering a close reading of the films, I also address the circumstances of their production and the reception they met with. More specifically, I explore the ways that all three discuss and negotiate a number of overlapping and interrelated boundaries: cultural, racial (and its combination with gender), as well as national. I will show how in discussing these themes, the films display obvious tensions, contradictions, and ambivalences.

To capture the complexity of the filmic treatment of history, a number of perspectives must be taken into consideration. The first is the impact of technology on media representation.¹⁵ The three 'Boxer' films represent different stages in the history of filming technology: *Red Lantern* dates from the era of silent film, *Alarm in Peking* is a black-and-white talkie, while *55 Days*, shot in Technirama, is representative of the period of monumental historical colour films of the 1950s and early 1960s. Technological possibilities and lim-

Paš, 2. See also Frank Sanello, *Reel vs. Real: How Hollywood Turns Fact into Fiction* (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2003), xiii; Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Paš* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 208.

¹³ Davis, "Any Resemblance," 279–82; Rosenstone, *Visions of the Paš*, 10–2, 61–4.

¹⁴ Paul Grainge, "Introduction: memory and popular film," in: *Memory and popular film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1–3. Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 4–6, discusses the ability of recent film to undermine national historical myths and articulate the views of marginalised groups by revealing historical power structures, which is an equally presentist argument.

¹⁵ See, for example, Sorlin, *The Film in History*, 7–9. For a history of film that combines a history of technology with content analysis, see David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 5th ed. (New York: Norton, 2016).

itations determine how the movies present certain aspects of their narration. Secondly, it is important to contextualise cinematic narratives within the historical transmission of narrative patterns and practical conventions – not only of film-making, but also of other media. On the theoretical level, the historical film shares its complex relation to history with, for example, the historical novel.¹⁶ In our case, it is noticeable that the setting of the three ‘Boxer movies’ resembles that of some of the earliest novels on the Boxer War, although – with the exception of *Red Lantern* – no direct influence has been documented. The most salient feature they share with literary treatments of the subject is that they situate the action within the limited and increasingly contracting space of the Legations Quarter, thus creating a claustrophobic feel and externalising the danger that threatens the foreign community in China. At the same time, the rescue narrative which forms their core can look back on an established, plurimedial tradition and was first applied to the Boxer War in one of the early short films, James Williamson’s *Attack on a China Mission – Bluejackets to the Rescue*, shot as early as 1900.¹⁷

Thirdly, the filmic representation of the Boxer War draws on established nineteenth-century, Orientalist stereotypes of China and the Chinese, which not only portrayed ‘backward’ China as the antithesis of ‘modern’ Europe, but also ascribed to the Chinese a whole range of moral deficiencies.¹⁸ The mostly negative stereotypes of the Middle Kingdom and its people were intimately linked to conventions of visually representing Chinese and other East Asians in

¹⁶ Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and heritage in contemporary popular culture* (London: Routledge, 2009), 217–8; id., *The historical novel* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1–10. See also the thoughtful comments by Yixu Lü, “The Boxers in Contemporary Chinese and German Fiction: Mo Yan and Gerhard Seyfried,” *Comparative Critical Studies* II, no. 1 (2014): 70–2.

¹⁷ Frank Gray, “James Williamson’s Rescue Narratives,” in *Young and Innocent? The Cinema in Britain 1896–1930*, ed. Andrew Higson (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), 29–31. Williamson returned to the rescue narrative in subsequent films.

¹⁸ See Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1989), 43–65; Mechthild Leutner, “Deutsche Vorstellungen über China und die Chinesen,” in *Von der Kolonialpolitik zur Kooperation: Studien zur Geschichte der deutsch-chinesischen Beziehungen*, ed. Kuo Heng-Yü (Munich: Minerva Publikation, 1986), 401–42. The persistence of nineteenth-century stereotypes is demonstrated by Monika Gaenssbauer, “In China They Eat the Moon: Western Images of China from the 19th to the 21st Century,” *Asien*, no. 121 (2011): 119–29. For the wider context cf. Edward Said, *Orientalism*. 25th anniversary ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), esp. 90, 108, 251. See also Jeff Bowersox’s contribution to this volume.

the arts. As we shall see, however, the early twentieth century saw some more positive assessments of China emerge. Finally, each film has been influenced by the specific political and sociocultural context of its production. *Red Lantern* was released in the United States at a time when the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was still barring Chinese labourers from entering the United States; when those Chinese already lawfully in the country were facing extensive racial discrimination; and when, more broadly, the global ‘colour line’ separating white from non-white populations was hardening across the Anglophone world in the face of increasing demands for racial equality.¹⁹ *Alarm in Peking* is a typical representative of the National Socialist regime’s attempts at enticing moviegoers through entertainment, even though these often combined with rabid racial propaganda. In its specific take on issues of culture and race, it also reflects the political partnership between Germany and the Chinese Republic that had emerged in the 1920s and would last until 1938, the year following the film’s release.²⁰ *55 Days* belongs in yet another political context: during the Cold War, the necessity of building alliances across the ‘free world’, humanitarian concern for Chinese refugees, as well as the emergence of civil rights issues had led to a gradual softening-up of US anti-Chinese immigration restrictions since the 1950s, until immigration was completely liberalised in 1965.²¹ Taking these factors into account, it will become possible to assess in each case the specific mélange of context-specific and traditional elements, fleshing out similarities and differences between the three films.

¹⁹ For an overview of the exclusion era see John Robert Soennichsen, *The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2011), 67–90; Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); for the wider context see Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2008), 310–31.

²⁰ The classical study of German-Chinese relations in the period under question is William C. Kirby, *Germany and Republican China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984). For enemy images in German film during the Third Reich see Rolf Giesen, *Nazi Propaganda Films: A History and Filmography* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2003), 93–142 and David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema 1933–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 238–306.

²¹ See Madeline Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), esp. 130–235.