

HIPPODROME silent film festival

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WEDNESDAY 20 MARCH - SUNDAY 24 MARCH 2019

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The Red Heroine (Hongxia)(1929)

Saturday 23 March

Performing live: John Sweeney & Frank Bockius

What do we talk about when we talk about Chinese films? For many, the answer might be martial arts! From Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, to Kungfu Panda, the enigmatic Chinese world of fists, swords, and all-powerful knight-errands has mesmerised numerous movie-goers worldwide. This genre started to become more widely known through Hollywood movies of the 1970s, but its origins can be traced back to 1920s Shanghai.

A martial arts craze swept the nascent Chinese film industry in the last few years of the 1920s. Between 1928 and 1931, about 60 percent of the total film output was martial arts films, reaching a peak in 1929 when 85 films of the genre were released. *Red Heroine* was one of those 85 films, but the only one that has magically survived the passage of time. What attractions does this oldest surviving Chinese martial arts film have in store for us?

What comes to mind is the comment of a film reviewer on the 2019 Chinese sci-fi film *Wandering Earth*, who said: "First there are the special effects, [...] the first thing Chinese people say about the film." The passage of ninety years doesn't seem to have changed this popular taste drastically. "Cutting-edge" special effects, by the 1920s standard, were probably the prime attraction of *Red Heroine* for Chinese movie-goers in 1929. In addition to such commonplace special effects as iris shots and double exposure, which can be seen in other films from the same period, the most stunning special effect is, flying! The protagonist 'Red Heroine' flying deftly and elegantly in the clouds must have dazzled countless 1929 Chinese audiences, as it will hopefully dazzle you this afternoon. This cinematic feat became a staple ingredient for the martial arts films of the day.

Another key attraction is the various women characters in the film. Contrary to the male dominance in traditional martial arts stories, this film features a female knight errant, an aspect which was not unusual at that time. In fact, the film was one of a number of films that featured female martial arts masters. This sub-genre gave rise to a group of actresses whose physical dexterity and prowess drastically changed the traditional image of delicate and feminine beauty of Chinese actresses. Fan Xuepeng (the lead actress in *Red Heroine*) is a prime example of this new generation of Chinese film star. But most astonishingly eye-catching for today's audience might be a bevy of half-naked girls in the sumptuous secret palace of the bandits. Their bound breasts probably look odd to a 21st-century audience, but that feature definitely represented the 1920s fashion in China!

Last but not least, the sheer evil represented by the decadent bandits alluded to the warlords who had been causing such turmoil in China from the mid-1910s on. A buck-toothed villain figure is the epitome of this force of evil and would have provoked a Chinese audience's strong emotions against warlord-ism all too easily. In these ways, *Red Heroine* supplied a full spectrum of sentiments ranging from visual astonishment, erotic enticement, to nationalist feelings.

By Dr Xuelel Huang, Lecturer in Chinese Studies, and **Dr Julian Ward**, Senior Lecturer in Chinese, School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh.

Dir. Wen Yimin | China | 1929 | N/C PG | b&w | Chinese & English intertitles | 1h 34m
With: Fan Xuepeng, Wang Chuqin, Zhu Shaoquan, Zhao Taishan, Qu Yifeng

Screening material courtesy of the China Film Archive

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