

Post-Colonialism in Chinese Film

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doi:10.56397/AS.2023.06.01

Abstract

This essay references the notion of post-colonialism and the consequential effects of referencing colonialism on the evolution of China's four levels (culture, politics, humanity, and civilisation). In addition, the embodiment of postcolonialism in Chinese film is concisely summarised, with specific case studies for each. It can be observed that post-colonialism has had a profound impact on the development of Chinese cinema. This has led to a heightened focus on showcasing the unique and distinct aspects of Chinese culture and a greater emphasis on promoting national unity. Additionally, there has been a willingness to shed light on the negative effects of colonialist aggression while incorporating more global perspectives into Chinese film.

Keywords: post-colonialism, colonialism's impact on China, Chinese characteristics, Chinese national cohesion, colonial damage, international elements

This essay focuses on the reflection of four analyses and arguments are presented in terms of representative works of post-colonialism in Chinese film. These analyses are looking at the export of national culture with Chinese characteristics, the emphasis on Chinese national cohesion, the exposure of the damage caused by colonial aggression, and the increasing permeation of international elements, which confirm that post-colonialism is inextricably linked to the development and presentation of Chinese cinema.

The chaotic 1960s in the West gave rise to post-colonialism, that impacted conventional Western cultural and religious norms. "Post-colonialism often involves discussions of experiences of slavery, immigration, repression and resistance, difference, race, gender, and place (Quayson, 2020)." Post-colonialism accentuates colonial control over cultural, intellectual, and cultural hegemony, whereas colonialism was primarily about aggression, control, and intervention in economic, political, military, and national sovereignty. The question of how to gain independence and development from imperialist colonial domination in economic and political terms has become an issue that postcolonial theory must confront (Wang, 2020).

Between 1840 and 1931, China was fully reduced to a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, and colonialism impacted China's growth across all levels (Cai, 2014). At the cultural level, Western culture had a significant cultural influence on traditional Chinese culture, which caused Chinese nationalism to wane and Western education to become more common. Politically, the Chinese government lost its sovereignty and went from being a centralised power structure to acting as a proxy for foreign governments. At the level of humanity, China could not achieve complete national unity for a very long period due to the disintegration of the territorial integrity of the Chinese collar, and the populace battled to survive in a chaotic society (Hu, 2008). At the civilisational level, Chinese science, technology, and culture were internationalised on a civilisational level by introducing Western science, technology, and culture (Ezinne, 2012).

The globalisation of culture is a post-colonial globalisation. Only by understanding different cultures with an open attitude and allowing for the existence of various values can we achieve true cultural globalisation and promote the development of social civilisation (Yang, 2014). Edward Said (2021) reveals the nature of *Orientalism* as a powerful colonial tool. He starkly points out that the Oriental world portrayed in *Orientalism* has little to do with the realities of Eastern countries but is an object created by Westerners looking down on the

East from another Western-centric perspective, picking out exotic cultural elements and making them in a Western context. Orientalism is not an “actual discourse about the East” (Said, 2021) but reflects the subjectivity and dominance of the Western ego. Chinese cinema, influenced by post-colonialism, has presented the world with the authentic culture of the East.

Post-colonialism’s desire to escape colonial control over aspects of cultural hegemony has led Chinese cinema to place value on the export of national culture with Chinese characteristics. This is amply demonstrated in *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Full River Red* (2023). *Red Sorghum* (1987), which is set in Gaomi, Shandong Province, during The Japanese War of Aggression against China, is the tale of a man and woman who run a sorghum distillery jointly. However, during the Japanese invasion of China, the Japanese army executes the heroine and the distillery workers for participating in the resistance movement. The movie showcases a variety of Chinese ethnic cultures that embody Chinese mythology and traditions. Stories, myths, tales, proverbs, poetry, jokes, and other oral traditions are all included in folklore. Traditional architectural designs are part of it, as well as material culture. Folklore also includes customs, rituals adopted by folk beliefs, festivals, and forms of celebration of events such as weddings and folk dances, considered expressions of traditional culture (Bronner, 1987).

Chinese wedding customs are reflected in the film, in which the bride, Jiu Er, is dressed in red, wearing a red headdress, red dress, red embroidered shoes and a red veil in a red palanquin (see figure 1). Red has traditionally been revered in China and is frequently associated with positive and joyful things since it is seen as a colour of power, hope, celebration, and fertility (Stuart, 2020). The film uses red to bring out this auspicious and festive connotation.



Figure 1. Screenshot from *Red Sorghum* (1987) by Yimou Zhang

Red Sorghum (1987) also shows the traditional Chinese folklore of the jolt palanquin (see Figure 2). Sedan chairs have been used in China for over four thousand years, dating back as far as the Xia Dynasty. The palanquin must be carried by a minimum of two persons, but there may be as many as four, eight, or more, and the more people there are, the more solemn the occasion (You, 2019). In the film are four men carrying a palanquin, which is the standard version. Welcoming the bride in a palanquin represents the most formal and respectful wedding etiquette (You, 2019).



Figure 2. Screenshot from *Red Sorghum* (1987) by Yimou Zhang

This film features many folk songs and suona folk music, such as *The Song of the Upside-Down Sedan Chair* and *The Song of the Wine God*, etc. There are four types of songs: mountain songs, work songs, chanty and minor (Huang, 1989), and there is a great deal of fusion going on within the film *Red Sorghum*. Brewing of alcohol is the main event of this film, and it is depicted at every step of the process, from fermentation to honouring the god of wine. In particular, the ritual of honouring the god is shown, with the brewery workers standing in front of a portrait of the god of wine, Dukang, singing a song about this, while drinking and throwing bowls (see Figure 3). The toasting of the god of wine is another fictional folk tale that has its origins in ancient Chinese rituals (Nan, 2022). *Red Sorghum* (1987) effectively displays the different cultural meanings of Chinese distinctive ethnic culture by including much of the traditional Chinese folklore.



Figure 3. Screenshot from *Red Sorghum* (1987) by Yimou Zhang

The soundtrack of the film *Full River Red* (2023) is a fusion of traditional Chinese opera and rock music. The score includes classical Yu opera songs such as *Lady General Mu Takes Command*, *Bow Kung's Jurisdiction in the Hades* and *Ten Security Officers*, etc. The long-standing variety of operas across the country, in line with the geographical features, human customs, linguistic habits and ethnic characteristics of their places of origin, has made opera an important tool for people everywhere to express their emotions and enliven their lives (Shang & Jin, 2023).

The soundtrack for *Full River Red* (2023) is a unique and rich combination of traditional Chinese instruments, such as gongs, drums, jing-hu, ban-hu, and gao-hu, along with modern distorted guitars that feature intense rhythms and high-pitched sounds (Jiang, 2023). The incorporation of opera, rock, and electric music also adds to the depth of the music, making it an excellent platform for promoting traditional Chinese opera culture. This intricate blend of musical styles showcases the beauty and diversity of Chinese music heritage.

The title of the movie is derived from a poem called *Man Jiang Hong—Raging Hair*, penned by the esteemed anti-Japanese hero Yue Fei during the Song dynasty. Yue Fei, a general during that era, fought against the Jin dynasty while symbolizing the national sentiment prevalent at the time (Zhou, 2004). This historical context lends the title a profound and meaningful significance, elevating it beyond its surface-level interpretation. The film's greatest villain, Qin Hui's double, recites the entire lyric unpassionately (see Figure 4), thus bringing the film to its climax. *Full River Red* (2023) combines traditional Chinese ethnic culture with modern Western elements, paired with traditional Chinese cultural Yu Opera and musical instruments, to export Chinese characteristic ethnic culture better.



Figure 4. Screenshot from *Full River Red* (2023) by Yimou Zhang

Post-colonialism, emphasising independence and development, is also influenced by the increasing focus on national cohesion in Chinese cinema, as exemplified by the films *Wolf Warriors II* (2017). The story revolves around the experiences of Leng Feng, a highly accomplished former member of the special forces who possesses an impressive military record. He becomes embroiled in the internal conflicts of a specific African nation.

Leng Feng filled with a sense of patriotism, takes on the responsibility of addressing pressing issues and securing a safe environment for his fellow countrymen. As the story unfolds, Leng Feng emerges as a natural leader and takes charge of a daring rescue operation aimed at liberating 47 of his compatriots who are trapped in Africa amidst an ongoing conflict, including the esteemed Dr. Chen. Despite facing seemingly insurmountable challenges, Leng Feng remains resolute in his determination to overcome all obstacles and ensure the well-being and safety of his fellow citizens.

Leng Feng, an exceptionally courageous individual, demonstrated national cohesion spirit in the face of danger by leading two Chinese soldiers into combat against a rebel group in Africa. With the unwavering support of his fellow citizens, Leng Feng managed to successfully rescue a total of 47 Chinese nationals and several people stranded in Africa. He in question is displaying remarkable courage by standing firmly in his vehicle. With a strong sense of national pride, he confidently raises the flag of China high while navigating through the difficult terrain of the conflict zone. His unyielding spirit is further strengthened by the unwavering support of his fellow citizens, who stand united with him in this challenging undertaking (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Screenshot from *Wolf Warriors II* (2017) by Jing Wu

This film evokes a shared spiritual longing that resonates with the Chinese populace. According to the director and lead actor, Wu Jing, during a talk show, “A passport from the People’s Republic of China may not necessarily grant access to all locations, but it does possess the power to bring its holder back from any destination,” Which demonstrates the unifying force of the Chinese nation (Zhang, 2017). The film *Wolf Warriors II* (2017) effectively portrays the remarkable solidarity of the Chinese people through compelling scenes. One such example is the courageous rescue mission led by Leng Feng, which highlights the selflessness and unwavering commitment of Chinese citizens during times of crisis. Furthermore, the collective efforts of the stranded Chinese nationals in the movie bear witness to the shared sense of responsibility and resilience that unite the Chinese populace. Overall, the film serves as a powerful tribute to the unbreakable spirit of the Chinese nation.

The film *Home Coming* (2022) accurately depicts actual events, Libyan evacuation incident, and showcases the admirable sense of solidarity within the Chinese community. The film highlights the admirable deeds of Zong Dawei, a diplomat, and Cheng Lang, a newcomer, who displayed remarkable selflessness by sacrificing their own evacuation tickets to help their fellow Taiwanese citizens. Despite encountering challenges such as lost passports, they managed to lead a group of more than 1,000 compatriots to resolve their paperwork issues and meet the strict border requirements, which enabled them to get permission to leave from the frontier of Libyan through teamwork.

On a mission to find and bring back their missing comrades from the war zone, they made sure that no one suffering from malaria was left behind. Despite the tough conditions of the desert and war zone, they supported each other by taking turns carrying their belongings and sharing water (see Figure 6). It took them 13 challenging days to reach the reinforcements from the Chinese Embassy, but they persevered through it all. During a rescue operation, diplomat Zong Dawei faced imminent danger from the rebels. However, his fellow Chinese compatriots came to his aid by using their mobile phones to record the situation (see Figure 7). This strategic move was aimed at creating international pressure on the rebels, and it successfully enabled them to escort Zong Dawei out of the country safely.



Figure 6. Screenshot from *Home Coming* (2022) by Xiaozhi Rao



Figure 7. Screenshot from *Home Coming* (2022) by Xiaozhi Rao

The film portrays the valiant efforts of Zong Dawei, a seasoned diplomat, and Cheng Lang, a newcomer to the Foreign Ministry, as they guide and safeguard their compatriots through perilous war zones and barren deserts using only their bare hands. Together, they fearlessly shield Jong Da Wei from the lethal gunfire of the insurgents. As stated by Zheng & Yang in the Chongqing Morning Post Media, “*Home Coming* (2022) embodies the spirit and power of collectivism, where the individual is united with the collective, highlighting the cultural representation of collectivism that upholds group identity. It presents the cultural significance of Chinese community spirit and values (Zheng & Yang, 2022).”

Twenty-Two (2017) is a documentary-style movie that uses 22 women severely wronged by the Japanese Empire as its subjects to reveal the harm that colonial invasion has caused. Chinese women formed the largest group of Japanese sex slaves during the Japanese invasion of mainland China in the 1930s, which occurred during the 50-year colonial invasion of Taiwan, from 1895 to 1945 (Liao & Wang, 2006). The documentary, based on interviews, shows the physical and mental harm done to the persecuted women who were forced to serve as “comfort women” and their families. The film exposes the crimes against Chinese women, carried out by the Japanese occupiers during their colonial invasion of China.

The women who had endured such great suffering were already in their 70s and 80s when they were interviewed for the film. However, they could still clearly recall the atrocities committed against them by the Japanese soldiers. The interviewees all state that they “don’t want to talk about it,” are not “willing to talk about it,” and “don’t dare to talk about it” (*Twenty-Two*, 2017) (see Figures 8 and 9, respectively). Upon conducting thorough research and carefully analyzing various factors, Lee has arrived at the conclusion that some individuals with

families and children may be hesitant to discuss their past experiences. This reluctance may stem from concerns about how society may perceive them and the potential fear of being judged or ostracized by others. Furthermore, these individuals may find their past experiences to be extremely difficult and painful, leading them to feel humiliated and desire to forget and move on. Consequently, they may choose to keep their past a secret and avoid discussing it altogether. (Lee et al., 2019).



Figure 8. Screenshot from *Twenty-Two* (2017) by Ke Guo



Figure 9. Screenshot from *Twenty-Two* (2017) by Ke Guo

Psychiatry Investing (2019) has previously confirmed that these oppressed women experienced severe trauma during their forced servitude by the Imperial Japanese Army, including widespread rape and physical torture. Because of trauma, they displayed a high prevalence of mental illnesses following the events, especially post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Survivors experience lifelong feelings of guilt and shame, as well as dealing with problems of emotional regulation and impulse control (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

However, the effects of such extreme trauma may not be limited to the survivors themselves. There is growing evidence that the effects of having had a traumatic experience are passed on to future generations (Lee, et al., 2019). This demonstrates the severe adverse psychological impact of the Japanese invasion on the women

victims and their families. Even an elderly woman in the film, who is 80 years old, speaks Japanese unconsciously when being interviewed (see Figure 10). She has sustained long-term psychological harm because of the traumatic recollections of being made to become a “comfort woman”, which is permanently ingrained in her memory.



Figure 10. Screenshot from *Twenty-Two* (2017) by Ke Guo

In an in-depth interview with a journalist, they said that when the Japanese would see the girls, they would be taken and raped. They were afraid to run away during their capture. If discovered, they would be beaten to death or thrown into the river with their hands and feet tied (see Figure 11). Even if they were lucky enough to return to their families, the persistent physical abuse they received from the Japanese forces prevented them from leading normal lives (see Figure 12). It can be observed that they in question have relatively little flesh covering their bones, which gives them a very slender appearance. Additionally, they use crutches to aid in their mobility (see Figure 13). The Journal of Gerontological Social Work has published an article stating that “comfort women suffered substantial physical harm during their captivity, including contracting sexually transmitted diseases, failure to treat these diseases, abortion, forced abortions, and forced sterilisation (Park, et al., 2016).”



Figure 11. Screenshot from *Twenty-Two* (2017) by Ke Guo



Figure 12. Screenshot from *Twenty-Two* (2017) by Ke Guo



Figure 13. Screenshot from *Twenty-Two* (2017) by Ke Guo

One of the elderly persons in the film states that after she was taken away, the Japanese would still set fire to their house, even though their family was still inside. This demonstrates that the Japanese colonial invasion caused permanent physical damage to these women and their families and even took their lives. There were only 22 “comfort women” survivors in mainland China in 2014, the China Comfort Women Research Centre reported at the film’s conclusion (see Figure 14). This is the reason for the film’s title. *Twenty-Two* (2017) reveals the physical and psychological impact of the Japanese colonial invasion on the “comfort women” and their families in the form of interviews, reflecting the post-colonial resistance against imperial colonialism.

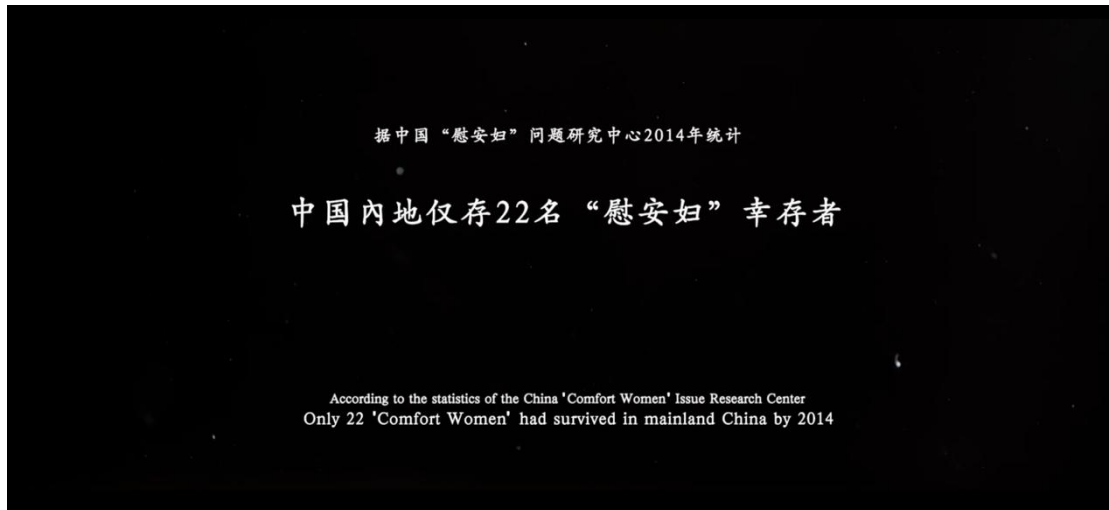


Figure 14. Screenshot from *Twenty-Two* (2017) by Ke Guo

Under the influence of post-colonialism, Chinese film has gradually taken an open attitude, blended diverse cultures different cultures and presented an increasing number of international elements. Examples include the films *The Flowers of War* (2011) and *Perhaps Love* (2005). The films have international elements regarding religion and presenting style, respectively. *The Flowers of War* (2011) offers a fictionalized take on the Nanjing Massacre of 1937, delving into the intricacies of human emotions and experiences amidst this unfortunate historical incident. Twelve prostitutes from the Qinhuai River seek refuge from the Japanese madness in a Catholic chapel with an American flag. The rose-stained glass windows in the church are particularly significant in the film's depiction of the church's interior design (see Figure 15).

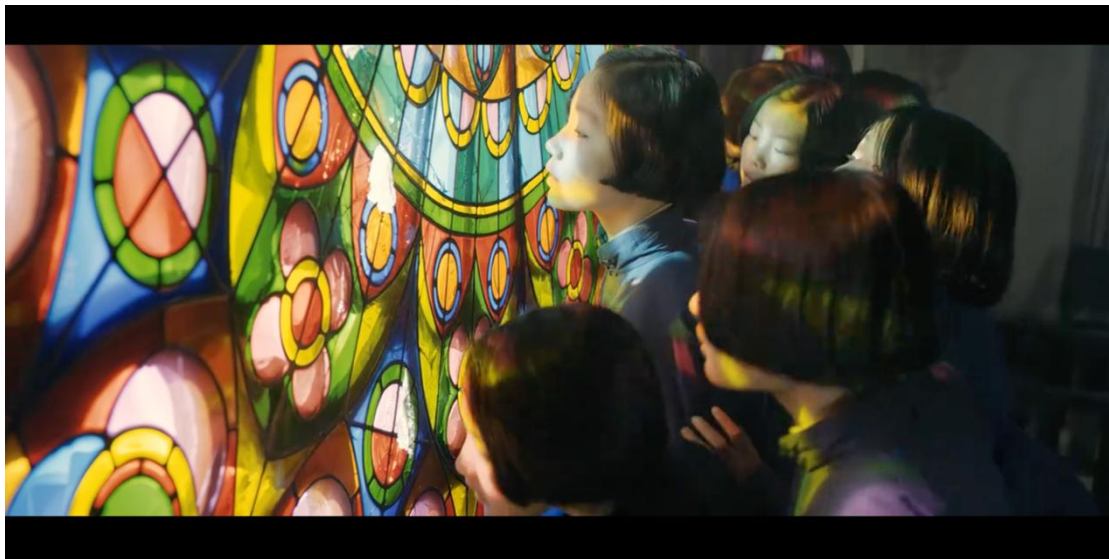


Figure 15. Screenshot from *The Flowers of War* (2011) by Yimou Zhang

The rose-stained glass window appears in many scenes in the film, including shots of bullets passing through it (see Figure 16), Japanese soldiers raping schoolgirls beneath it (see Figure 17), and schoolgirls inside the church witnessing Qinhuai River prostitutes entering the church through the rose-stained glass window's damaged hole (see Figure 18). Fr. William G. Most has said that church is sometimes referred to as the sacrament of salvation (Most, 1990). The Qinhuai River prostitutes' entrance inside the church, in the film, can be seen as a sign of their salvation. In contrast, the Japanese soldiers storm the church and become demons by the stained glass's light.



Figure 16. Screenshot from *The Flowers of War* (2011) by Yimou Zhang



Figure 17. Screenshot from *The Flowers of War* (2011) by Yimou Zhang



Figure 18. Screenshot from *The Flowers of War* (2011) by Yimou Zhang

The transformation of the American mortician John also plays an essential role in the film. He initially merely enters the church, hoping to find something worthwhile. Nevertheless, he chooses to pose as a priest to save them after seeing Chinese schoolgirls being hazed and killed by Japanese soldiers (see Figure 19). When he courageously rescued the schoolgirls from peril, he not only exemplified his altruism and bravery, but also underwent a significant personal transformation. Prior to this heroic act, he had been struggling with a fear of mortality, but by putting his own life at risk to save others, he demonstrated himself to be a true hero who was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of justice.

At the end of the film, he leaves Nanjing with tears in his eyes as he drives. His tears are shed for the prostitutes of the Qinhuai River who were captured by the Japanese army in the guise of schoolgirls, for the girls who escaped against all odds, and for the tragic fate of the people of Nanjing and the entire Chinese nation who were slaughtered by the Japanese army. *The Flowers of War* (2011) uses the elements of the church and the priest while skillfully combining Western religion with the Chinese historical background.



Figure 19. Screenshot from *The Flowers of War* (2011) by Yimou Zhang

Perhaps Love (2005) incorporates the Hollywood cabaret format as well as British montage filming. The storyline of it draws on many Hollywood cabaret sequences, including *Moulin Rouge* (2001). The most influential part of *Moulin Rouge* (2001) on *Perhaps Love* (2005) was the song and dance. After the Cultural Revolution, the development of Chinese musical films has been slow and stagnant. It was not until the release of the Chinese song and dance film *Perhaps Love* (2005), which was influenced by *Moulin Rouge* (2001), that the struggle of Chinese musical film was broken (Chen, 2016).

Perhaps Love (2005) explores a different presentation from traditional musical films, not using singing and dancing to drive the plot forward rather than rendering emotions in a scene within a play-within-a-play, adding colour to the emotional scenes in the film. For instance, after Niewen learns about Sunna and Lin Jiandong's romance, there is a dance scene in the movie with extremely contemporary moves and formations, as well as sophisticated jumping, that depicts Nie Wen's inner emotional ups and downs at the time (see Figure 20). The dancers in the play-within-a-play scene do a vigorous and lively modern dance while wearing traditional Chinese cheongsams (see Figure 21). This is an excellent fusion of modern dance in the Hollywood style with a Chinese twist.



Figure 20. Screenshot from *Perhaps Love* (2005) by Peter Chan



Figure 21. Screenshot from *Perhaps Love* (2005) by Peter Chan

The film employs a diverse range of montage techniques in order to effectively tell its story. Among these techniques are cinematic crossovers and parallelism, which are used to great effect throughout the film. One particularly successful aspect of the movie's editing is its ability to distinguish between dance sequences and plot development by editing the frames in sync with the music's rhythm. This attention to detail and careful consideration of the relationship between visuals and music make for a truly engaging and immersive cinematic experience.

The language of film is divided into two parts. Firstly, the process by which individual shots are transformed into the language of cinema through purposeful camera processing. Secondly, the process by which multiple shots can be stitched together to form a meaningful sequence, which is the foundation for the complex narrative function of cinema, and the process of generating the semantics of cinema through the action of montage (Xu & Zhang, 2022). *Perhaps Love* (2005) is an example of a complex narrative that employs montage to tell three intertwined stories within a constrained narrative time frame.

One is the tale of a couple fell in love in Beijing ten years ago (see Figure 22). The second is the tale of their collaboration on a film in Shanghai ten years later (see Figure 23). The third is the story of the studio owner, Xiao Yu, and Zhang Yang in the play-within-a-play (see Figure 24). The three levels can be abbreviated as the story of the past, the story of the present, and the story of the play, respectively. The film takes a very contemporary approach to time and space. The audience feels a powerful psychological impact due to the director's flexible use of parallel montages with images swinging back and forth from a decade. *The Flowers of War* (2011) and *Perhaps Love* (2005) reflect the growing diversity of international elements being incorporated into Chinese cinema under the influence of post-colonial openness and tolerance of different cultures.



Figure 22. Screenshot from *Perhaps Love* (2005) by Peter Chan



Figure 23. Screenshot from *Perhaps Love* (2005) by Peter Chan



Figure 24. Screenshot from *Perhaps Love* (2005) by Peter Chan

In conclusion, post-colonialism has influenced and been closely linked to the development trend of Chinese film in terms of its desire to break free from colonial control over cultural hegemony, emphasis on its own independence and development, resistance to colonial subjugation, and openness to accepting different cultures. This has encouraged Chinese film to focus more on exporting national culture with distinctive Chinese aspects, emphasising the nation's unity, exposing bravely the harm done by colonial aggression, and enabling more and more foreign elements to permeate it.

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