

OCT 13 1932

Shanghai

China

September 13, 1932

Subject:

MOTION PICTURE THEATRES IN CHINA

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The distribution of American motion picture films in China amounts to about 420 new feature films annually, compared with about 90 British feature films, or a total of about 4,500,000 linear feet. Added to these are about 1,200,000 linear feet of shorts including news reels, or a total of 5,700,000 linear feet. Occasional German, Russian and French films brought in this market probably increase the total importation to about 6,000,000 linear feet. Strong efforts are being made by the British producers to increase their proportionate importation of films into the China market, but up to the present the popularity of the American film gives it a dominant position among the China theatre-goers.

In all of China there are only about 200 motion picture theatres. Many of these are almost too small to be considered of any consequence. Of these 200 ninety are equipped for sound reproduction and of these ninety about seventy are worthy of much consideration. Although Hong-Kong is in reality a British colony, yet for trade purposes it is often incorporated in figures for China. Among the motion picture fraternity the Hongkong theatres are listed as Chinese.

Shanghai and Hongkong represent the majority of sound motion picture theatres, and represent the great bulk of the revenues for foreign films. Canton stands next in order of importance, and is considerably ahead of any other city in China excepting Shanghai, in the number of its theatres

42-14-42
23

and the motion picture theatre going public. Five years ago Shanghai had but three first run theatres, whereas now it has six. The number of Chinese patrons in the first run theatres is gradually increasing, and some estimate it as high as 50% with prospects for greater proportionate numbers. Thus it becomes necessary to take cognizance of the demands of the Chinese theatre-going public in considering the future prospects of foreign imported films.

Fortunately, next after Chinese, English is the most important language in China. The number of English-speaking Chinese is gradually increasing, as the secondary schools and colleges are placing greater emphasis upon the usefulness of English in their curricula. Furthermore, the Chinese are naturally good linguists and acquire a working knowledge of English very easily. Among the boys and girls in the schools of China, English is assuming a position of increasing importance. Young China finds the imported motion picture film interesting and instructive. In fact, present day China is so much influenced by the imported film that it has been very difficult to make a success of the production of Chinese films.

Apparently there has been too much emphasis placed upon the imitation of the western film and too little attention given to the production of Chinese films of purely Chinese character. Up to the present the majority of Chinese films have featured the conflict between old

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and new China. Young China is featured as distinctively modern and imitative of the society of the west. On the other hand Old China must continue to respect the traditions, customs and ideas of its ancestors. This theme, however, is being worn threadbare. Hence the Chinese motion picture producing companies are experiencing difficulty in maintaining popularity for Chinese films. These companies will undoubtedly have to develop organizations capable of producing Chinese stories more typically Chinese, if the Chinese motion picture film will achieve a growing popularity among the people of this country.

Many of the Chinese motion picture theatres, especially those in cities other than Shanghai and Hongkong, depend in large measure upon imported silent films which are being used over and over again until they are worn out. Apparently the time will come when they will find it practically impossible to secure foreign silent films, which will mean that they will be obliged to depend upon Chinese silent productions or put in sound equipment for the use of used sound films. Chinese film producing companies are being criticized for lack of originality in films for Chinese consumption. It is contended that they are too prone to imitate the themes of western films.

Although the English speaking population among the Chinese is on the increase, yet the fact remains that the Chinese audience prefers those foreign films which show action rather than those

which depend upon dialogue. For this reason musical extravaganzas are very popular, as also are those in which the meaning is plain without a knowledge of the subtleties of the English idiom. Many foreign observers have expressed surprise over the great popularity accorded by Chinese audiences to "All Quiet on the Western Front." Ancient China exalted its military heroes, and it is only in recent years that there has been a reversion in Chinese society to the idea of looking with fever upon military encounters. Thus, with the re-development of military organizations in China, films of this type are achieving popularity.

"The Love Parade" appeals to Chinese of all stages of life; the child, youth, the middle-aged man and the elders all in their own way seem to find much enjoyment in the action, beauty and music which a film of this type presents.

"Trader Horn" has proved to be another popular production with the Chinese audience.

Chinese are also very fond of comedians, especially those of the Charlie Chaplin type; the animated cartoons are popular with Chinese audiences. The general spirit of receptivity to ideas from the occidental world makes the news reel an important part of the program among Chinese audiences.

Foreign film producers, however, must be on their guard in distributing their films in China not to include anything which

in the slightest sense may be adversely critical of the Chinese people. In this trying period of transition, young China is very sensitive to criticism from without, and the portrayal of Chinese people in any other way than may be considered complimentary is likely to arouse their resentment. Some are inclined to attribute to the present-day China a super-sensitive attitude toward criticism from without. This is shown by the attitude of the Chinese censors who seem to be unduly severe regarding the unfavorable portrayal of their people.

The fact that motion picture films came to China at a time when they were fairly perfected abroad has militated against the rapid development of the motion picture industry in China. In the west in the inception of the industry, the motion picture theatres catered to the public with a five cent admission fee. This was so low that it attracted crowds easily, and gradually resulted in the development of a large movie public. The demand grew so rapidly that companies could afford to spend increasingly larger sums of money in the production of films, with the result that admission prices were raised, and eventually the movie house replaced the old style legitimate stage. If some motion picture companies here in China could produce purely Chinese films, catering to the Chinese public, and on a very low admission fee basis, there would be developed in this country a large population of movie minded patrons, and the industry could expand somewhat after the lines

which characterized its growth abroad.

There are, however, conflicting sentiments in the Old and New China with which motion picture producing companies in this country must reckon. Young China is "stepping out." It is dancing to the tunes of modern jazz, and takes its cue from the imported films. It will probably not be long before film censors in this country will no longer insist upon putting the soft pedal on kissing scenes and other practices and customs of an occidental society which shock the proprieties of a Confucianist China.

Up to the present, it can hardly be said that any of the Chinese motion picture producing companies have been financially successful. Some of them have achieved a certain measure of success in the production of certain films, but profits have not been sustained over a period of time. Undoubtedly the day will come when we shall have here in China producing companies capable of sensing in a profitable way the larger demands of the Chinese public.

In the meanwhile, increasingly larger numbers of English speaking Chinese encourage the importation of western films, about eighty per cent of which at the moment are American.

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