



Masterpieces of early cinema

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MASTERPIECES OF EARLY
CINEMA*Corrado Neri***Attractive shadows**

The last phase of the nineteenth-century China was in a state of dramatic political instability, caused both by foreign aggression and internal troubles. The fall of the Qing dynasty seemed more and more likely, and the presence of the foreign (people, goods, ideas) on the imperial soil aroused conflicting reactions: shame and pride, the desire to emulate and the desire to rekindle “traditional” culture(s), as well as the evidence of the necessity of rapid modernization, at least in the technical field. Stretched between these overlapping poles, cinema as a technical development and as a new form of entertainment appeared very quickly as a formidable way to get to know the West, as well as a medium to be appropriated by local standards. Early movies made by the Lumière Company were travelling to China, and it was easy to understand the clamor made by the depiction of contemporary Europe. *La sortie des usines Lumière à Lyon* (August and Louis Lumière, 1895), for example, is a manifestation of a scientific accomplishment of the West (a movie) and at the same time is showing where this new object was made (the camera factory): spectators could see men and women coming out of a modern (soon to be Fordist) industry, some of them riding bicycles. In *The Last Emperor* (1987) Bertolucci poetizes the seduction of the newly imported (foreign) innovation of locomotion. Audiences could be in awe of the epitome of the industrialization of Europe via an astonishing product of this progress, the movie projector. This scientific curiosity is displayed as an attraction: movies are shown in theatres, tea houses, expositions, and slowly contribute to the shaping of the fast-growing eastern metropolis via the building of ad hoc modern cinema theatres. The local public showed a desire to appropriate the representational device, linking it to the shadow puppetry that they used to appreciate. The debate is still ongoing to clarify how much the cultural appreciation of puppet theatre has been a source of inspiration for the adoption of the term *yingxi* first, and *dianying* later. The former merges the “shadow (*ying*)” with the “spectacle (*xi*),” and the latter is a word that conjures ideas of electricity (therefore modernity) and the theatrical/traditional visual apparatus. As Emīlie Yueh-yu Yeh states, the first film magazine used the title *The Motion Picture Review*;¹ yet, in an article published in the very same review, she cautions readers in remembering that “Central to these dominant historiographical discourses lies the *yingxi* concept and its literal English translation ‘shadow play.’” Scholars of Chinese film history, in both China and the West, have adopted the ideas of *yingxi* and its translated twin “shadow play” to frame the reception of cinema in late

Qing and early Republican years. Almost without exception, they write that given that *yingxi* is the earliest Chinese term for motion pictures, there exists a tie between shadow puppetry, opera and early cinema. But she argues that “little evidence has been produced to link *yingxi* (motion pictures) with shadow puppetry, or Peking opera in terms of production, exhibition and reception,” advocating therefore a new approach, namely “by super-imposing the core image of early cinema *yingxi* with *yinghua*, I call attention to the import of film experiences in lesser-known locales, such as Hong Kong and Guangzhou.”²

Other than relocating its origin to a familiar, reassuring visual practice, another strategy to take possession of the medium, and free it from Western influence (in the struggle of the negation of a local modernity), is to relate the camera to local and/or traditional subjects: the familiar, the local, the repertoire, and the mirror. This process is very well described in the movie *Shadow Magic* (Xiyangjing, Ann Hu, 2000), an historical melodrama that describes first the stupor of the public, and later the acceptance that comes only when people start to see themselves at the end of the beam of light. Only then is the foreign spectacle adopted by the local public, when, in other words, they become the protagonists of the show and not merely spectators. Opera is the immediate and obvious reference for modern cinematographers: *Dingjun Mountain* (Dingjun shan, 1905, with the Peking opera star Tan Xinpei as its central character) is allegedly (yet to be factually proven) the first local movie, and it is relevant that regardless of it depicting real events, or a post-facto interpretation of them, the eye of the camera (or of its biographer) is defined as attracted by the costumed, stylized, and familiar visual universe of the theatre. In proposing a different translation for *yingxi*, “shadow opera,” Berry and Farquhar underscore how “opera film,” between documentary – filmed theatre – and what we would today call “performance” (projected images, live orchestra, multimedia art), with their stock of characters and formal strategies, will become the trademark of Chinese cinematographic representations.³ Nonetheless, the first remaining Chinese film is a contemporary drama, *Laborer's Love* (Laogong zhi aiqing, 1922) probably (as Zhang Zhen astutely notes)⁴ survived by chance and not because of its peculiarity or status, yet still relevant for a close analysis. *Laborer's Love* is a simple story of a carpenter who doesn't have the social status to marry the impoverished doctor's daughter he's in love with, but, thanks to his cleverness, accomplishes the mission of improving the doctor's business and earns the hand of the girl. Love and freedom, crossing social boundaries, class contradictions, and the central importance of money in human relationships – these thematic elements make this short movie relevant because they would become recurrent themes in Chinese movies of the time – and beyond. Moreover, the movie already displays some specifically cinematographic techniques: subjective shots and superimposed images shift the perception from the theatrical style of shooting just from the front (as if watching a performance) to a movie-unique experience. The subjective gaze here is particularly relevant: we literally see through the eyes of the protagonist, who uses the doctor's thick glasses by mistake and cannot see clearly anymore. The film reproduces this blurred vision, introducing a specific technique of cinema and a central theoretical point in many discussions on cinema. To stick to this peculiar subjective sequence, and following Tom Gunning's seminal definition, here we are in a “movie of attraction.”⁵ Gunning defines the operative category of cinema of attraction using ideas from Serguei Eisenstein, but the latter defines theatre and its effects, while the former appropriates it to underscore how cinema of origin was not (yet) dominated by the desire of fiction and narrative that will categorize it in its future development – and that is taking its revenge today, with IMAX 3D for example – but rather focusing on the “astonishment” provoked by the spectacular visual element. Symbolically, in *Laborer's Love* an art is born, and exhibits its stammering but already astounding special effects to the public.

Special effects: the martial art film and the fantasy film are popular genres during the 1920s. There are only a few frames left today of *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (Huoshao honglian si, 1928), but contemporary cinema still quotes them with longing and regrets (see for example *The Master* or *Shifu*, 2015). After all, *Red Lotus* is the matrix of the burgeoning genre of martial art historical (or chivalric) movie (*wuxiapian*), the Chinese film genre par excellence (with the “opera film”). *Red Lotus* is also the symbol of the new, “fiery” art that can arouse public debate via a physical response.⁶ These films exploit both the bravura of their stunts as well as the rudimentary, Méliès-style special effects: flying heroes and heroines, monsters and ghosts, palms shooting rays of energy, fantastic transmutations, and grand architectures. The *wuxiapian* is a fusion of – as mentioned before – martial art bravura and historical epic, which shows empresses and concubines, kings and soldiers retell and re-create national/imperial history for a newborn republic.

Stars are born

This newly born, struggling republic (or at least its leaders) appears less and less keen on dwelling in the “superstitions” of the past. Cinema gradually aligns with the different currents of intellectual battles that struggle to find ways to reinforce an objectively weakened and feeble country and in the meantime try not to lose the link with its long history and its heritage. What we call – and it’s obviously largely arguable – the road to “modernity” becomes a key mode of representation: psychological/family/social drama (*wenyi pian*) is the most influential and important genre in the ’20s and ’30s, partly because the KMT censorship against the fantastic, superstitious, and “reactionary” becomes more and more effective, especially with the launch of “New Life” Movement by Chiang Kai-shek himself in 1934; and partly because the war with Japan is entering a dramatic stage, Communist party intellectuals and ideas infiltrate the art world, and the public is demanding realistic and committed movies that voice the sufferings of the people and their hope for a drastic revolution. Overlapping with the official KMT directives towards a Confucian re-foundation of the Republic, the “leftist cinema” struggles to find its own legitimacy between commercial drives and totalitarian censorship. The intervention of screenwriters like Xia Yan and Tian Han is pivotal in the breeding of “cinema engagé.” The first half of the 1930s witnessed a battle fought on the silver screen and on the newspaper, where the advocates of “hard film” (*yingxing dianying*) argue for the necessity of a social awareness in art that refuses aesthetic and political compromise, an art that has the mission of changing society via critical representations. They were opposed by the partisans of the “soft film” (*ruanxing dianying*), which, on the contrary, believed in art for art’s sake, an aesthetic endorsement of cinema far from any political preoccupations, “ice-cream for the eyes,” a quest for pleasure and refinement.

In the ’30s, we can legitimately talk about an industry: different companies were shaping a new landscape for film production modelled after its loved and hated rival – Hollywood. Studios proliferated (being regularly destroyed by Japanese bombings), professional categories were created (notably the figure of the director acquires its legitimacy), a star system was articulated across various media. Stars like Ruan Lingyu, Hu Die, Li Lili, Wang Renmei, Jin Yan, and Zhao Dan appeared on the pages of magazines and on advertising posters, contributing to the creation of modern public opinion, enflaming scandals, and shaping the “new” urbanite subject.

Shooting techniques were changing as well: technical advancement could bring more fluidity and facilitate the movement of the camera; cameras performed better and better and could guarantee longer shots, and were more and more suitable for external shooting, enhancing the liberation from the theatrical cangue. The advent of sound was unescapable, even if it took longer and it was more problematic than in the West because of questions related to the extreme

richness of Chinese dialects and/or languages, as well as economic difficulties for the studios to keep up with Western technical progress. From 1930 to 1936, talkies were produced with silent movies, and hybrid forms lived ephemeral, yet fascinating lives: films with few sequences with synchronized sound – often songs – were alternating intertitles in the outdated fashion of silent movies. Despite all these technical and formal advances, local production strived to find its audience.

America and realism

It is amply documented that in China (and in the Far East in general), the public was eager to see Western movies, particularly Hollywood films, in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Citing an American study published in 1938, Laikwan Pang reports that in 1936 “among all films shown in China, only 12 percent of them were local productions, yet American films comprised more than 80 percent, and Soviet movies represented a mere 2.4 percent.”⁷ Popular taste was enthusiastic about and modelled by Hollywood production, often claiming disdain for local creations, dismissing them as vulgar, technically inferior, and less daring. Sympathetic with the Maoist revolution, later scholars harshly criticized the dominance of Hollywood movies and their supposed brainwashing effects on the public. Regis Bergeron, for example, condemns all American films available in China, claiming that they serve as a means to colonize the imagination of the Chinese people and to divert revolutionary production into light entertainment. Bergeron notes, not without disdain, that China had not only produced its own versions of Laurel and Hardy, but also versions of Charlie Chaplin – especially regarding the latter, arguably without the disruptive energy and the harsh critique of the status quo typical of Chaplin.⁸ If on the one hand, popular taste tended to indulge in treacherous Occidentalism,⁹ on the other hand, filmmakers were more ambivalent. During the 1920s and ’30s, the Soviet model was popular among intellectuals in China owing to translations of Soviet theories, the screening of movies directed by Vsevolod Pudovkin and Dziga Vertov, and a much-celebrated séance introducing the *Battleship Potemkin* in 1926 (Sergei Eisenstein, 1925). We need to note that this screening was not public, but limited to a select list of cinematographers and intellectuals. While the impact of the *Battleship Potemkin*’s visual force was arguably remarkable to a few politically committed artist and journalists, but the practice of Eisenstein-like montage was nevertheless seldom utilized in a context where, in the first place, left-wing parties were repressed and censored and, secondly, cinema had to depend heavily on public recognition to survive. Chinese cinema was struggling between commercial and political models. These categories, even if imprecise and overlapping, were discussed at that time by theoreticians, filmmakers, critics, journalists, audiences, and writers. By analyzing articles published in the newspapers and magazines, as well as more intellectual studies on the (relatively) new art form, it is evident that Chinese national cinema was trying to emulate Hollywood dominance in this field. Widespread dislike of national cinema was taken for granted – the most immediate example that comes to mind is Lu Xun (1881–1936), considered to be the father of modern Chinese literature. As a writer who was extremely concerned about the nation’s future, we should expect that he would have endorsed local production. Yet, we discover from his diaries that he almost exclusively watched and enjoyed American movies.¹⁰

Although national cinema (a slippery term, within the context of a rapidly changing political situation like the Chinese one at the beginning of the 19th century) was not being ignored, it was sometimes difficult to differentiate between the “local” and the westernized cinematographic models. Cinematographers, scriptwriters, and critics periodically argued over the necessity to endorse and sustain their national cinema in the face of the colonial cultural dominance of the western model. However, this was much more closely related to production values and

content ethics than it was to form or style. Producers and investors had to survive without state subsidies (unlike post-revolutionary Russia); many of them found it more lucrative to speculate on fluctuations of the market, by buying and selling equipment (including the very film itself) and studio proprieties, rather than invest in the high-risk enterprise of movie pictures. On the other hand, in the eyes of progressive filmmakers, the goal was the engagement of all citizens, a coming to consciousness that would ultimately lead to radical changes in society and politics. Thus, the most “Chinese/traditional” productions (those related to popular entertainment like the *wuxiapian*/martial arts movies and the opera film) were loved by the public, but rejected by the intelligentsia and pioneer filmmakers as suspicious – if not despicable – remainders from feudal times. Yet even the more leftist productions, later acclaimed by official historiography as the seeds of the new revolutionary consciousness in cinema, needed public recognition, box office return, and a safe way through censorship’s control. The most practiced way to reach public acclaim and to spread modernist and democratic values was through melodrama. As a “new” genre, indebted to Western romantic and popular literature, Ibsen’s theater, Beethoven’s symphonies and of course, Hollywood “Griffithiana,” melodramatic cinema was – in the late ’20s and ’30s– already a largely global language. Many critics argue that melodrama was one or *the* principal characteristic of Chinese cinema in general.¹¹ Others have tried to redefine this idea using different concepts, such as the “vernacular.”¹²

One of the most prominent moviemakers of the golden age of Chinese cinema consciously and admittedly introduced Hollywood techniques, styles, and aesthetics in national cinema, via a lyrical yet realistic, popular yet informed, consistent yet variegated cinematographic style. I am referring here to the pioneer director Sun Yu (1900–1990). Sun Yu was the only filmmaker at the time to complete his education in the States. After a period at Qinghua University in Beijing (where he studied theatre and literature), in 1923 he began his literary studies at the University of Wisconsin, where he remained for three years, and later graduated from the New York Institute of Photography. He also took evening classes at Columbia University (where he specialized in photography and filmmaking). Sun Yu was there during the Roaring Twenties, when American cinema was crafting its global appeal. The influence of a solid traditional Chinese literary education, American-style filmmaking and firsthand experience in the New York of the Jazz Age mingle in his works and writings. Sun Yu defines the cinema (and, indirectly, himself) as *zasui* or chop-suey (which recalls the famous self-definition of Ozu Yasujiro as a tofu-maker).¹³ His most accomplished films include *Wild Rose* (Ye meigui, 1932), *Daybreak* (Tianming, 1933), *Little Toys* (Xiao wanyi, 1933), *Queen of Sports* (Tiyu huanghou, 1934), and *The Big Road* (Da lu, 1935). Later, his famous and acclaimed *Life of Wu Xun* (Wu Xun zhuan, 1949) had the misfortune of being one of first films to receive a direct and fierce critique from the *People’s Daily*, signed by Mao Zedong himself, and which almost put an end to his career. He still managed to produce a few movies in the late ’50s, but they were pale works of propaganda, lacking any creative tension. In his silent films, Sun Yu developed his own personal poetics, strongly influenced by his technical apprenticeship in the States and his practical experience as an avid moviegoer. Admittedly, Sun Yu was influenced by the works of King Vidor, F.W. Murnau, and D.W. Griffith. Directing techniques were one of the significant novelties introduced by Sun Yu. His actors stopped acting with their eyes, and started acting with their bodies. The other major novelty popularized by Sun Yu was unprecedented dynamic camera work. Sun Yu contributed to the spreading of complicated pan movements, tracking shots, and crane shots. At the time, these techniques were major innovations, shifting from static, theatrical representation, where the camera was at the same height and angle as the spectator’s gaze in a theatre, staring fixedly at the scene.

The scenarios of his most classic movies decline, via melodramatic twists, the struggle of the youth to define a mission during turbulent times: *Daybreak* tells the story of a young couple,

Lingling (Li Lili) and her cousin (Gao Zhanfei) arriving from the countryside to Shanghai and confronting corruption and decadence. The boy joins the revolutionary party, the girl is forced into prostitution but eventually becomes a spy and, once caught, faces death as a martyr, becoming an inspiration for the very same soldiers who are responsible for her execution. Anne Kerlan-Stephens and Marie-Claire Quiquemelle see an homage to Marlene Dietrich herself in the final sequence of *Daybreak*, particularly from *Dishonored* (Joseph Von Sternberg, 1931). In both movies, the protagonists walk to their end – the firing squad – bravely defying the perturbed gaze of the soldiers.¹⁴ If Marlene brandishes her mythical cigarette, Li Lili lets her beautiful smile shine over her dark fate. Facing her destiny, Lingling does not betray her lover, and she accepts death by a firing squad. She does this with two conditions though, both related to her image. In the first place, she wants to face death dressed in her village clothes. She refuses her evening dress, her refined but corrupted camouflage, and chooses to return to her “original” identity, which represents purity, innocence, and ultimately, the inner, original strength of the Chinese soul. Her second condition: she wants to smile. She is going to die, but she wants her death to be a symbol of future hope, of optimism, of a fighting spirit, of martyrdom. It is noteworthy that Lingling, in endorsing the revolutionary cause, understood the importance of the image, of the symbol. Thanks to her village dress and girlish smile, Lingling is not a simple individual girl, for she represents all of China’s youth.

In *The Big Road*, the young protagonists are building a road that will lead the Nationalist army to fight the Japanese invaders. Their bodies are followed by a long and sensuous tracking shot that expresses their youthful energy, as well as the idea of an entire nation marching towards independence. There is a literal stretching out towards liberation, towards emancipation, towards empowerment. The movement of the camera, the novelty of the tracking shot, the dynamism never seen before of the interaction between the camera work and the muscular bodies of the young characters, all lend a special, “modern,” blatant, energetic, and fresh meaning to the ideological image of the newly constructed social class, that is, young romantic rebels in a young China.

It is both a call to arms addressed to a new generation of young people and a declaration that insists that Chinese youth are not weak, and shall not be. Utilizing the “Western” technique of cinematography, which he apprehended in loco, Sun Yu shifts the representation of the intellectual heroes from that of a weak scholar and a submissive refined young lady¹⁵ to an image of strength, energy, and engagement. Along the tragic path of his heroes and heroines – revolutionary martyrs, saint-like prostitutes, but also common young women who sacrifice their pride to collective honor as in the *Queen of Sport* – Sun Yu elaborates a new ideal of battling youth. His movies remain largely popular (or “vernacular”)¹⁶ and endorse the melodramatic mode to call for public response and reaction. Like other members of intellectual circles of the time (to which he was closely tied), the director, once called “the poet of the silver screen,” rejected Western and Japanese imperialism while appropriating democratic ideals, romantic momentum, a fascination with science and social progress, and Western-developed representational techniques. His visual style, the way of filming young bodies that lean straight into the camera, and the idealization of the (paradoxically) realistic push towards progress and rebellion, often interrupted by war, society, and religion, portray the patriotic engagement of Sun Yu, as well as an aesthetic ideal made of freedom, liberty, and sensuality, an ideal for the building of a new generation that may embody the future of China itself.

The tragic star

Herself a masterpiece, Ruan Lingyu is one of the most important and influential actresses of the silent era. Stanley Kwan filmed an avant-garde biopic in which she was interpreted by

Maggie Cheung (*Center Stage*, 1992). Among her most representative films is probably *The Goddess* (Shennü, Wu Yonggang, 1934). The protagonist is the archetype of the saint prostitute, sacrificing herself for her child. This iconic figure recurs throughout the beginning of the twentieth-century China, since it contains the strongest potential for melodrama. It is an obvious sexual voyeuristic magnet, and at the same time is a powerful site of negotiation of freedom for women's still-under-construction new identity, and ultimately stands as a representation of humiliation suffered by a China still "violated" by foreign invaders as well as the "weakness" of the Chinese intellectual at the time. The movie has been largely analysed and its contradictions are laid bare for a modern eye: on the one hand, society is clearly seen as a weapon of oppression for women, where all divergence from a Confucian norm are stigmatized by an angry mob of rumors and hypocrisy; on the other hand, the woman cannot but succumb at the end of the movie, praying for her son to forget her (she's spending time in prison for having killed her cruel pimp). She hands him over to the school headmaster, a Confucian figure par excellence, who is going to save him by writing a canonical path to redemption. Revolutionary catharsis and conservative parables merge in this classic melodrama.

Sadly, Ruan Lingyu is also known for her tragic destiny: she committed suicide at 25 years old, and her death and funeral become the illustration of the overlapping and contradictory forces in the process of reshaping the media field of Republican China. She represented the female casualty of a patriarchal society – her portrait by Lu Xun became a classic of women's emancipation literature; she transfigured into the sacrificial victim of the star system, long before the Paparazzi character from Fellini's *La dolce vita* established its figure as a ubiquitous poltergeist of the Debordian spectacle society. Besides, her untimely death signaled the epochal, traumatic passage from the silent era to the advent of talkies. Many actors' and actresses' careers didn't survive the shift because of their untrained voices, and of course because of the lack of a standard oral language capable of reaching all Chinese communities in the mainland and abroad.

To stay in tune with this para-cinematic note, the recent recovery of *Love and Duty* (Lian'ai yu yiwu, Bu Wancang, 1931) is well timed and highly symbolic. A decade-spanning 153-minute-long epic love story between a young emancipated girl of Confucian background and a college student disliked by her parents, *Love and Duty* can be viewed as the prototype of the Chinese silent blockbuster in terms of content, form, and distribution. Starting from its very title: "Love" reveals clearly that melodrama is and will be one of the genres par excellence of Chinese cinema, where individual feelings must negotiate with the pressure of society and internal contradictions. "Duty" is reminiscent of the famous phrase: "obsession with China" coined by C. T. Hsia to describe the intellectuals and the writers of Early Republic: filmmakers had to negotiate changing times and dramatic historic circumstances and continue to define, redefine, challenge, or contribute shaping effort to the newborn republic of China. Along this short journey into the masterpieces of early Chinese cinema, we have already found and continue to encounter this recurrent dialogue between politics and the cinema medium in the prescient or programmatic title "love and duty."

Finally, the journey of the hard copy of the film itself reveals the adventure of early Chinese cinema. Considered lost for quite some time, a 35mm copy was retrieved in an archive in Uruguay, and then sent to Taiwan, where an enthusiastic archivist found it in the vault of the library and then had it elaborately restored. This intriguing story reveals the complexities of the circulation of what we call now "Chinese" film, linking Shanghai to Hong Kong, Japan-occupied Taiwan to mainland, Chinese communities abroad, and the international cinema market. And it reminds us that most early Chinese masterpieces are lost, because of the wars, lack of proper conservation methods, and the fatally belated idea that cinema is an art to be protected and restored.

It speaks, eventually

Sound film takes a long time to carve its dominion: the different languages spoken in the country made it hard to find a common practice among actors, written text on the other hand was a better way to communicate; technological backwardness also slowed down the adoption of sound films; but eventually there appeared some of the most highly regarded films of the time. At the end of the '30s two masterpieces were shot: *Crossroads* (Shizi jietou, Shen Xiling, 1937) and *Street Angels* (Malu tianshi, Yuan Muzhi, 1937). These two films depict dramatic trajectories of youth in Shanghai urban spaces. An array of characters – from the prostitute to the intellectual, from the street artist to the failed journalist – are shown as struggling within the turmoil of the time, caught in the despair of the impossibility to find a place in a society changing too fast. At the same time, the energy of their vital force is represented as the true vehicle of possible social and political change. Negotiating the new role of the woman, the to-be-reinvented place of the individual, the elegy of the tragic artist and the virtuous poor, these films somehow are reminders of the poetics of the sixth generation that started making movies in the 1990s: limited funds, urban settings, and peer actors. Both tendencies were inspired by the frequent importation of Western movies and by a keen gaze on local reality, a certain decadent aesthetics that can be seen both as indulging in self-pity or as a denunciation of alienation and solitude of modernizing youth in a struggling megalopolis.

Critics tend to underline the political values of films of the '30s, their political relevance and their political and leftist components. History reminds us that screenwriters and directors had to cope with a highly unstable situation in terms of personal freedom and political turmoil, and so many had to self-censor to avoid imprisonment, or worse. Thus, many movies tended to be crowd-pleasers or popular dramas, where the sexiness of the actors, the erotics of the love stories, and the attraction of the action sequences are much more important than the political components.

The Wan brothers can arguably be seen as the pioneer of Chinese animation, with masterpieces like *Iron Fan Princess* (Tieshan gongzhu, Wan Laiming and Wan Guchan, 1941) technically modelled on Walt Disney's successful *Snow White* and thematically inspired by the legendary Monkey King's (Sun Wukong) adventures during his (and his pals) journey to the West. Color, as elsewhere, takes a long time to appear and cohabitates for many decades with black-and-white films. In China, like the first feature films, color film came onto the scene via the threshold of theatre: the first color movie is *Remorse at Death* (Shensi hen, Fei Mu, 1948), played by Mei Lanfang, the iconic opera actor, whose figure inspires Bertold Brecht and Seguei Eisenstein in their study of the Chinese performing arts, and in turn shapes their own artistic practices. Genre films are both instrumental in taking the public into the theaters and as vehicles of ideological struggles using history or theatrical repertoire as means to talk about the present and raise the consciousness of the public. *Mulan Joins the Army* (Mulan congjun, Bu Wancang, 1939), for example, clearly alludes to the resistance against a "barbarian" foreign power invading China from the North. Based on the well-known story of the female soldier who pretends to be a man to serve the army so as to take the place of her aging father, the film speaks about the reality of the newsreel shown just before the feature presentation.

Sometimes the political message acquires an uncanny echo in very popular films like *Song of Midnight* (Yeban gesheng, Maxu Weibang, 1937). *Song of Midnight* was able to exploit viral modern mass communication marketing techniques: huge posters portraying the monstrous protagonist loomed in front of the theatres, and newspapers reported shocking effects and promised never before seen thrills. The movie was heavily influenced by classic Western horrors such as *The Phantom of the Opera* (Rupert Julian, 1925) or *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931). As Linda

Hutcheon describes, we are confronted here with an adaptation similar to an inception of ideas. The process of transcoding signs can be seen as a Darwinian process where forms and style struggle to survive and disseminate.¹⁷ Here, the universe is derivative: in an abandoned theatre a Cyrano de Bergerac-style deformed actor (believed dead) literarily sings in place of the young, inexperienced protagonist. His ancient lover has gone crazy and lingers in her garden dressed up with a white tunic, her hair disheveled, waiting every night to hear the song of her lover. The mob finally hunts down with torches the “monster” who is but a victim of society’s blindness and prejudices. The background is expressionist-gothic scenery filled with signs such as bats, squeaking floors, candle-lit ghostly abandoned rooms. However, the local specificity is loud and clear: the “phantom of the opera” has been persecuted because he was the representation of the new intellectual elite trying to transform China, both on and off scene. In his youth he was acting in modern plays representing the French revolution, hence advocating the socialist reform of society, and was in love with the woman desired by the local warlord. The newly arrived troupe is performing a Song dynasty story, where an “attack from the north” is mentioned, again an explicit (yet censorship-wise safer) reference to the then-current invasion of Japan. Private grief and public progressive forces mingle in a revolutionary drive that seems, at times, to serve as an uncanny force that haunts generation after generation: the young actor not only receives the training of the “phantom” but, at the end of the movie, promises that he will elope with his master’s ancient lover – who, meanwhile, has recovered her spirits. But she’s never asked an opinion about with whom to elope! In sum, the hero completely assumes the “phantom” role, including accepting what can be described as an arranged marriage. The younger generation has to submit to the ancients in Confucian obedience, even if chanting revolutionary slogans as a promise of self-determination facing national crisis. The fact that the young character doesn’t seem to have any decisional power, but that he slavishly follows the liberating (pun intended) commands of his mentor, could be read as an expression of Maxu Weibang’s (and his public’s) anxiety vis-à-vis the political dogma and revolutionary doctrine that will soon be imposed on the whole nation. Is it a subtle text foreshadowing the authoritarian consequences of the Yan’an forum talk? Or an expression of the restlessness vis-à-vis a foreign model (here: the codes of the gothic/horror genre, the Broadway-style opera) that kindles desire but also provokes rejections as an organ transplant? Or an unconscious revival of Buddhist retribution schemes, where the cyclical repetition becomes a source of threat and a ghastly image of coalition to repetition? In any case, the force of *Song of Midnight* is to be found exactly in this complexity, where multiple readings and suggestions debate and struggle under a murky surface. The aforementioned mob that blindly hunts the revolutionary character is another powerful representation of this subterranean anxiety. This is far from a coeval representation of a happy, cheering, optimistic crowd bringing the long-awaited liberation to the people. Here the mob is an *unheimlich* figure of abdication – the masses abdicate their free will, acting as a totality – possibly also hinting at the disturbing upload of Western ideas and lifestyle (including communism) that will shape future China. The birth of a nation is a labor by fire.

Last spring

In the troubled times between 1945 and 1949 some films are made, and they are great documents of the civil war tearing the nation apart while still recovering from the Japanese invasion. *The Spring River Flows East* is an outstanding achievement just in its making: an epic three hours long, divided into three parts, the plot spanning from wartime to postwar, and from Chongqing to Shanghai. Regardless of how difficult it was just to achieve the filming because of the

practical challenges of wartime, this blockbuster remains one of the most famous and influential Chinese movies ever made, a matrix for further historical dramas, since it encompasses different structures of feelings, highly cinematographic representations and melodramatic dilemmas, family values confronting epochal turmoil, the display of the fierceness and greatness of Chinese geography, and the harshness of its extreme climates, chanting a passionate elegy for the native land and the sufferance of forced diaspora, the contrast between romantic love and Confucian obligations, the struggle of changing gender roles, the coming of age of a generation during war time, the contrasting ideological drives that will soon bring the Nationalist and Communist parties to a dramatic showdown in 1949.

Still, probably the most important and cherished pre-1949 film remains a movie that was hidden from the public by censorship for many years before being acknowledged and rediscovered by the generation that started making movies during the Deng Xiaoping's 1980s as a source of inspiration and a drive to uncompromising, poetical creation. *Spring in a Small Town* (Xiaocheng zhi chun, Fei Mu, 1948) keeps the war outside its frame, but yet the conflict is there, pushing at the very limits of the setting and the consciousness of the characters. It is a liminal film, standing on the verge of a ravine, keeping an elegant equilibrium just before the fall. The story follows a doctor coming back home to his natal village – a figure reminiscent of a character from Lu Xun's short stories: the intellectual, Westernized man that faces the retrogressive, paralyzed ideological landscape of his native rural China. The encounter raises questions about his own commitment to modernization and progress, and about the price he has paid or he's ready to pay in order to accomplish his modernizing objective, not to mention the doubt about the possibility to change the nature of the sick cradle that still retains a luring, decadent attraction. The doctor visits his school friend, who's sick and depressed, living in a rich but dilapidated family mansion with his frustrated wife and fully-in-bloom younger sister. He discovers – along with the public – that he and his friend's wife used to be lovers. Their passion soon rekindles, thus giving rise to a classic love triangle, further spiced by the young sister who's fantasizing that the doctor can be a way out of the claustrophobic small town.

The force of the movie goes beyond the stereotyped dichotomy of the political struggle and enters the realm of the senses via languid camerawork and an evocative set design that visualizes the respiration of vital *qi* – to use the expression by Anne Cheng¹⁸ – circulating among human beings and architectures, vibrating on the desolate landscape and penetrating the cracks of the decrepit walls of the family mansion. There is indeed a strong critical standpoint vis-à-vis the sick, impotent, and suicidal husband, but the doctor is also stigmatized as a selfish individual who doesn't hesitate to abandon his love to pursue his career by himself alone in the city. Hence, it is a difficult task to decipher a privileged ideological standpoint of the director, because all the characters are painted with an affectionate yet critical look, soaked with weakness and vital drives. Soon the spring will bring long-repressed desires and memories to resurface with force and urgency. Maintaining elegant restraint, Fei Mu shoots iconic sequences of implicit seduction and sensual tension using the most quintessential elements of everyday life, suddenly eroticized by a camera that seems to gently pose layer after layer of voluptuous vibrations flowing among characters. The dialogues between the ancient lovers are a precious example: the two characters stand in the dimly lit room, discussing the watering of the plant or the comfort of the pillow, when all of a sudden the light goes out because of a blackout with hands clasped in a brief, torrid, though promising and memorable gesture; or in plain daylight, on the ruined city wall, the woman engages in a dangerous game of seduction using her handkerchiefs to repel and attract her old lover, displaying her own conflict between the nostalgia for past passion and her duty as a faithful wife. One of the most iconic and vibrant sequences takes place at night, around a table, where all the protagonists start to engage in a drinking game that soon reveals

overlapping desires and tensions. Nothing is said explicitly, but the complicated psychological relations among them – fear and desire, kindness and rage, hypocrisy and rebellion – always threaten to explode, but remain hidden in plain sight, as if following the rhythm of the slowly shifting movement of the camera, modestly situated outside the room.

At the end of the movie the doctor leaves the town and the other characters behind; a hollow representation that doesn't steer towards a clear-cut ideological standpoint. The family seems back together (after a suicidal attempt by the husband), but no revolutionary seeds have been planted. And is the young doctor heading to a brighter future or toward a moral compromise where professional success will overwhelm ethical and political considerations? This conclusion seems to be indebted to the poetics of Lu Xun: a clear diagnosis of the political situation of his country, full of compassion and irony, where the “optimism” of the revolutionary drive is but a stitch demanded by political necessity, while the feeling left by the movie is a decadent, pleasant melancholy suggesting a contemplative attitude more than a proactive engagement. No wonder that *Spring in a Small Town*, like the most controversial and subtle short stories by the “father of the modern Chinese literature,” has been repeatedly submitted to censorship and denial – not without leaving a burgeon for future blossoming. Such a slightly decadent indulgence in complex emotional intertwining, painted with graceful chiaroscuro, would not find its place in the development of Chinese socialist cinema (except for a few rare exceptions, as the exceptionally apolitical and passionate *Early Spring in February*), not at least until the blossoming of the fifth generation of the late 1980s. Tian Zhuangzhuang, one of the most important and controversial contemporary directors, signed a contract to do a remake of *Spring in a Small Town*. Filmed in lush colors, the movie is dedicated to the pioneer of Chinese cinema.

The rich heritage of early cinema enshrines precious gems to be discovered and rediscovered, to be restored and preserved for further generations that seem, consciously or not – as the doctor in *Spring* – to look back and to reproduce in a loop the visual practices of the republican period: competing studios producing melodramas, comedies, *wuxiapian*, blockbusters, with few but aesthetically relevant, small-scale productions, and literary adaptations.

Notes

- 1 Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, “New Takes on Film Historiography: Republican cinema redux, an introduction,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (2015), vol. 9, no. 1, 1–7, doi:10.1080/17508061.2015.1005931
- 2 Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, “Translating Yingxi: Chinese Film Genealogy and Early Cinema in Hong Kong,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 76–109, doi:10.1080/17508061.2014.994849, 77.
- 3 Berry Chris and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 47–56.
- 4 Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
- 5 Gunning, Tom, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator,” *Art and Text* (1989), vol. 34, 114–133.
- 6 Bao Weihong, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- 7 Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932–1937* (Boston: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 148.
- 8 Régis Bergeron, *Le Cinéma chinois: 1905–1949* (Paris: Alfred Eibel, 1977).
- 9 Chen Xiaomei, *Occidentalism: A Theory of Counter-discourse in Post-Mao China* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) underscores the positive effects of using the “Other” as an inspirational force to empower the subjected peoples; she is also aware of the risk involved in such an intellectual enterprise.
- 10 Anne Kerlan-Stephens and Marie-Claire Quiquémelle, “La compagnie cinématographique Lianhua et le cinéma progressiste chinois: 1930–1937,” in *Arts Asiatiques* (2006), tome 61, 5.

- 11 Nick Brown, "Society, and Subjectivity: On the Political Economy of Chinese Melodrama," in *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 40–56. Wimal Dissanayake, ed., *Melodrama and Asian Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Stephen Teo, "Il genere *wenyi*: una esegesi del melodramma cinese," [The *wenyi* genre: The Chinese melodrama], in Festival del cinema di Pesaro, ed., Stanley Kwan. *La via orientale al melodramma* (Roma: Il Castoro, 2000).
- 12 Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937*, 30. It is necessary to note that since melodrama is to some degree a foreign concept, the Chinese translation is shifting. It is often rendered as *tongsu ju*, where *tongsu* means "popular" and *ju* "play, drama."
- 13 See Sun Yu, *Floating on the Screen: Memories of My Life* (Yinhai fanzhou – huiyi wo de yisheng) (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi chubanshe, 1987); and Sun Yu, *Song of the Big Road* (Dalu zhi ge) (Taipei: Yuanliu, 1990). Note that the "traditional" chop-suey dish is not traditional at all, but instead a "construction" of the Chinese diaspora; see Gregory B. Lee, *Chinas Unlimited: Making the Imaginaries of China and Chinese-ness* (Honolulu: Routledge Curzon Press and University of Hawaii Press, 2003).
- 14 Anne Kerlan-Stephens and Marie-Claire Quiquemelle, "La compagnie cinématographique Lianhua et le cinéma progressiste chinois: 1930–1937," in *Arts Asiatiques* (2006), no. 61, 11.
- 15 Song Geng, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004). Stephen Teo, *Hong Kong: The Extra Dimensions* (London: BFI Publishing, 1997).
- 16 "Sun's commitment to both social progress and cinematic innovation led him to create a particular film language that may be called "unofficial/popular discourse," which for my purpose, may be reformulated as "vernacular discourse";" Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937*, 296–297.
- 17 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).
- 18 Anne Cheng, "Le souffle chinois," in *Cahiers du cinéma* (Novembre 2003), n. 584.

Further readings

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