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PAST IN REPUBLICAN CHINA

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## **Abstract:**

This dissertation studies the representation of the ancient (*gu*) in Shanghai cinema up to 1941 when Shanghai fell under total Japanese occupation. I trace the development of the genre of ancient costume films (*guzhuang pian*) and analyze the material and formal aspects of the construction of the ancient (*zhuang gu*) in cinema. Arguing against the stereotypical prejudice against ancient costume films as the “countercurrents” of modernity, I understand cinema’s engagement with the ancient past as a modern form of enchantment, both for the creators and consumers of a perceptually realistic ancient world.

The project explores two production cycles of the genre in light of changing political and social contexts: the first is in the late 1920s before censorship intervened the market-oriented film industry; the second period is from 1937 to 1941 when the Shanghai film industry retreated to the French and International Concessions after the outbreak of the War of Resistance Against Japan. I demonstrate a wide range of modern factors behind the emergence of the genre, and its multilayered function in the nation-building and national defense efforts. Looking at the fabrication of ancient costumes and the incorporation of historical sites in the 1920s, as well as the construction of film sets and the employment of sound in the late 1930s, this dissertation identifies major changes in formal features and ideological concerns of representing the past, and shows their connections to broader historical environments. If enchantment initially derives from the magic power of cinema in conjuring up a past world that transcends the boundary between the ancient and modern, between reality and fantasy, the wartime expression of enchantment highlights the reassuring effect of tradition in creating a sense of continuity and belonging in face of turbulence and crisis.

My research seeks to address two interrelated questions: how does tradition participate in shaping China's path to modernity and what new experiences of and relations to the past does cinema generate. The goal of this project is to break away from a progressive account of early Chinese cinema that privileged modern subject matters and features as its inquiry, and to uncover the entangled aspects of ancient and modern from the perspective of a new medium form.

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## Abbreviations:

- FMDK Wong Ain-ling (ed). *Fei Mu Dianyng Kong Fuzi* [Fei Mu's Confucius]. Hong Kong: Xianggang dianyng ziliaoguan, 2010.
- ZDFS Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen. *Zhongguo Dianyng Fazhanshi* [History of the Dveelopment of Chinese Cinema]. 2 vols. Beijing: Zhuoguo dianyng chubanshe, 1981.
- ZWD Hu Xiaolan (ed). *Zhongguo Wusheng Dianyng* [Sources of Chinese Silent Cinema]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianyng chubanse, 1996.
- ZWDS Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin. *Zhongguo Wusheng Dianyng Shi* [*Silent Chinese Film History*]. Beijing: Zhongguo dianyng chubanshe, 1996.

## Introduction:

What if there had been movie cameras since ancient times! If the photographic medium satisfies our perpetual psychological need to defend against the passage of time, as André Bazin famously claims,<sup>1</sup> the intrinsic human curiosity towards the unknown compels us to search for the past embalmed in any possible form. New technologies of recording and representing the present prompts the wishful thinking that the past had been preserved and available to us in the same way. Cinematic construction of the ancient to some extent is an enchanting response to the “what if” inquiry, compensating the unfulfillable desire unleashed by the very medium.

Ever since storytelling became the major mission of cinema, filmmakers have ventured to bring back a past world.<sup>2</sup> The first Italian feature film *The Taking of Rome* (dir. Filoteo Alberini, 1905) evokes the conquest of Rome by Italian troops in 1870, and the best-known Italian films prior to the First World War, are mostly historical epics, such as *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1908 and 1913), *Quo Vadis* (dir. Enrico Guazzoni, 1913), and *Cabiria* (dir. Giovanni Pastrone, 1914).<sup>3</sup> After the success of D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of the Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), film companies in France, Austria and Germany competed to make films on epic subjects with opulent sets.<sup>4</sup> In China, collective effort to represent the past in cinema did not occur until the mid 1920s, and the emergence of the genre immediately attracted enormous popular attention. For about a century, cinematic representations of the past have radically transformed our historical imagination, and it is hard for us today to speculate how people envisioned their

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<sup>1</sup> André Bazin. “The Ontology of Photographic Image” in *What is Cinema?* Translated by Hugh Gray, (Berkeley & LA: University of California Press, 1967), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Gunning has famously argued that narrative film did not become a major force shaping cinema until 1906 or so. See Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, 3-4 (1986): 63-70.

<sup>3</sup> For more detailed discussions on early epic films in Italy, see Carlo Celli and Marga Cottino-Jones, *A New Guide to Italian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 1-19; Pierre Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), 16 – 43; Giuliana Muscio, “In Hoc Signo Vincens: Historical Films,” in *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*, ed. Giorgio Bertellini (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2013), 161-170.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany’s Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), 197.

historical past before the invention of cinema. The inchoate endeavors to recreate past worlds through the latest medium have become a distant history in itself. Revisiting this history will open up new perspectives on how cinema changed the perception of the past and how engagement with the past altered people's understanding of the potential of the new medium.

The early history of making films on history is particularly intriguing in China due to the complexity of the attitude towards the nation's past and tradition in the broader social and cultural context of the first half of the twentieth century. A series of military fiascoes starting from the Opium War in 1839 had shattered the high self-esteem of the Chinese people. Failed military and political reforms finally resulted in the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 that terminated the Chinese imperial dynasties, drawing a clear line between old and new China.<sup>5</sup> In the intellectual sphere, iconoclasts took Chinese cultural tradition as the main cause for China's backwardness in the modern world. The desire to modernize Chinese culture was so strong that leading intellectuals even forcefully advocated the abolishment of Chinese characters.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore not surprising that when cinema, a quintessential symbol of modernity, started to engage traditional subject matters, modern-minded intellectuals were greatly troubled and considered it a countertrend of the times. But why would Chinese filmmakers shift their focus to the past in a time dominated by such passionate aspiration for modernity? What were the appeals of these films to their contemporary audience?

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<sup>5</sup> Yuan Shikai briefly restored monarchy in China for 1915 to 1916, but his short-lived Empire of China only lasted for 83 days.

<sup>6</sup> In "Chinese Characters in the Future" (zhongguo jinhou zhi wenzi wenti) published in *New Youth* in 1918, Qian Xuantong forcefully argues that in order to save China, it is necessary to abolish Chinese characters. Chen Duxiu, Wu Zhihui and Hu Shi all agreed with Qian's suggestion. See "Zhongguo Jinhou zhi Wenzi Wenti" [Issues of Chinese Characters in the future], *Xin Qingnian* 4, 4 (1918): 70-77. In July 1922, *National Language Monthly* (*Guoyu Yuekan*) published a special issue devoted to discussion on revolutions of Chinese characters. For English scholarship on the issue, see Thomas Mullaney, *The Chinese Typewriter: A History* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 12-26.

This dissertation studies the cinematic representation of China's dynastic past during the Republican era, charting the development of "ancient costume films" (*guzhuang pian*) against changing historical backgrounds and analyzing the way "the ancient" is reconstructed in cinema. Like in other film cultures, the heterogeneous traits of these films pose a challenge to approach them as a genre. In her analysis of early Italian historical films, Giuliana Muscio argues that two elements help to legitimize a genre study of this group of films: its diachronic evolution and its inherent ability of social engagement.<sup>7</sup> Throughout Republican China, two production cycles of ancient costume films can be clearly identified: the earliest experiment with the genre in the 1920s, and the revival of the genre during the War of Resistance Against Japan (1937-1945). Although the genre fulfilled different functions in these two periods, its enchanting effect remained consistent. If one of the major achievements of China's modern revolution was to permanently end the imperial dynasties, when they returned in a verisimilar appearance through the modern medium of cinema, it was alarming for radical reformists and enchanting to those who were still deeply attached to the past. As the survival of the new nation was critically threatened by the Japanese invasion, the ancient was evoked again to enchant Chinese people through a heightened sense of unity and historical continuity.

### **Defining "Ancient Costume Films"**

"Ancient Costume Film" is an indigenous Chinese genre, comparable to costume drama, period film, historical film, or the Japanese *Jidaigeki*. The key difference from these other commonly used concepts, however, is embodied by the character "ancient" (*gu*), which forms the kernel of the genre. Ancient here is not the same as the Western periodization of remote history,

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<sup>7</sup> Giuliana Muscio, "In Hoc Signo Vincas: Historical Films," 161.

but refers to the historical past that preceded the Founding of Republican China in 1911. It is not, strictly speaking, a period in Chinese history, which is more commonly divided by dynasties, but stands as the antithesis of modern China. Although in the academic field, the beginning of modern Chinese history is still a question under constant debate,<sup>8</sup> the popular understanding of the division, as represented by the genre, is far less complicated. The establishment of the “new” necessarily requires the articulation of the old, amalgamating various historical periods and traditions under the umbrella term “ancient.” The word *gu* was therefore turned from a general reference to the past to a fixed temporal frame and cultural form.<sup>9</sup> Such understanding of *gu* becomes more evident in contemporary Chinese popular culture. Films set in Republican China (1911-1949), which is by now a bygone historical period and also features unique costume styles of *qipao*, *changshan* mixed with Western dresses, are not considered as ancient costume films. The Republican era in contemporary representations always symbolizes modernity and the demise of tradition.

The vast majority of the films on ancient subject matter in the 1920s, as well as during the wartime revival, were adaptations of familiar stories that had been widely circulated through other media and performance forms. Rarely did they intend to offer new perspectives or serious reflections on history, but instead often aimed for new sensorial experiences of the past. In this sense, they were the closest to the concept of costume dramas, which, as defined by Belén Vidal,

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<sup>8</sup> In *The Rise of Modern China*, Immanuel Hsu reviews two major schools in the periodization of modern Chinese history, the first takes the Opium War (1839-1842) as the point of departure, and the second school considers the arrival of Western explorers and missionaries during the late Ming and early Qing as the starting point. See Immanuel Hsu C. Y. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4-7. Despite the apparent difference, both schools understand Chinese modernity as a result of China's encounter with the West. More recently, scholars started to ponder the possibility of discovering modernity within Chinese culture. For example, Jonathan Spence's traces the beginning of modern China to the internal developments in the late Ming in early seventeenth century. See Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York and London: Norton & Company, 1990). Craig Clunas also provocatively uses the term “Early Modern China” in his study of the visual culture of the Ming Dynasty to question the exclusive origin of modernity in Europe. See Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality in Early Modern China* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Foreign films that set in the pre-modern era were also generally referred to as *guzhuang pian*.

“may adapt historical sources or canonical novels, but allow fictional narratives and the detail of period construction to dominate over engagement with historical issues.”<sup>10</sup> When the genre first emerged in the 1920s, it was addressed in a variety of ways. The supporters of the genre promoted it as “history film” (*lishi pian*), whereas the detractors tended to call them *baishi pian*, which literally means films about petit history, or “chit-chat of the streets and alleyways, created by those holding conversations along the roadside.”<sup>11</sup> In 1940, a new term “folklore film” (*minjian gushi pian*) appeared to address the massive adaptations of popular tales that occurred that year. Among them, “ancient costume film” was the most commonly used term with a relatively neutral tone, and well indicates the genre’s connection with costume dramas in other culture contexts.

### **Ancient as Modern Enchantment**

The resurrection of the ancient through modern technology cannot be comfortably fit into any framework that based upon the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. These films were considered shamefully regressive in the eyes of modernists, and inauthentic to traditional cultural essentialists. Up until today, ancient costume film remains an understudied genre in early Chinese cinema, largely due to the overt emphasis on cinema’s affinity with modernity. How shall we bring back the ancient to the discussion of the modern experience of cinema? How can we rethink the dynamics between Chinese tradition and Western modernity through the neglected phenomenon of ancient costume film production?

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<sup>10</sup> Belén Vidal, *Figuring the Past: Period Film and the Mannerist Aesthetic* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ban Gu, *Han Shu*. Cited in Judith Zeitlin, “Xiaoshuo,” in *The Novel* ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 249 -261.

In her influential essay “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons,” Miriam Hansen applies her concept of vernacular modernism, which was first put forward in her discussion on classical Hollywood cinema, to Shanghai cinema in the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that cinema enabled a “sensory-reflexive horizon” that articulates the experience of modernity and allow the audience to make sense of their modern living condition.<sup>12</sup> Cinema reflects modern life both in its content and formal quality, laying in front of people their immediate environment “in a comprehensible, meaningful, and passionate way,” as Walter Benjamin puts it.<sup>13</sup> Along the same line, Zhang Zhen’s pioneering work *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen* firmly situates early Chinese cinema in the modern cosmopolitanism of Shanghai, delineating the cultural environment for the production and consumption of films.<sup>14</sup> For Zhang Zhen, vernacular modernism does not just refer to a specific quality of cinema, but is a basic condition of Chinese modernity. The very contradiction between “vernacular” and “modern” reflects the hybrid nature of modernity in China that defies any rigid boundaries and constantly produces tensions and energy. Although she only briefly mentions ancient costume films in her discussion,<sup>15</sup> her expanded concept of vernacular modernism draws our attention to the diversified facets of modern experience in China, among which the ancient also plays a role and triggers tension with modernity.

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<sup>12</sup> Miriam Hansen, “Falling Women Rising Star, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Films as Vernacular Modernism,” in *Film Quarterly* 54, 1 (Fall 2000): 10-22. The concept of “vernacular modernism” is first put forth and elaborated in Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” in *Modernism/Modernity* 6, 2 (1999): 59-77.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 329.

<sup>14</sup> Zhen Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896 – 1905* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Zhang Zhen translates *guzhuang* as “classical costume.” However, as I will demonstrate in chapter 2, the so-called *guzhuang* was a part of the modern fabrication of *gu*, and had no intrinsic classical quality.

The content of ancient costume films might be traditional and familiar, but watching the ancient on screen is unarguably a novel modern experience. However, if we force the genre under the rubric of vernacular modernism, we might risk seeing every film as vernacular modernist and making the framework too attenuated to be useful, as Daniel Morgan points out.<sup>16</sup> Instead, it will be more productive to start from the specificity of the genre, and analyze how the production and consumption of these films challenge, intersect, or complement vernacular modernism in China. On the most apparent level, the emergence of ancient costume films in the 1920s demonstrated that cinema was not only capable of reflecting modern experiences but could also bring back the past, which was probably more relatable than the extravagant modern life depicted in cinema, especially to the audience beyond the metropolitan area of Shanghai.

The appearance of the ancient on screen is foremost an enchanting experience, not in the sense that it tricked people to believe the ancient was miraculously captured by the modern camera, but because it showcased the wondrous capacity of the medium to resurrect a past world in motion with the most vivid visual details. The term enchantment inevitably evokes Max Weber's influential and frequently challenged concept of *die Entzauberung der Welt*, the disenchantment (de-magic-ation) of the world in modern time. For Weber, modern science and rationality demystify the natural world and human experiences, sweeping away the spirits and magic that once occupied the pre-modern world. "In a disenchanted world everything becomes understandable and tameable, even if not, for the moment, understood and tamed."<sup>17</sup> My use of enchantment/disenchantment departs from Weber's dichotomy between modern science and pre-modern magic, freeing enchantment from its oppositional position to a scientific understanding

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<sup>16</sup> Daniel Morgan, " 'Play with Danger': Vernacular Modernism and the Problem of Criticism," in *New German Critique* 122 (Summer 2014): 67-82.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Jenkins, "Disenchantment, Enchantment, and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium," *Max Weber Studies* 1 (2000): 12.

of the world. Enchantment as the experience of wonder, delight, and affective power has no direct correlation with the Weberian disenchantment as a rational cognitive process.

My usage of the term is in accordance with two major trends in the critical engagement with Weber's concept. First is the claim that we have never been disenchanted by science, as put forth by Bruno Latour and followed by Jason Josephson's recent book *The Myth of Disenchantment*.<sup>18</sup> Second is to search for new forms of (re)enchantment in modern time, among which secular magic and cinema often serve as prominent examples.<sup>19</sup> The former pushes us to rethink what it means to be modern and the latter broadens the implication of enchantment, although the two are, of course, closely interconnected. In this dissertation, I endeavor to situate enchantment/disenchantment in the specific context of Chinese modernity in the early twentieth century and also elaborate the specific enchanting effects of ancient costume films.

The understanding of modernity as a rupture from the past is by no means unique to the Chinese case, as evident in Weber's conceptualization of disenchantment. Modernity in the West is also established as an emphatically new age against the dark, superstitious, and irrational medieval epoch. But in China, as well as in other non-Western cultures, the newness of the modern also implies a geographical rupture between the local and the West. This is not to ignore the new academic trend of rediscovering modernity as an internal force in non-Western cultures,<sup>20</sup> but that would be a different topic. In the popular perception since the Qing dynasty, the awareness of "the modern" was intertwined with the "oceanic other" (*yang*), first the West (*xiyang*) and then the modernized Japan (*dongyang*). When Western modernity was introduced

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<sup>18</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Jason A. Josephson, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Colin Williamson, *Hidden in Plain Sight: An Archeology of Magic and the Cinema* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Saurabh Dube, "Modernity and Its Enchantments: An Introduction," in *Enchantments of Modernity: Empire, Nation, Globalization*, ed. Saurabh Dube (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1–41.

in the form of practical or playful objects, such as clocks, mirrors, perspective paintings, and various visual devices, they functioned as a source of enchantment.<sup>21</sup> With the scientific principles and the process of making “black-boxed,” to borrow the term from Latour,<sup>22</sup> they almost appeared as a form of magic, and sometimes elicited supernatural explanations. The most far-reaching disenchanting effect of modernity in China was the disillusion of a Sino-centric worldview, the realization of the urgency to open up the blackbox of science and introduce the spirit of democracy. Such disenchantment soon reemerged as a new form of enchantment, the enchantment of Chinese nationalism.

Ancient costume film as enchantment, in this context, also registers at both the national and personal levels – national in terms of its relation to the growing nationalist sentiment and nation building / nation defending efforts, and personal refers to the individual experience of the ancient world on screen. The “ancient costume film movement” in the 1920s started as a conscious effort to de-Europeanize the mise-en-scene of Chinese films and improve the national image of Chinese people. During wartime revival of the genre, the ancient constantly appeared as allegories of the historical present, mobilizing the audience to resist the invaders. Ancient costume films provided people an effective and enchanting experience of identification with the nation through familiar historical tales and figures. On the experiential level, enchantment was at work every moment when filmmakers conceived the possibility of applying the “new realm of consciousness” enabled by cinema, as Benjamin puts it,<sup>23</sup> to re-imagine and piece together a disappeared past world. As costumed actors and extras occupied city space in the 1920s and

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<sup>21</sup> For example, the depiction of Western objects in *Dreams of the Red Chamber* often entails funny and enchanting situations, such as Granny Liu’s encounter with the perspective painting. The earliest Chinese pictorial *Dianshizhai Huaba* is also filled with exciting depictions of Western products as wondrous spectacles.

<sup>22</sup> For Latour, the black box refers to the complicated scientific and technical process that is made invisible by the efficiency of the final product. It is a reoccurring metaphor in his writings, and clarified in the glossary in his anthology *Pandora’s Hope*. See Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 304.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Reply to Oscar A. H. Schmitz,” 329.

ancient characters shouted out patriotic slogans during the war, all solid boundaries dissolved into the air.

In her study of classical Chinese literature, Wai-yee Li defines enchantment as “the process of being drawn into another world that promises sensual and spiritual fulfillment. It is the illusion of power, of the capacity to transcend the human condition.” And disenchantment is “the awareness of enchantment as mere enchantment, a condition of limited duration subject to inevitable demolition.”<sup>24</sup> Although Li’s pairing of the two concepts refers to the rhetorical strategy of literary texts, her definitions are also suitable to the experience of film viewing. Indeed, cinema that manifested the “magic of science” to Chinese people was already imbued with an enchanting quality. But it is not enough to simply understand enchantment as the nature of the medium. It was the appearance of the ancient, which had just been petrified into an unreturnable past, that provided the strongest wonder.

Enchantment’s dialectic relation with disenchantment also allows me to go beyond the conventional understanding of ancient costume films as a form of escapism, which had a strong negative implication, especially during the war. To escape is to leave behind the depressing reality, to lose oneself in a utopian world for the purpose of forgetting, but to be enchanted is not necessarily a rejection of an attachment to reality. Enchantment enables more fluid interaction between the film viewing experience and reflections on real living conditions, and with its magical power, better prepares people to cope with the disenchanting reality.

### **Film and History: Literature Review and Methodology**

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<sup>24</sup> Wai-yee Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3.

Siegfried Kracauer's posthumous book *History: The Last Thing Before the Last* (1969) initiated the effort to reflect upon the "existing parallels between history and photographic media, historical reality and camera-reality."<sup>25</sup> Despite his disapproval of history films expressed in *Theory of Film*, Kracauer's philosophical inquiry into the affinity between film and history reunites the two terms. Ever since the launch of the specialist journal *Film and History*, discussions on the interrelation and overlaps between history and cinema have become a steadily growing field across the disciplines of History and Cinema Studies. The majority of books in this field are general theoretical works that reflect on cinema's ability to serve as a legitimate form of historiography, such as Pierre Sorlin's *The Film in History* (1980), Marc Ferro's *Cinema and History* (1988), Robert Rosenstone's *Visions of the Past* (1995) and *History on Film/Film on History* (2001), Marcia Landy's *The Cinematic Use of the Past* (1996), Philip Rosen's *Change Mummified* (2001), and Antoine de Baecque's *Camera Historica* (2012). They all share the common agenda to challenge, or at least to rethink, the dominant position of written history. For this reason, scholars tend to draw a clear line between serious historical films that use the unique capabilities of the media to create gaps and multiple meanings, raising questions and creatively interacting with historical traces, whereas mainstream costume films depict the past in a highly developed, polished form that simply serves as a setting for romance and adventure.<sup>26</sup> Such categorization often privileges the former over the latter.

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<sup>25</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Thing Before the Last* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1969), 3. The introduction that the quote is cited from was written from 1961 to February 1962.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 11-12, 44. Fredric Jameson defines historical films as the ones that "have holes or are perforated, leaving us to navigate through gaps and to work at meaning making," as opposed to nostalgia films that are merely "the surface sheen of a period." See Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1992), 179-80. Pierre Sorlin also distinguishes historical films that connect to wider political concern from the ones that are more enamored by the look of the past than by the social and political issues. See Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 116.

Sue Harper and Marcia Landy bring our attention to the popular appeal of films on the past, both evoking the concept of melodrama. In Harper's study on British Gainsborough costume melodramas during and after the World War Two, she understands the historical past portrayed in these films as "a site of sensual pleasure." The affective and spectacular mise en scene provided the wartime (female) audience an escapist space where "only feelings reside, not socio-political conflicts."<sup>27</sup> Landy expands the use of costume melodrama as a specific woman's genre, as in Harper's case, to engage a broader cinematic representation of popular history. By linking melodrama with Antonio Gramsci's concept of "common sense as folklore," she stresses that the excessiveness of affect "enables common sense to masquerade truth and folklore as history."<sup>28</sup> Both authors emphasize the importance of emotional appeal and affective function over narrative interest, prompting us to reconsider the nature of attraction in cinematic use of the past. My analysis of the enchanting effects of Chinese ancient costume films also focuses on the non-narrative aspects, although the familiarity of the narratives, their "common sense" nature as Landy describes, is also a constitutive part of enchantment.

Despite the growing number of works in this field, little attention has been paid to the collective body of costume films in specific social and cultural contexts, with the exceptions of Sue Harper's cultural studies approach to British costume films from 1933 to 1950 and Susan Hayward's focus on the politics in French costume drama of the 1950s.<sup>29</sup> Sean O'Reilly's recently published book *Re-viewing the Past: The Uses of History in the Cinema of Imperial Japan* analyzes the filmic depictions of the Bakumatsu period (1853 – 1868) against the social-

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<sup>27</sup> Sue Harper, "Historical Pleasures, Gainsborough Costume Melodrama," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies of Melodrama and Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Glendhill, (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 175-82.

<sup>28</sup> Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 161.

<sup>29</sup> Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: BFI, 1993); Susan Hayward, *French Costume Drama of the 1950s: Fashioning Politics in Film* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2010.)

historical background of interwar and wartime Japan, weaving close formal analysis with issues of audience experience, censorship, and social environment.<sup>30</sup>

In the field of early Chinese cinema, no book-length study has been devoted to a single genre, and ancient costume films remain largely a virgin land. The aim of this dissertation is to layout a general history of the genre, analyze its stylistic features and the intertwined cultural, political, and political forces behind them. One of the major difficulties in studying the genre, as well as early Chinese cinema in general, is the scarcity of surviving film texts, especially from the 1920s. My study of the first wave of the genre has relied primarily on newspapers and periodicals from the time to reconstruct the debates, production conditions, and film details. The number of extant films increases in the wartime era – about one fifth of the total output of ancient costume films are available today, many with restricted access. My analytical focus in this part shifts to close reading of the film texts, while attending to their production background and firmly grounding them in social-historical contexts of the war. The methodological difference in the two parts of the dissertation is conditioned by the availability of the materials.

Besides laying out the historical development of the genre, I study the construction of the ancient world from the perspectives of costume design, setting, and sound. When film texts are available, I analyze how these proflimic elements are transformed into the diegesis through cinematography, editing, and recording. The elements I choose to focus on are not just important formal aspects of the genre, but also outstanding features of Chinese cinema of that specific historical period, thus linking the specificity of the genre to the general trend of film production in China. Theater serves as another crucial thread that runs throughout the dissertation. I focus on the complexity of the relation and interactions between the two forms, treating theater as

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<sup>30</sup> Sean O'Reilly's recently published book *Re-viewing the Past: The Uses of History in the Cinema of Imperial Japan* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

cinema's source of inspiration, point of departure, commercial competitor, and also as an example to emulate, a field to escape to during the war.

Like ancient costume filmmakers' endeavor to build a past world upon the fragmented historical knowledge and materials that were available to them, my writing of the history of film on history is also confined by the incompleteness of the film archive and historical documents. But this is the condition shared by all historians, and also the very reason why people are attracted to history. The history I am able to offer in this dissertation is by nature incomplete. To quote Kracauer's analogy between history and the photographic image, "its frame marks a provisional limit; its content points beyond that frame, referring to a multitude of real-life phenomena which cannot possibly be encompassed in their entirety."<sup>31</sup> In historical writings and historical films, it is often from the incompleteness that something enchanting emerges.

### **Chapter Outlines:**

This dissertation is divided into two parts, each studying one genre cycle in three chapters. The first chapter of each part gives a general outline of the historical background, the development of the genre, and major theoretical or practical concerns at the time. The remaining two chapters focus on major formal aspects or stylistic features of each genre cycle. In the first wave of ancient costume films from 1926 to 1931, I examine the fabrication of ancient costumes (chapter 2) and the use of location shooting (chapter 3) as the key attractions of the genre. During the wartime revival of ancient costume films from 1938 to 1941, two new aspects will be analyzed in detail: the total reliance on studio sets due to the loss of access to location shooting

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<sup>31</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Thing Before the Last*, 58.

(chapter 5) and the use of sound that caused major changes in the representation of the past (chapter 6).

Chapter 1 challenges the persisting prejudice against ancient costumes films in the 1920s as a countertrend of modernity. By tracing the international influence on the birth of the genre in China and filmmakers' initial intentions to de-Europeanize the mise-en-scene of Chinese cinema, I argue that ancient costume films were first envisioned as a promising chance to advance the Chinese film industry and improve the national image. As the pursuit of historical accuracy encountered setbacks due to the lack of proper knowledge, the original ambition to faithfully represent the past gradually shifted to the creation of fantasies of the past to demonstrate the dream-making capacity of cinema, transforming the genre into martial arts-magic spirit films.

Chapter 2 studies the invention of ancient costumes as the antithesis of contemporary costumes, and their circulation from photo studios to theater and cinema. The necessity to use ancient costumes to portray ancient figures was gradually established as a new norm in modern theater and cinema from the 1910s to the 1920s in China. It not only resulted from a quest for realism, but was also caused by a rejection of Qing costumes for political and ideological reasons, and by a desire for visual novelty on stage and screen. In pre-modern texts, the term "ancient costume" often denotes some kind of strangeness, usually worn by celestial beings or ghosts, rather than simply referring to sartorial styles from past dynasties. The disenchanted modern concept of ancient costume also became a new form of enchantment that allowed people to re-imagine and even embody the ancient.

Chapter 3 focuses on my discovery of a key trait of early Chinese cinema: frequent use of location shooting. This is particularly puzzling in ancient costume films, which aim to convey a different temporality from the contemporary world. Shooting locations were often advertised as

special attractions of films, and the very production process was also exhibited as an enchanting spectacle. If the invention of ancient costumes indicated a conceptual rupture between the ancient and the modern, the appropriation of contemporary landscapes as ancient settings tended to suggest a temporary continuity embedded in the land in which Chinese people and their ancestors dwelled. Instead of hiding the identity of the shooting location to present a self-contained diegetic world of the ancient, filmmakers often foregrounded the magical transformation of recognizable sites into ancient sets to invite the audience to marvel at the capability of cinema.

Chapter 4 to 6 are devoted to the second wave of ancient costume films during the War of Resistance Against Japan. After a long interval period with very few ancient costume film productions, the ancient reemerged as a popular subject in semi-occupied Shanghai. Chapter 4 argues that countering our common understanding that wartime conditions brought back ancient costume films, the outbreak of the war in fact delayed its resurgence. Such understanding challenges the causal relation between wartime censorship and the prevalence of ancient costume films, leading us to pay more attention to the formal, social, and economic aspects of the genre. I also endeavor to go beyond the firmly established dichotomy between valueless entertainment films and meaningful patriotic films by rethinking the implication of “contemporary relevance,” granting ancient costume films a more positive role in enchanting a wartime audience.

Chapter 5 analyzes set constructions in ancient costume films when location shooting became largely unattainable in Orphan Island Shanghai. Filmmakers retreated to the studios, relying on the magic of set designers and cinematographer to turn limited space into “endlessly expanding” ancient worlds. The model of “two-way mirror” will be introduced to rethink how film diegesis enables reflections on the audience’s reality. By categorizing three different kinds

of spatial arrangement in the sets of ancient costume films, I demonstrate how filmmakers' concerns have been built into the space of the diegesis, controlling the ways audiences engage with the cinematic world.

Chapter 6 studies the incorporation of sound into the cinematic depiction of the ancient. The vocal-centric use of sound in this period emphasizes the comprehensibility of language over its mission to represent the ancient. With few exceptions, conversations of the characters erased rather than reinforced the distance between the ancient and the modern, encouraging the audience to identify and resonate with ancient figures being depicted. Singing constituted another major usage of sound, and the enchanting effects of songs soon turned the musical into the next dominant genre that replaced ancient costume films.

**PART I:**

**Inventing the Ancient: the Birth of a New Genre (1926-1931)**

## Chapter 1. Debating Ancient Costume Films: A Countertrend or A Modern Promise?

“Magnificent, Magnificent! Magnificent ancient people, magnificent Chinese cinema, and magnificent new views of Chinese ancient costume films!”<sup>1</sup>

- Zheng Zhengqiu

When Zheng Zhengqiu wrote this line in “The Good Luck of Ancient People and Chinese Cinema” in 1927, his Star Film Company (Mingxing Yingpian Gongsì) had not yet made a single ancient costume film.<sup>2</sup> Film scholars tend to understand the company’s belated participation in the trend as a deliberate resistance to ancient costume films.<sup>3</sup> But Zheng Zhengqiu’s passionate voice proves the opposite. In fact, the Star Company was one of the first Chinese companies to advocate the genre, and its promotion of the plan to make *Fengyi Pavilion* - a famous segment from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, was the earliest among all.<sup>4</sup> In the article, Zheng attributed the delay of *Fengyi Pavilion* to the company’s serious and cautious attitudes towards the making of ancient costume films. Zheng claimed that the Star Company had been preparing the film for over a year, and recently formed three separate committees for costume research, prop research and makeup research. Even an insignificant extra in the film would receive professional training from an acting school that was established especially for the production of ancient costume films.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zheng Zhengqiu, “Guren Jiaoyun yu Zhongguo Dianying” [The Good Luck of Ancient People and Chinese Cinema], in *Mingxing Ketan: Meihua Luo* 22 (1927): 3.

<sup>2</sup> The Star Film Company was a major film company in the 1920s and 1930s. It was founded by Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Zhengqiu, Zhou Jianyun and others in Shanghai in 1922, and ceased production at the Battle of Shanghai (*Songhu Huizhan*) in 1937. For detailed information about the company, see Huang Xuelei *Shanghai Filmmaking: Cross Borders, Connecting to the Globe, 1922 – 1938*. (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Huang Xuelei, *Shanghai Filmmaking*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> In February 1926 (the beginning of a new Chinese calendar year), the company designed a calendar with images of the *Fengyi Pavilion* as a complimentary gift with the tickets of *Lonely Orchid* (*Konggu Lan*). In the summer of that year, a scene of the film is printed on foldable fans that were given to the audience of *The Daughter of a Wealthy Family* (*Furen zhi Nü*). See *Shenbao*, February 6, 1926, 12; August 8, 1926, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Zheng Zhengqiu, “Guren Jiaoyun yu Zhongguo Dianying,” 3.

Later that year, the company reaffirmed their determination to make *Fengyi Pavilion* an exemplary ancient costume film, and announced their ambitious plan for making five more ancient costume films.<sup>6</sup> However, only *Chechi Country* (dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1927) and *Luoyang Bridge* (dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1928) were actually realized before the company reinvested their production resources in the martial arts-magic spirit genre. The Star Company became the leading force in the new trend through the raving success of *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1928), and its dream of making of a real magnificent ancient costume film has never been realized.



Fig. 1.1. Ruan Lingyu's Ancient costume debut in *Luoyang Bridge* (*Liangyou Magazine* 25, 1928)

<sup>6</sup> "Mingxing Gongsì Kaishe Wuda Guzhuang Pian Guanggao" [The Star Company Starts to Shoot Five Ancient Costume Films], in *Shenbao*, October 4, 1927, 1. The five announced titles are: *The Chechi Country* (*Chechi Guo*, dir. Zhang Shichuan) from *Journey to the West*, *Ling Chong* (dir. Hong Shen) from *The Water Margin*, *Daji* (dir. Bu Wancang) from *The Investiture of the Gods* (*Fengshen Bang*), *Xishi* (dir. Zheng Zhengqiu) based on *Chronicles of the Eastern Zhou Kingdoms*, and *Luoyang Bridge* (dir. Zhang Shichuan) adapted from folklore. .

Although the Star Company has not become a hub of ancient costume film production in the 1920s, its initial enthusiasm for the genre, the strong aspiration for historical accuracy and the endeavors that went with it, and eventually resorting to a fanciful imagination of the past under the pressure of market competition were emblematic of the ancient costume film movement as a whole. Ancient costume films were initially envisioned as an enchanting opportunity to advance the Chinese film industry and disseminate Chinese history and culture among and beyond domestic audience. But the triumph of the fantastic over the historical changed the way the Chinese past was presented on screen.

This chapter analyzes the motivations for making ancient costume films, the materials chosen for the genre, and the discussions on how to represent the no longer extant ancient through cinematic means. The huge discrepancy between the ambitions expressed in the writings that advocated the genre and the actual film products from this period revealed the complexity of the genre in its constant negotiation with foreign and domestic artistic influences, ideological justifications, market profitability, and technical feasibility. Situating the discussion and production of ancient costume films in the social and cultural milieu of late nineteenth and early twentieth century China, this chapter argues that the emergence of the genre was motivated by a combination of nationalist concerns and the desire to advance the Chinese film industry. The aspiration for realistic reconstructions of an ancient world on screen attracted many filmmakers to ancient costume films, but pragmatic concerns and evolving understandings of cinematic realism eventually shifted the focus from historical accuracy to fantastic visual effects.

### **Charting the Genre in the 1920s**

The year of 1926 witnessed a major change in Chinese cinema: a significant increase in the number of films with traditional subject matters, which soon led to an “ancient costume film movement” in the following year. Although scattered adaptations of traditional tales did occur in the earlier period,<sup>7</sup> Chinese cinema up until 1925 was preoccupied with contemporary subjects. However, by the end of 1927, most film companies in Shanghai had participated in the making of ancient costume films. Popular folk tales, opera plays, and renowned novels all became favored sources for screen adaptation. Some stories were even adapted multiple times within one year.<sup>8</sup> Fictionalized ancient worlds were blended with fantastical visions of magic spirits and martial arts heroes/heroines, dominating Chinese silver screens for almost 5 years. The fascination with cinema’s potential in constructing worlds beyond contemporary reality persisted until 1931 when the ban on superstitious elements in films marked the termination of martial arts-magic spirit films.

This craze for non-contemporary subject films was typically dismissed as a “turmoil period” or degeneration of domestic film industry until it was redeemed by the advent of progressive Left-wing cinema in the 1930s.<sup>9</sup> When viewed from the linear progressive perspective of modernity, such “backward-looking” productions could be interpreted as a retreat

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<sup>7</sup> The earliest fictional film from Hong Kong *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (Zhuangzi Shi Qi, 1913) was based on a tale from Feng Menglong’s *Ordinary Words to Warn the World* (*Jingshi Tongyan*). Li Minwen, who was involved in the production of this film later made *Rouge* (*Yanzhi*, 1924), an adaptation from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Scholar* (*Liaozhai Zhiyi*). The earliest productions of the Asian Film Company in Shanghai also included two old plays: *Zhuangzi Hacking the Coffin* (*Zhuangzi Piguan*) and *Retribution* (*Shazi Bao*). The former was based on the same story as *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* from Hong Kong. From 1922 – 1923, the Commercial Press also adapted four traditional tales into films.

<sup>8</sup> Both the Fudan Company and the Peacock Company made *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou Meng*) in 1927; and two versions of *Mulan Joins the Army* were produced by the Tianyi Company and the Minxin Company.

<sup>9</sup> Gu Jianchen categorized the period as the “turmoil” of the Chinese film industry. See Gu Jianchen, “Zhongguo Dianying Fada Shi” [History of Chinese Cinema], originally published in *Zhongguo Dianying Nianjian*, 1934), collected in *ZWD*, 1369. For Zheng Junli, this trend marked the decline of domestic cinema. See Zheng Junli, “Xiandai Zhongguo Dianying Shilue” [A Brief History of Modern Chinese Cinema], originally published in *Jindai Zhongguo Yishu Fazhan Shi* (1936), collected in *ZWD*, 1497. Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Ling Zhuwen claim the fad of ancient costume and martial art-magic spirit films as a countercurrent against the New Cultural Movement. See *ZDFS*, 86-90.

from the raving efforts for modernization in the early twentieth century. And it is true that the majority of these films were quickly and cheaply made under the pressure of vicious market competition, as Zhang Yingjin claims.<sup>10</sup> However such criticism neglects two important aspects of the trend: the complexity of this shift toward traditional subject matter in relation to its social-cultural environment and the significance of this wave of experiments as the inchoate stage of ancient costume films that will develop into a prominent genre in Chinese cinema. Recent studies in Chinese cinema have greatly complicated the long-existing prejudice against martial arts-magic spirit films, analyzing and contextualizing them under the conditions of modern fascination with the kinesthetic experience of the body, the dichotomy between science and superstition, the affect they had on the audience and their intricate relations to nationalism.<sup>11</sup> But ancient costume films as a genre largely remain under-discussed.

The broadest definition of ancient costume film, which refers to any film set before the founding of Republican China in 1911, would include a significant portion of martial arts-magic spirit films that were set in a vaguely remote past.<sup>12</sup> But in the context of the 1920s, the enormous popularity of martial arts-magic spirit films turned in into an independent genre. As Rick Altman argues, genre formation is an ongoing process of turning promising adjectives into substantive nouns.<sup>13</sup> Martial arts and magic spirit were the two adjectives that “graduated” from the school of ancient costume films. Zhang Yingjin defines ancient costume films in the 1920s as

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<sup>10</sup> Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 37-47.

<sup>11</sup> See Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1869-1937* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005), chapter 6; Bao Weihong, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), chapter 1.

<sup>12</sup> Some people in the 1920s understood ancient costume films as consisting of two subgenres: history films and magic-spirit films. See Zhu Yi, “Lun Guzhuang Ju: Shenguai Ju yu Lishi Ju” [On Ancient Costume Films: Magic-spirit films and History films], in *Meiren Ji Tekan* [Special Issue on *Beauty Ruse*], 1927, collected in *ZWD*, 651. Huang Xuelei also sees ancient costume films as a broader genre that includes magic-spirit films. See Huang Xuelei, *Shanghai Filmmaking*, 222.

<sup>13</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), 54. In China, films with magic spirit and martial arts elements emerged before the production of ancient costume films, but the prevalence of martial arts-magic spirit film as a genre occurred after the ancient costume film movement.

“historical films adapted from *tanci* repertoires and a wealth of unofficial histories, traditional novels, vernacular stories and folk tales.”<sup>14</sup> That is to say, the “ancient” in ancient costume films does not simply refer to the period in which the story is set, but also to the creation and circulation history of the narrative. My use of the term is in accordance with Zhang’s definition, emphasizing filmmakers’ intention to engage history and traditional culture, but what I want to emphasize is the largely ambiguous boundary between ancient costume films and martial arts-magic spirit films.

Although historiographies of Chinese cinema tend to narrate a clear transition from ancient costume films to martial arts-magic spirit films, their distinction is extremely hard to maintain. In 1932, Ji Zhong delineated a general trajectory of Chinese cinema from social issue films starting with the Star Company’s *An Orphan Rescues His Grandfather* (*Gu’er Jiuzu Ji*, dir. Zhuang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu, 1923) to ancient costume films fashioned by the Tianyi Company, which soon gave way to martial arts films and further developed into magic spirit films.<sup>15</sup> This basic narrative is generally endorsed by later film historians with some small variations. In *History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*, Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen combine martial arts and magic spirit into one specific genre that took over the popularity of ancient costume films. Although they single out *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* as the first film to ignite the new craze, some of the examples of marital arts-magic spirit films they analyze, for instance, *The Tang Emperor Visits Hell* (*Tanghuang You Difu*, dir. Yu Qingquan, 1927) and *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (*Ernü Yingxiong*, dir. Wen Yimin, 1927) were made prior to *Burning*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Zhang Yingjin, *Chinese National Cinema*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> Ji Zhong, “Guochan Yingpian Zuofeng zhi Yangge yiji Jinhou zhi Qushi” [The Trajectory of Domestic Cinema and its Future Trend], *Shenbao*, Nov. 14, 1932, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Xing Zuwen, *ZDFS*, 131-136.

Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin consider *The Tang Emperor Visits Hell* as an ancient costume film since it is adapted from the Ming dynasty novel *Journey to the West*, while listing *Heroic Sons and Daughters* as a martial arts film. For them, source of adaptation is fundamental in the demarcation between ancient costume films and martial arts films – the former were closely based on traditional cultural materials, whereas the latter were mostly made up by filmmakers or adapted from serialized martial arts novels in newspapers that started to gain popularity in the 1920s. They therefore counted a total output of 75 ancient costume films from 1927 to 1928, excluding martial arts films that used ancient costumes. By setting up ancient costume films and martial arts films as two parallel genres, they understand the formation of the martial arts-magic spirit genre as a result of the migration of magic spirit elements from the former to the latter.<sup>17</sup> The martial arts genre that typically features knight-errant characters is not confined to the ancient or contemporary settings, but can be freely located in any time period, whereas magic spirit films always imply a vague sense of the past due to their depictions of the supernatural, which was the target of exorcism in modern time. It was the attachment of magic aspects to martial arts films that anchored the new genre in the realm of the past.

Li and Hu's definitions of ancient costume films and martial arts films seem to rely on two separate but overlapping primary criteria - source of adaptation for the former and subject matter for the latter. Such inconsistency leads to ambiguous overlaps between these two genres. In fact, both martial and supernatural elements were important ingredients for traditional Chinese literature, folklore, and even historical writings. They were ubiquitous in ancient costume films from the beginning. The exclusion of martial arts films from the ancient costume genre may easily lead to a false impression that ancient costume films primarily consist of non-martial

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<sup>17</sup> ZWDS, 210-240.

subjects based on an intrinsic dichotomy between the civil (*wen*) and the martial (*wu*) in Chinese culture.<sup>18</sup>

Zhang Yingjin considers “scholar meets beauty” and “hero loves beauty” as two basic narrative formulas of ancient costume films.<sup>19</sup> Bao Weihong also reads Lu Mengshu and Chen Zhiqing’s advocacy for “New Heroism” as a rejection of the “benign” beauty of ancient costume films, which then contributed to the rise of martial art films.<sup>20</sup> But a perusal of titles of ancient costume films reveal a strong penchant for martial arts and magic spirit subjects, and the sheer quantity of these films largely outnumbered traditional romantic tales between a sentimental scholar and a gentle beauty, as will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.

Moreover, it is not always self-evident whether a literal source is “traditional” or “contemporary,” especially where the late Qing era is concerned. *Heroic Sons and Daughters* and its sequel are typically considered as martial art films due to their chivalric subject matter. The novel they were based on was first published in the late Qing (ca. 1870s), about fifty years before its cinematic adaptations. Was such a temporal gap sufficient to establish the novel as a traditional source in addition to the fact that it was written before the division line of 1911? There is no straightforward answer since time is an essential but not the single decisive fact in creating tradition. The novel’s innovative integration of chivalric fiction and scholar-beauty romance, as Lee Haiyan points out, laid the foundation for a new formula of heroic romance in both commercially successful fictions and left-wing writings decades later, and therefore closely connected to modern genres. However, on the ideological level, Lee considers it as a

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<sup>18</sup> Traditional Chinese operas are typically divided into martial plays, which emphasize the acrobatic skill of the body, and civil plays that tend to reflect people’s everyday life through singing, speech and stylized gestures. For detailed discussion on *wen* and *wu*, see Kam Louie, *Theorizing Chinese Masculinity* (New York: University of Cambridge Press, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Zhang Yingjing, 2004, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Bao Weihong, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915 – 1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 59-61.

quintessential example of a “Confucian structure of feeling” that serves to reinforce the vertical structure of Confucian sentimentality.<sup>21</sup> The purpose here is not to reductively label the novel “traditional” or “modern,” but to tease out the complexity in defining tradition and hence ancient costume films.



Fig. 1.2. Fan Xuepeng in *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (1927)  
(*Sanri Huabao* no. 169, 1927)

No definition is capable of providing a clear demarcation between ancient costume films and martial arts-magic spirit films, the relation between which is contingent and dynamic rather than intrinsically fixed. In the specific context of late 1920s China, martial arts-magic spirit films were so popular that they formed a unique genre cycle; whereas in the late 1930s, as we will see

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<sup>21</sup> Lee Haiyan, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900 – 1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

in the second half of this dissertation, they were unable to regain the same level of prominence for various reasons and remained part of the production cycle of ancient costume films.

Therefore I propose to understand martial arts-magic spirit films as a subgenre of ancient costume films in the 1920s, which provided a unique mode of imagining the past as a fantastic space. Such understanding stresses the interconnection of the two groups of films and their production cycles, placing the historic and fantastic in a spectacle of representations of the past rather than seeing them as opposing categories. Although martial arts–magic spirit films are not the focus of this dissertation, as a later mutation of ancient costume films, they are crucial to the analysis of filmmakers’ changing interests in the past and cinematic technology.

Zhang Zhen acknowledges ancient costume films as one of the earlier experiments that led to the prevalence of martial arts–magic spirit films since “the materials that most attracted producers (of ancient costume films) were tales with strong supernatural and amorous elements.” Emphasizing the ultramodern appearance of some ancient costume films, Zhang argues that the alternative versions of “history” provided by the genre “became the place where magic and technology, archaic fantasy and modern desire fused into a feast of visual display.”<sup>22</sup> Taking Zhang Zhen’s insightful observation on the genre as a starting point, I will push further the question of the cinematic imagination of the past and its relation to history and fantasy. Was the past simply used as an unimportant background setting to project modern desire for kinetic bodily potential and showcase cinema’s capability in creating wondrous visual effects? How did people in the 1920s imagine the ancient besides exotic fantasization in magic spirit films? If there was indeed a distinctive “Ancient Costume Movement” with a different agenda from the production of martial art–magic spirit films, why would the two become so closely related and almost inseparable in practice?

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<sup>22</sup> Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History*, 210-212.

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to foreground the ancient world as the subject of modern imagination and construction. Although the Shanghai film industry from its inception in 1913 to the early 1920s was “distinctively concerned with contemporary subjects, ranging from current affairs, slapstick comedies, and scenic panoramas to educational materials,”<sup>23</sup> the use of traditional subject matter was not a completely new invention in the late 1920s. Besides Beijing Fengtai Photo Studio’s early opera films that marked the beginning of Chinese cinema,<sup>24</sup> Li Minwei in Hong Kong and the Commercial Press in Shanghai both participated in the adaptation of traditional stories, and cooperated with the rising star Mei Lanfang in the production of opera films. What distinguished these earlier efforts to incorporate traditional stories into cinema from the Ancient Costume Film Movement was the cinematic treatment of “the ancient.” Earlier adaptations either reset ancient stories in the present or conveniently used contemporary mise-en-scene to represent the past. In opera films, the sense of the past is primarily conveyed through operatic rather than cinematic means. After the mid-1920s, how to construct an “ancient look” of the diegetic world in films became a reoccurring subject of discussion among filmmakers and film critics. Beneath the apparent thematic shift in trends from contemporary to ancient stories, a more fundamental change was the increasing attention paid to costumes and settings.

## **The Myth of History Films**

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>24</sup> This claim has been challenged by recent scholarship due to the lack of historical evidences. Huang Dequan argued against the existence of *Dingjun Mountain* and denied the possibility of Fengtai Photo Studio in making opera films before 1909. See Huang Dequan, “Xiqu Dianyong *Dingjun Shan de Youlai yu Yanbian*” [The Origin and Evolution of Opera Film *Dingjun Mountain*], *Dangdai Dianyong 2* (2008): 104-111. Since no convincing evidence have been provided to prove these films could not have been made, I follow the conventional historiography, but with variations on certain historical facts.

The huge popularity and box office success of Tianyi Company's *Liang Zhu* (*Liangzhu Tongshi*, dir. Shao Zuiweng 1926), adapted from a renowned tragic love story between Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, is commonly counted as the major cause for the prevalence of folklore adaptations and ancient costume films. True as this causal relation might be, such a narrative immediately ties the genre with the pursuit of commercial profit, seeing the burgeoning of ancient costume films as an opportunistic act rather than deeply rooted in the social and cultural conditions of the time. In fact, advocacy of ancient costume films started way before Tianyi Company's experiment, and *Liang Zhu* was not the first commercially successful ancient costume film – strictly speaking, it was not even an ancient costume film since its setting was mostly contemporary. Besides profit making, the emergence and development of ancient costume films can also be attributed to artistic inspiration from foreign films, desire to advance the Chinese film industry, and concern for the national image on screen.

Ancient costume films were first envisioned as history films, a term that frequently appeared in the advertisements for foreign films set in a historical or imagined past. As early as 1923, increasing screenings of foreign “history films” in Shanghai,<sup>25</sup> including *Lotus Blossom* (*Canzhong Hen*, dir. Frank Grandon, 1921) which features an ancient Chinese story,<sup>26</sup> started to draw people's attention to cinema's ability to portray a vivid world of the past. A reviewer of *Deception* (dir. Ernst Lubitsch, 1920) passionately detailed the bustling scene of King Henry VIII's wedding, emphasizing its luxurious ancient setting, and claimed at the end of the article: “the films Chinese people have seen so far are mostly in contemporary costumes. Once ancient

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<sup>25</sup> According to a *Shenbao* advertisement, Ernst Lubitsch's *Madam du Barry* (1919) and *Deception* (1920), Griffith's *Birth of the Nation* (1915), and Peter Felner's *The Earl of Essex* (1922) were all screened as “history films” in Shanghai that year.

<sup>26</sup> The film was adapted from Koizumi Yakumo's *The Soul of the Great Bell*, which was loosely based and indirectly translated from a story in Yu Baozhen's *Baixiao Tushuo*. The film was advertised as “a Chinese production” in *Shenbao*, but in fact it was made in Los Angeles with a film crew consisted of people from China, Japan and the US.

etiquettes and customs come to life on the silver screen, it can surely increase people's interest."<sup>27</sup> During the next two years, quite a few articles proposed to make use of historical narratives in film production, and most writers directly referred to Western "history films" as their source of inspiration and object of emulation.<sup>28</sup> Not long after, *Shenbao* published a list of best 23 American films of all time voted by moviegoers in 1925, from which eight films out of the top-ten were promoted as "history films" in China.<sup>29</sup> It was commonly acknowledged among Chinese reviewers that "history films" had become a fashionable trend in European and American cinema.<sup>30</sup>

There was indeed a surge of costume drama productions in post-war Europe and Hollywood,<sup>31</sup> as Chinese reviewers acutely sensed, but what counted as "history films" in China at the time far exceeded the concept of history films or costume dramas in the West. Westerns and adventure films that utilize non-contemporary settings were all appreciated as history films due to their careful construction of historical details. The first Chinese film textbook *Introduction to Shadowplays*, written between July 1924 and June 1925, defined the history film as follows:

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<sup>27</sup> Bo, "Ping Ca'erdeng zhi Yinian zhi Cha" [Review of *Deception*, Playing at the Carlton Theater], *Shenbao*, November 23, 1923, 17.

<sup>28</sup> See Feng Shuluan (Ma Er Xiansheng), "Zhongguo Yingxi Juben de Biyao Tedian" [Essential Characteristics for Chinese Film Scripts], *Dianying Zazhi* 1, 1924, 1-4; Song Tao, "Bianzhi Yingpian Jiaoben de Shangque" [Considerations in Writing Film Scripts], *Shenbao*, June 2, 1924, 18; Aiying Nulang "Bianji Yingpian Juben tan" [On Creating Film Scripts], *Shenbao*, January 1, 1925, 39; Ju Ping "Gailiang Yingpian zhi Wo Jian" [My Opinions on How to Improve Chinese Cinema], *Shenbao*, March 10, 1925, 7; Luo Shusen, "Yu Xiwang yu Zhongguo Dianyingjie Zhe" [What I hope for the Chinese Film Industry], *Shenbao*, October 27, 1925, 19; Bao Tianxiao, "Lishi Yingpian zhi Taolun" [Discussions on History Films], in *Mingxing Tekan: Kelian de Guinü* 6, Nov. 1925, 1-2.

<sup>29</sup> Song Tao, "Meiguo Yingpian Zhong Zuijia Zhe" [The Best of American Films], *Shenbao*, Nov. 27, 1925, 18. The article does not specify the nationality of the voters, but since some titles were listed in English and noted as "unknown", it was more likely to be a vote by American rather than Chinese audience. The eight "history films" are: biblical story - *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil DeMille, 1923); adventures adapted from fictions and folklores - *Scaramouche* (Rex Ingram, 1923), *The Sea Hawk* (Frank Lloyd, 1924), *Robin Hood* (Allan Dwan, 1922); romance set in a specific historical period - *Orphans of the Storm* (D.W. Griffith, 1921), *Monsieur Beaucaire* (Sidney Olcott, 1924); western film - *The Covered Wagon* (James Cruze, 1923); and historical epic - *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915).

<sup>30</sup> "Kan Ci Yingpian Rujian Guren" [Film Watching as Meeting Ancient People], *Shenbao*, November 29, 1925, 2; Di Xian "Tan Lishi Yingpian" [On History Film], *Shenbao*, February 5, 1926, 20; "Yangmei Tuqi" [Advertisement of *The Fighting Coward*], *Shenbao*, March 12, 1926, 20.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis Jacobs, *The Rise of American Cinema: A critical History* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971), 305.

“To tell a story from a specific time period, costumes, background sets, interior decorations and crops must be exclusively made in accordance with historical reality. (Researches should be) based on exemplary objects in museums and library records in order to hold up historical values.”<sup>32</sup> This definition focuses exclusively on the construction of mise-en-scene, with no mentioning of historical veracity of the narrative. Since no history films had been made domestically by the time the book was written, this definition must have been based on the writers’ observations on the distinctive traits of Western history films. What impressed them the most were the realistic sense of historical detail and the effort put into the creation of a past world.

Reviews of foreign history films from this period marveled at the perception of the real. As the advertisement of *The Fighting Coward* (James Cruze, 1924) notes, “the story is nowhere to be found in history books, but the ancient quay in Mississippi and people’s life in the South during the Civil War are so vividly present as if they were real (*li li ru zhen*).”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the reviewer of *Messalina* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1920) also pointed out that the actual focus of the film was the portrayal of social life in ancient Rome, which “placed the audience in an ancient environment.”<sup>34</sup> The story might be fictional, but the world of the past felt real.

Chinese reviewers believed that such a feeling of vividness resulted from careful studies of social life and the material culture of the past. Qiu Yun’s serialized article “The Giants of American History Films” emphasized the crucial participation of historians and archeologists in

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<sup>32</sup> The textbook consists of four parts: Introduction to Shadowplays, Directing, Script Writing, and Cinematography. See Zhou Jianyun and Wang Xuchang, *Changming Dianying Hanshou Xuexiao Jiaoyi* [Textbook for Changming Film School], collected in *Ershi Shiji Zhongguo Dianying Lilun Wenxuan* ed. Zhou Yijun (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 2003), 26.

<sup>33</sup> “*Yangmei Tuqi*” [Advertisement of *The Fighting Coward*], *Shenbao*, March 12, 1926, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Ti Ran, “Guan *Gugong Chunmeng Hou*” [After Watching *Messalina*], *Shenbao*, May 19, 1926, 25.

set design.<sup>35</sup> It was carried even further in Song Tao's "Second Review on *Pony Express*," where he claimed, "*historical accuracy* (English in original text) was the most important aspect of history film in creating the unique social milieu of a specific time period. Therefore even details like a hat or a shoe should stay truthful to the time depicted." He then laboriously elaborates on how the production crew of *Pony Express* (James Cruze, 1925) toured around different states to carry out research on costumes, wagons, ships, weapons and so forth in public museums and private collections.<sup>36</sup>

In China, public museums and libraries were quickly burgeoning but still at an inchoate stage of development.<sup>37</sup> They were far from fulfilling the function of providing models and references for the construction of films sets and costumes, as Zhou and Wang imagined in their textbook. However, the growing number of history museums and exhibition halls for the palace collections (*guwu chenliesuo*) provided people a material-based spatial experience of the past that significantly differed from the narrativized historical experience that they were used to. The excitement over history films' potential to incorporate the material appearance of the past into historical narratives is clearly expressed in the promotions of the genre. Although Zhou and Wang did not openly advocate history films in the book, it is the first fictional genre on their list of film genres, followed by old story films,<sup>38</sup> magic spirit film and martial arts film. Family issue films, social issue films, romances and tragedies that were considered as popular genres in

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<sup>35</sup> Qiu Yun, "Meiguo Lishi Yingpian zhi Jubo" [The Giants of American History Films], *Shenbao*, February 1, 1926, 17; February 2, 1926, 20; February 3, 1926, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Song Tao, "Zaiji *Nanbei Tongyi* Yingpian" [Second Review on *Pony Express*], *Shenbao*, February 18, 1926, 17.

<sup>37</sup> The first museum in China was founded by Zhang Jian in 1905. It consisted of three parts: nature, history and art. After the founding of Republican China, the government established the first national history museum in Beijing, two exhibition halls for the palace collection (*guwu chenliesuo*) in Beijing and Nanjing from 1914 to 1915. The Palace Museum opened in October 1925.

<sup>38</sup> The Chinese characters 故事 (*gu shi*), are most commonly used as a compound that means "story." But according to the context here, they are used as two individual characters: *gu* as past, old, and *shi* as story, event. The entry for old story films reads more like a comment rather than a definition: "Although (the stories are) not recorded in official historiography, films adapted from works by renowned writers and widely circulated among the people also have their appeal."

domestic production in the early 1920s only came later. Written as a textbook for future Chinese filmmakers, it revealed their hope for what should be made, and somehow accurately anticipated the shifting trend in the domestic film industry.

In a strict sense, no single Chinese film from the late 1920s could meet their criteria for history films, but making a proper history film remained an aspiration for many filmmakers at the time. With the realization that the ancient look was a major attraction of history films, “ancient costume” (*guzhuang*) which was previously used as a descriptive term for history films (*guzhuang lishi pian*) in advertisement started to gain prominence, and “ancient costume films” eventually became a more popular term to name Chinese films set in the dynastic past. The term “ancient costume films” also further relieved the burden of engaging historical events and allowed the inclusion of more fantastical tales and folklore. Although the word *guzhuang* was primarily understood and translated as ancient costume, it could more generally refer to “ancient setting” since *zhuang* also contains the meaning of decoration and construction, and even disguise. As one film critic wittily puts it, the most difficult issue in making *guzhuang pian* is *zhuang gu* - “how to construct / make-believe (*zhuang*) the antiquity (*gu*).”<sup>39</sup>

During the ancient costume film movement, film studios continued to use the term “history film” interchangeably or in conjunction with “ancient costume films” for stories that were based on or only loosely connected to historical records. Film critics and scholars who were more cautious with the definition of history favored the term “ancient costume film” or “unofficial history film” (*baishi pian*)<sup>40</sup> to indicate their fictional quality. Why would promoters

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<sup>39</sup> Peng Xin, “Guzhuang ji Lishi Dianying de Taolun” [Discussions on Ancient Costume Films and History films], *Guowen Zhoubao* 4, 31 (1927): 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> *Baishi* was commonly traced as the original of *xiaoshuo* (fiction) in China. During the Ming-Qing period, *baishi* almost became a literary concept close to fiction. Liu Xiaojun traces the complicated relationship between *baishi*, historiography, and fiction, arguing that *baishi*'s evolvement from a historical concept to literary concept reflects the status of fiction as “supplements of history.” See Liu Xiaojun, “Baishi Kao” [A Genealogy of *Baishi*], *Zhongshan Daxue Xuebao*, 4 (2008): 28-33.

of history films take specific interest in the historical accuracy of visual details rather than the veracity of historical narrative? To understand this question, we should turn to early Chinese understanding of what cinema was and its relation to realism.

### **Cinematic Realism in the 1920s**

As many scholars have pointed out, cinema in the 1920s was commonly understood as a form of drama (*xi*). This view is most clearly encapsulated in the term “shadowplay” (*ying xi*) - a favored Chinese name for film before being replaced by “electric shadows” (*dian ying*) in the 1930s.<sup>41</sup> Such understanding both determines the heavy influence of theater on Chinese cinema, and evoked heightened consciousness of unique characteristics of cinema in comparison to stage performance. As Zhong Dafeng states, early Chinese cinema evolved through “a dynamic interaction between absorbing and denying, and developing and repressing stage experiences.”<sup>42</sup> However, besides all the stylistic influences theater had on Chinese films, what exactly does it mean to see cinema as one kind of drama?

In his analysis of director Hou Yao’s *Methods of Writing Shadowplay Scripts* (1926), Chen Xihe pushes this view to an ontological argument, claiming that Chinese filmmakers in the 1920s saw “*xi* (drama) as the nature of cinema, whereas *ying* (shadow, or cinematic means) was only the representative means to realize *xi*.”<sup>43</sup> The gap between seeing cinema as a form of drama and considering drama as the nature of cinema, which was never directly put forth in the 1920s, is crucial but never carefully expounded by Chen. In his article, Chen relies on Hou Yao’s emphasis on the importance of the script as “the soul of a film” to argue for a drama-based

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<sup>41</sup> Zhong Dafeng, “Lun Yingxi” [On “Shadowplay”], *Beijing Dianying Xueyuan Xuebao*, 2 (1985): 54-92; Chen Xihe, “Zhongguo Dianying Meixue de Zai Renshi – Ping *Yingxi Juben Zuofa*” [Re-understanding the Aesthetics of Chinese Cinema – Analysis of *Methods of Film Scriptwriting*], *Dangdai Dianying* 1 (1986): 82-90.

<sup>42</sup> Zhong, “Lun Yingxi,” 56.

<sup>43</sup> Chen Xihe, “Zhongguo Dianying Meixue de Zai Renshi – Ping *Yingxi Juben Zuofa*,” 85.

ontology of shadowplay, claiming that cinematic means are only utilized to convey the *xi*. Chen has conflated two layers of meanings of *xi* here: *xi* as a dramatic form that requires the rendition of a story through performance, and *xi* as the dramatic content, the narrative and its tension. Throughout his analysis, Chen focuses on the issue of script or storytelling – the second concept of *xi*, but shifts back to the first meaning to make an ontological argument. What he actually maintains, or is capable of arguing from his source of analysis, is that for Chinese filmmakers in the 1920s, as exemplified by Hou Yao, cinematic means primarily served the purpose of storytelling.

Victor Fan is right that Chen's intention to establish a culturally specific theoretical framework for film analysis in contrast to Western film theory motivated him to elevate a socially conditioned view on cinema to a drama-play-based ontology.<sup>44</sup> Such theorization maps the dichotomy between China and the West onto a forced opposition between *ying* and *xi*. However, if we set aside Chen's ontological argument and take his idea on the centrality of narrative as a starting point to understand the relation between cinema and drama, it will provide a new perspective on how cinema (exclusively referring to narrative films here) was understood in 1920s' China and the uniqueness of ancient costume films at the time.

It is true that Chinese filmmakers in the 1920s saw cinema as primarily a storytelling device, and cinematic means were employed mainly to articulate the narrative, as Chen Xihe argues. In fact it was not too different from how narrative films were perceived in other parts of the world at the time. Seeing storytelling as an end does not necessarily mean that narrative was deemed as more important than how it was told, or people went to see a film mainly for its story. And it would be equally problematic to argue the opposite as well. The story can never be

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<sup>44</sup> Victor Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 23-30.

separated from how it is experienced. The real focus of the filmmakers was the crafting of a coherent diegetic world that is visualized by set design (both studio sets and real location) and cinematography, activated by motion (human performance, motion of nature, as well as camera movement), and held together through narrative and editing. Content and form, the profilmic and filmic are all blended together in this cinematic story world.

For Chinese filmmakers in the early 1920s, the unique value of cinema resides in the cinematic world's realistic resemblance to the real world. In Gu Kenfu's frequently quoted "Introduction to the Inaugural Issue of *Shadowplay Magazine*" published in 1921, the realistic effect of cinema is explained by three natures of shadowplay (*ying xi*): technique, literature, and science. Technique refers to realistic acting, especially real life skills such as horse riding, driving, swimming that make performances more convincing. Literature is clarified as the realistic recording of human life conditions, which is realized through the incorporation of real settings. Film script was only mentioned briefly at the end. Science means the technological invention of cinema. Gu argues that a good play moves the audience through lively performance, whereas the aforementioned three natures made cinema the most realistic among all plays.<sup>45</sup> Technique and literature in Gu's conception are not simply profilmic elements shared with stage plays, but displaying of real skills and settings that are enabled by the photographic technology.

Victor Fan interprets Gu's article as prioritizing performance over the mechanical reproduction of cinema that is mainly for the purpose of preservation and dissemination. He believes that Gu's ultimate focus is on the performance itself. It is through powerful performance, not cinematic means, that the audience "get close to, or approach, reality."<sup>46</sup> Contrary to Fan's reading that mechanical production "is not in itself an entry point into reality," I would argue that

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<sup>45</sup> Gu Kenfu, "Fa Kan Ci" [Introduction to the Inaugural Issue of *Shadowplay Magazine*], *Yingxi Zazhi* 1 (1921):1.

<sup>46</sup> Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory*, 35.

for Gu, cinema's affinity with the real not only made more realistic depiction of life possible but also turned realism into a requirement for acting and set designs. But he confuses three concepts of the real in the cinematic production: the phenomenal real, the impression of the real and the social-historical real. He was preoccupied with cinema's preservation of the phenomenal real – its scientific quality, or its “mechanical reproduction” as Fan puts it, and used it to explain the cinematic impression of the real and cinema's association with social-historical reality. This was a common problem shared by other discussions on cinema, including history films, at the time.

The phenomenal real refers to cinema's ability to capture the appearance of the phenomenal world in motion, which is commonly attributed to the indexicality of the photographic image. The impression of reality refers to the realistic effect of cinematic images during reception. For Christian Metz, it depends on the constant interaction between “the reproduction (that) resembles the original more or less closely” and “the vital, organizing faculty of perception” that is “more or less able to *realize* (to make real) the object it grasps.”<sup>47</sup> The impression of the real heavily relies on the photographic nature to seize the real, but as Tom Gunning cogently argues, the charm of cinema is indeed its magical ability to make the unreal or surreal appear realistic.<sup>48</sup> And lastly, the social-historical real reveals deeper conditions and reality of contemporary society or a historical period. It can be realized through engagement with social issues, but is not a nature intrinsic to cinema.<sup>49</sup>

Gu utilizes cinema's ability to capture real objects and spaces - the “phenomenal real,” to argue for its social function of reflecting life situations, hence its “literary value.” By defining

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<sup>47</sup> Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6.

<sup>48</sup> Tom Gunning, “Moving away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of the Real,” *Differences* (2007) 18 (1): 29-52.

<sup>49</sup> In his upcoming new book on realism in Chinese cinema, Jason McGrath distinguishes six categories of realism: ontological realism, perceptual realism, fictional realism, verisimilar realism, prescriptive realism, and apophatic realism. My use of the phenomenal real and the impression of the real roughly overlap with McGrath's concepts of ontological realism and perceptual realism respectively. See Jason McGrath, *Inscribing the Real: Realism and Convention in Chinese Fiction Film*. Upcoming 2020.

the fidelity of the cinematic image as an absolute scientific fact, he leaves no room to negotiate the possibility of the impression of the real that is partly based on subjective experience. For Gu, a cinematic world feels real because performances and sets are realistically crafted to resemble, or taken directly from, the phenomenal world, and objectively recorded by the camera. Such an understanding may explain the realistic effect of a cinematic world that closely resembles the real world, but becomes inadequate when it comes to the realm of history and fantasy.

As we have seen from the previous section, Chinese reviewers were hugely impressed by the vividness of a world of the past that was no longer there. Filming of such a world could no longer be simply based on snatching or mimicking real actions and real sites from the phenomenal world, but constructing realistic sets and crops based on historical knowledge. The writers directly associated the vividness of a past world with rigorous historical research and accurate *mise en scene*, overlooking an impression of reality generated from the activated photographic images that had little to do with historical accuracy. This confusion of the perceptual real with historical reality inflated their sense of awe for the veracity of historical details in foreign films, and motivated them to experiment with their own history. Of course, this is not to claim that Chinese people at the time would naively take everything they see on the silver screen as realistic. But since the association between cinema and realism is experienced perceptually and explained scientifically, they tended to intuitively take the visual details of the diegetic world as believable or realistic as long as these details do not directly contradict their existing knowledge of reality. The less they know about the world depicted, the more likely they would believe in the cinematic construction.

This dynamic interaction between knowing and believing is particularly evident in history films. Although China has a long and powerful tradition of historiography, little was

known about the material details of everyday life in the past. Historical narratives were widely circulated through storytelling tradition and operatic performances, both of which used minimal or no props and settings. Although visual representations of popular stories were omnipresent, in most cases, very little attention was paid to the depiction of material objects in the background. Neither the filmmakers nor the audience knew how the past actually looked. It was for this reason that Chinese filmmakers saw history films as an exciting opportunity, as well as a big challenge, to present an unprecedentedly realistic experience of the past. This was also the reason why, despite their final products' lack of historical accuracy, they nonetheless enjoyed huge popularity among the general audience.

However, fictionality is not the antithesis of reality, as reality can also be largely fictional. Provoking a third meaning of *xi*, Hou Yao expounded a dialectic relation between *xi* and life in the first chapter of *Methods*. *Xi* reflects and serves the purpose of life, and life itself can also be regarded as *xi*. For Hou, drama is a “representation of human action and spirit,” and an “*interpretation of human spirit.*”<sup>50</sup> (English in original text) The deeper truth about life underneath the surface phenomena needs to be brought out through *xi*, or, for the purpose of his book, through the film narrative. Hou continues that cinema as a form of *xi* inherits the function of representing and criticizing life, and better served it with its visually realistic quality.<sup>51</sup> If faithful imprinting of the phenomenal world was taken for granted as the scientific nature of cinema, fictionality that is intrinsic to the concept of *xi* also shaped people's expectations for films. Hou Yao did not consider the two as contradictory to each other, but both contributed to a realistic representation of life situations and human conditions. After all, neither shadow nor play

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<sup>50</sup> Hou Yao listed four relations between drama and life: representation, criticism, harmonization and aestheticization. See Hou Yao, *Yingxi Juban Zuofa [Methods of Film Scriptwriting]*, 1925.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

was life itself, but they mirror life from different perspectives and the combination of the two enabled better reflections on life.

The passion for realistic representation of life resonated with the concerns of the literary world in the 1920s. The Chinese Literary Association's (*wenxue yanjiushe*) famous slogan "literature for life" (*wenxue wei rensheng*) promoted the realistic literary depiction of social situations and individual struggles in order to tackle common issues in human life.<sup>52</sup> Although no direct personnel exchanges between Literary Association and film industry occurred in the early 1920s, the flow of ideology was evident. It is worth noting that Gu Ken describes cinema's realistic reflection of life conditions as a literary quality. In some sense, social and family issue films that prevailed before ancient costume films aimed at reflecting, or even exposing, life and social problems. Was the emergence of history films meant to avoid issues in contemporary life by escaping to the past? Certainly not. The promoters of the genre actually aimed at crucial problems that concerned Chinese intellectuals: China's position in the world and the image of Chinese people.

### **Attitudes Towards the Past**

Like other films, the goal for history films envisioned by its supporters was also to serve the purpose of real life, at least in rhetoric – to make Chinese people feel confident about their own nation, and to spread "thousands of years of valuable Chinese history unheard of [by foreigners],"<sup>53</sup> to "represent national character" and "sweep away the contempt" for the Chinese

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<sup>52</sup> For detailed information on the Chinese Literary Association, see Michel Hockx, "The Chinese Literary Association (1921-1930)," in *Literary Societies of Republican China*, ed. Kirk Denton and Michel Hockx (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).

<sup>53</sup> Dai Ying, "Yingmu yu Yishu" [Screen and Art], *Shenbao*, February 5, 1926, 19-20.

nation as “uncivilized people.”<sup>54</sup> It was believed that realistic depictions of historical events and heroic figures would counter the false images of Chinese people on Western screens. However, why would filmmakers believe that historical rather than contemporary stories could better represent Chinese national character? Besides the observation on the prevalence of history films in the West, the sense of pride about the Chinese past was essential to the formation of the genre.

In early promotions of domestic history films, film critics frequently lamented the irony of the richness of Chinese history and the lack of films that utilized this reservoir for great scripts. This irony evolved into a clear contrast between the overt confidence in Chinese history and a sense of shame in the inferiority of Chinese cinema in comparison to the West. In “What I hope for the Chinese Film Industry” Luo Shusen claims, “History films can imbue ordinary people with national sentiment, and every film contains great research value. Have such films ever been made in China? You might defend the Chinese film industry by saying it is still at an incipient stage, how can we possibly compare with the European or American film industry? But success is always determined by early endeavors.” The first hope he had for the Chinese film industry was to make plenty of history films. “Chinese film companies today are always short on good scripts. However what they have overlooked are the excellent pre-existing scripts in history.” After praising Western “history films” *Robin Hood*, *Prisoner of Zenda* and *Nero*, Luo concludes that “I deeply hope that our film industry hurries to rouse itself and follow these examples.”<sup>55</sup>

This idea of Chinese cinema lagging behind the advanced Western world and therefore needing to catch up echoed the prevailing thoughts of late Qing and early Republican intellectuals who tended to subjugate the differences between China and the West to a

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<sup>54</sup> Di Xian “Tan Lishi Yingpian” [On History Film], *Shenbao* January 28, 1926, 20.

<sup>55</sup> Luo Shusen, “Yu suo Xiwang yu Zhongguo Dianyingshe,” 19.

homogeneous time that progresses linearly.<sup>56</sup> Andrew Jones also emphasizes this “developmental” mode of thinking, arguing that “the geographical and historical rupture between here and there, old and new” is marked by the term *wenming* which “came to serve as an emblem of all that was advanced” and stands “as a synecdoche for the power and prestige of the West”.<sup>57</sup> However, if the alleged “backwardness” of the Chinese film industry exemplified China’s position on the scale of modernity in relation to the *wenming* West, why would the very film critics who bought into such logic be so enchanted by the possibility of engaging cinema with ancient Chinese history, which is even further away from modernity in a singular linear timeline?

Although Jones mainly focuses on the May Fourth ideological implication of *wenming* as desirably advanced and originally Western, its other common usage as ancient civilization helps to complete the picture of a popular understanding of China’s relation to the West. When it comes to this latter meaning, it is usually to locate and trace the history of China in a global scope. The popular and influential belief that China was one of the four earliest ancient civilizations (*sida wenming guguo*) is commonly traced to Liang Qichao’s 1900 article “The Song of the Twentieth Century Pacific.”<sup>58</sup> This idea was also promoted in Liu Yizheng’s groundbreaking book *History of Chinese Culture*, where he further states that the Chinese civilization was the longest among all nations.<sup>59</sup> Such categorization places China at the starting point of world civilization and produces a “counter-narrative” to China’s position as the pursuer of *wenming* – China used to be “the advanced” until it was surpassed by the West in the modern era. In contrast to the May Fourth iconoclasts’ accusation of Chinese tradition as the cause of

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<sup>56</sup> Tang Xiaobing, *Global Space and the Nationalist Discourse of Modernity: The Historical Thinking of Liang Qichao* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>57</sup> Andrew Jones, *Developmental Fairy Tales: Evolutionary Thinking and Modern Chinese Culture* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 17.

<sup>58</sup> Liang Qichao, “Ershi Shiji Taipingyang Ge” [The Song of the Twentieth Century Pacific], written on January 30, 1900. Collected in *Liang Qichao Quanjì*, vol. 9 (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 1999), 5426-7.

<sup>59</sup> Liu Yizheng, *Zhongguo Wenhua Shi* [History of Chinese Culture], second edition (Nanjing: Zhongshan Shuju: 1935), 6.

China's humiliation and backwardness in modernity, this narrative turns ancient China into a space of advancement and prosperity that can reassure Chinese people of their culture and history and even impress the West.

The 1920s saw an increasing trend in the so-called "cultural conservatism" in the Chinese intellectual world, resulting in a long-lasting debate on the advantages of Chinese and Western civilizations that involved hundreds of scholars.<sup>60</sup> Shih Shu-mei has convincingly argued that the so-called Chinese cultural conservatives in the 1920s who reaffirmed the value of Chinese culture and tradition were in fact more closely connected to the Western trend of thoughts that critically reflected on the problems of modernity and looked into alternative cultures for solutions in the aftermath of the First World War.<sup>61</sup> The direct influence of intellectual reflections on modernity on the rising popularity of ancient costume films in both China and the West are yet to be proved, but it is clear that instead of going against the trend, the desire to make history films largely follows the trend of the time.

Promoters of the genre believed that the realism of cinema could help convey Chinese history and culture across national and language boundaries and generate a real effect on the audience. This is most eloquently put forth by Bao Tianxiao, a popular writer who is commonly associated with the *Mandarin Duck and Butterfly* School of literature.<sup>62</sup>

America and European countries all know that China has a long history. Without exception, they all desire to learn the glory of Chinese history, but are troubled by the lack of reliable resources. [If] all of a sudden, they were presented with spectacular films about Chinese history – the civil officials wear long robes and hold official tablets, appearing dignified and

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<sup>60</sup> Chen Song, "Qianyan" [Preface], in *Wusi Qianhou Dongxi Wenhua Wenti Lunzhan Wenxuan* [Selected Articles on Debates on Eastern and Western Cultural Issues Around the May Fourth] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Chubanshe, 1985), 2. For detailed analysis of the trend in English scholarship, see Charlotte Furth, (ed.) *The Limits of Change: Essays on Conservative Alternatives in Republican China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

<sup>61</sup> Shih Shu-Mei, *The Lure of Modern: Writing Modernism in Semi-Colonial China, 1917-1937*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), chapter 4.

<sup>62</sup> Bao Tianxiao also worked as an advisor and scriptwriter for the Star Film Company. By the time he wrote the article, he had written several film scripts for the company, such as *New Family* (1925), *Orchid in the Empty Valley* (1925), and *Pitiful Daughter* (1925).

graceful; the martial generals carry spears and halberd, with charm shining in their gazes – accompanied by detailed explanation and brief English intertitles, they would surely crowd the cinemas. How could the great spirit and numerous heroes from our ancient history possibly be inferior to countries with shorter civilizations? I'm afraid that Europeans and Americans' attitudes towards Chinese people will change from contempt to admiration after watching many Chinese history films. This is exactly what (we) hope for.<sup>63</sup>

Bao's article was written when he was involved in the preparation for Mingxing Company's *Fengyi Pavilion*. His excitement for the genre was clearly palpable in the tone of his writing, as if he had already been enchanted by simply imagining the possibility of the genre. The cinematic medium not only tells stories about the Chinese past, but also delivers vivid imageries that convey the dignity and demeanor of ancient Chinese people as Bao delineated. Like the majority of ancient costume films from the twenties, the story of the *Fengyi Pavilion* was not based on any official historical records. It originated from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and was made known to every household in China through hundreds of years of storytelling and operatic tradition. Teaching historical facts was not the ultimate purpose of history films; what was needed was a lively perceptual experience of a gripping story that could evoke respect for Chinese culture and people.

Such strong nationalist sentiment certainly does not do full justice to the motivations for ancient costume films, but it nonetheless shows the high expectations its promoters had in the inception of the genre and its connection with social and intellectual environments. Filmmakers were certainly aware that domestic audiences, as well as Chinese diasporas in Southeast Asia, remained the primary consumers of history films. If to an imagined Western audience, the goal was to introduce positive images of China through the familiar cinematic medium, for domestic audience, it was the capability of cinema, or more precisely the progress of Chinese film industry, that the filmmakers hoped to impress on them through novel renditions of familiar stories.

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<sup>63</sup> Bao Tianxiao "Lishi Yingpian de Taolun," 1-2.

## Make-Believe the Ancient

Promoters of history films saw the genre as a great opportunity to advance the backward position of the Chinese film industry in two aspects: to galvanize the lifeless content of contemporary Chinese cinema and to construct realistic sets and spectacular scenes of the past unseen in domestic productions before. Realizing the rich possibilities ancient costume films could lead to, critics started to consider the prevailing family issue films as monotonous and “invariably featuring the misbehavior of young people.”<sup>64</sup> Bao Tianxiao states, “in order to develop the Chinese film industry, (we) can no longer rely on contemporary romance fraught with factitious performances. Only history films can drive Chinese cinema forward.”<sup>65</sup> The same idea was conveyed in a more passionate voice in Chen Zhiqing’s writing: “(Since) contemporary films all follow the same pattern ... (we) should introduce the touching heroic stories of our ancestors, their struggles against difficulties, and their honesty and determination to contemporary Chinese people, stirring up roaring waves to push them towards more meaningful life.”<sup>66</sup>

Such an idea parallels Chen Zhiqing’s advocacy of the “mobile, robust, and active spirit” in new heroism cinema around the same time.<sup>67</sup> Bao Weihong perceptively teases out the connection between Chen’s idea of new heroism cinema and martial arts films, arguing “the enthusiasm for martial arts films ... derived partly from the desire to present a more positive

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<sup>64</sup> Di Xian, “On History Film,” 20.

<sup>65</sup> Bao Tianxiao “Lishi Yingpian de Taolun,” 1.

<sup>66</sup> Chen Zhiqing, “Lun Shezhi Guzhuang Yingju” [On the Making of Ancient Costume Films], *Shenzhou Tekan: Maiyoulang Duzhan Huakuinv Hao* (1927): 24-34, collected in *ZWD*, 655-660.

<sup>67</sup> Chen Zhiqing published two articles on ancient costume films: “Duiyu Shezhi Guzhuang Yingpian zhi Yijian” [Opinions on Making Ancient Costume Films], *Shenzhou Tekan: Daoyi Zhijiao Hao* (1926): 19-26, collected in *ZWD*, 639-642; and “Lun Shezhi Guzhuang Yingju” [On the Making of Ancient Costume Films]. His “New Heroism Cinema” (1926) and “Once More on New Heroism Cinema” (1927) were published in the same time period.

image of the Chinese national character ... [to counteract] the 'ugly' national image of frailty and passivity."<sup>68</sup> Such arguments could also be applied to ancient costume films. The almost simultaneous appearance of ancient costume films and martial arts films and apparent overlaps in their subject matter showed that they both reacted against the contemporary romances that filmmakers complained about.

Throughout the Ancient Costume Film Movement, romantic love stories that feature two or three main characters only took up a small fraction of film production. Even in the quintessential example of the classical scholar-beauty formula, *Romance of the Western Chamber*, scholar Zhang's "heroic dream" and the battle scenes were deliberately highlighted, as we will see in chapter 3. *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin* and *Journey to the West* that mainly feature heroic and martial characters were the most popular sources of adaptation throughout 1927.<sup>69</sup> Although they all belong to the category of classical Chinese novels, *Three Kingdoms* is considered as a historical epic, *Water Margin* is the precursor to the modern martial arts fictions, and *Journey* is fraught with magic spirit elements. The diversity of traditional sources brought ancient costume films a variety of possibilities that could potentially germinate into different genres. Ancient costume films did share many traits with martial arts films, magic spirits films and martial arts-magic spirit films. Instead of differentiating the genres based on their source of adaptation or subject matter, if we understand them in terms of the gradation of the intention from between "make real the ancient," "make believinf the ancient" and "make believing the fantastic," it will help shift the attention from the overemphasized *xi* (drama) to *ying* (shadow, the cinematic).

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<sup>68</sup> Bao Weihong, *Fiery Cinema*, 63.

<sup>69</sup> In 1927, there were five adaptations from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, three from *On the Water Margin*, and nine from *Journey to the West*.

Ancient costume films started with the aspiration to “make an ancient world” that was grounded historically. With careful recreation of past details, Chinese filmmakers believed that they could bring the audience the most realistic experience of an ancient story ever imagined. How to make realistic costumes and sets came up in almost all early discussions on ancient costume films. In his first article on ancient costume films in 1926, Chen Zhiqing meticulously emphasized the importance of historical accuracy and passionately called upon antique connoisseurs and textologists to study the history of ancient Chinese costume and architecture to help the film industry.<sup>70</sup>

However, in his second article, published in 1927, Chen’s attitude towards historical accuracy changed completely. Instead of delving into the historical ancient, he advocated the “idealization (*lixiang hua*) of ancient costumes and settings” based on “Eastern visual aesthetics” to serve the purpose of the narrative.<sup>71</sup> Chen was not alone in this opinion. Director Hou Yao and set designer Zhang Guangyu also expressed similar ideas about aestheticizing the ancient in films.<sup>72</sup> After several months of experiments, filmmakers had been increasingly aware that the futile search for historical accuracy was counter productive, as the example of the Star Company’s *Fengyi Pavilion* proved. Research on the material culture of ancient China was beyond the capability of the film industry at the time. Indeed, it waited for almost 40 years until *History of Ancient Chinese Costumes and Accessories* was written, and another seventeen years for it to be published.<sup>73</sup> The Society for the Study of Chinese Architecture (*zhongguo yingzao xueshe*) did not found until 1930, and the first comprehensive history of Chinese architecture was

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<sup>70</sup> Chen Zhiqing “Duiyu Paishe Guzhuang Pian zhi Yijian,” 19-26.

<sup>71</sup> Chen Zhiqing, “Lun Shezhi Guzhuang Yingju,” 24-34.

<sup>72</sup> Hou Yao “Yandi de *Xixiang*” [*Romance of the West Chamber in My Eyes*], *Minxin Gongsi Tekan Xixiang Ji*, 7 (1927): 3; Zhang Guangyu “Shezhi Guzhuang Ju yu Xin Yishu” [Making Ancient Costume Films and New Art] in *Dazhonghua Baihe Gongsi Tekan: Meiren Ji*, 1927. Collected in *ZWD*, 649-650.

<sup>73</sup> Shen Congwen finished writing *Studies on Ancient Chinese Costumes and Accessories* in 1964, and the book was first published by Commercial Press Hong Kong Branch in 1981.

written fourteen years later.<sup>74</sup> But most important of all, filmmakers have more clearly realized that historically realistic details did not determine or necessarily enhance the realistic impression of an ancient world on screen.

If writings on cinema prior to 1927 mostly focused on its ability to record and reflect the real, since 1927 cinema was being increasingly compared to “a dream made through machine”, most famously expressed in Tian Han’s “Silver Dream”, quoting Junichiro Tanizaki.<sup>75</sup> Yu Dafu, a famous writer who claimed to be an amateur in cinema, further elaborated on the relation between life, dream and cinema. Just like Hou Yao’s interest in the philosophical relation between drama and life, Yu saw cinema as the most powerful form to reveal the dream quality of life and turn people’s *Selbsttäuschung* (original text in German, translated as *zi huan*, self-delusion) into art. For Yu, people watch films just like philosophers live their lives. They both know what they see and live through are mere dreams, but still pretend those were real through self-deception.<sup>76</sup> Tian Han and Yu Dafu’s analogy between cinema and dream referred to films in general, but such self-delusion was more apparent in history and fantasy films.

Yu Dafu argued that while people always emphasized the realism of cinema, what they had not realized was the surrealism (*chao xianshi xing*) of cinema that helped to sustain *Selbsttäuschung*. He then gave an example of Goethe’s *Faust* (Dir. F.W. Murnau, 1926), claiming that when it came to the mysterious parts of the film, such as when the scene ascends to the heavens or sinks into the earth, it felt much more natural and realistic in cinema than on

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<sup>74</sup> Liang Sicheng’s *Zhongguo Jianzhushi* [*History of Chinese Architecture*] was first published in 1944. The book is also available in the English version. Liang Ssu-Cheng, *Chinese Architecture: A Pictorial History* (Mineola: Dover Publication, 1984). In 1933, Le Jiazao published *History of Chinese Architecture*, the first important work in the field. But the book is not organized chronologically, and has little trace of history. In 1937, the Commercial Press in Shanghai published Japanese author Ito Chuta’s *History of Chinese Architecture*, which traces the Chinese architectural history up until the Six Dynasties.

<sup>75</sup> Tian Han, “Yinse de Meng” [Silver Dream], *Yinxing* 5 (1927): 58-64.

<sup>76</sup> Yu Dafu, “Dianying yu Wenyi” [Cinema and Literature-Art] in *Yinxing* 12 (1927): 31-36.

stage.<sup>77</sup> The attention shifted to the impression of reality was crucial. Cinema had its own mechanism to make believe the real instead of relying on the realistic quality of its content. Filmmakers' initial ambition to construct a realistic ancient world slipped into a more modest requirement to make the image of the past believable since no one actually knew what the real looked like. The pursuit of historical accuracy still remained as some directors' artistic aspiration, but what attracted the audiences into cinema were spectacular sets, large-scale battle scenes and dazzling special effects.

If cinema is indeed a dream-making machine, the sense of wonder and enchantment come from a startling contrast between the realistic perception of a world unfolding right there and the conscious awareness of the impossibility of such presence. Seeing a bygone world on screen is marvelous, but since neither the director nor the audience had a clear image of the ancient, nothing would strike them as a resurrection of the real ancient. Whatever they saw was just *a possibility* of the ancient world constructed for them. However, in the realm of the fantastic, people shared common sense understanding that things such as penetrating the wall, flying between roofs were impossible in real life. When these scenes were vividly presented in films and perceived by the audience as really *happening*, the magic power of cinema became more evident. It is therefore not hard to understand why filmmakers became increasingly attracted to the martial arts-magic spirit genre, freeing themselves from the shackle of historical accuracy to fully explore the magical possibility of cinema.

Cinema's ability to realistically capture phenomenal details inspired the search for historically accurate costumes and sets for the realization of a realistic ancient world on screen. However in the actual production, the pursuit of knowledge-based reality of the ancient increasingly gave way to the perceptual impression of the real intrinsic to the cinematic medium.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

If the commencement of the ancient costume film movement marked a shift from realistic depiction of *the presently real* world to the aspiration for realist details of the past - *the once real*, the dissolution of the genre into martial arts-magic spirit films reflected a growing interest in the perceptually realistic experience of *the unreal*. As the construction of a realistic ancient look of the diegetic world receded from the center of focus to a mere background for displaying kinetic bodily motions and spectacular special effects, the enthusiasm for ancient costume films dissolved into a fanciful imagination of the past.

The so-called Ancient Costume Film Movement was short-lived from 1927 to 1928, but it directed the filmmakers' attention from narrative (*xi*) to mise-en-scene (*zhuang*), from cinema's ability to show the phenomenal world in the present to its potential to reconstruct the past and the fantastic. Due to financial and technological limitations, lack of knowledge on material culture in history, and vicious market competition, the films made during this wave were far from their initial ambitions. But the great effort put into a number of big blockbuster films did significantly improve the set design and the production scale of domestic cinema. The next chapter will focus on ancient costumes: how they were imagined, used in other domains, and borrowed and redesigned for ancient costume films to make believe the ancient.

## Chapter 2: Objectifying the Past: Ancient Costumes in Photography, Theater and Cinema

It is fair to say that ancient costume films are pleasant to watch, no less pleasant than watching operas. And I can assure you that no gongs or drums would deafen your ears. On the “silver screen,” figures move in a slack manner, dressed up in costumes from an unknown period. Their visage is as lifeless as ancient people. In order to bring some life to it, they had to “embellish” their performance with fatuitous expressions and gestures borrowed from traditional opera performers.

- Lu Xun<sup>1</sup>

Beneath Lu Xun’s typical sarcastic tone, he made two incisive observations on ancient costume films: its indebtedness to traditional opera performance and the inaccurate design of costumes. Discussing the physiognomy of Chinese people, Lu Xun cynically pointed out that in order to prove cinema as a form of art, “film artists” added two kinds of “additional features” (*duoyu*) to the faces of Chinese people: “foolishness” (from traditional operas) in ancient costume films and “cunningness” (from contemporary Shanghai society) in contemporary costume films.<sup>2</sup> Caricatured as such a distinction might be, it vividly delineated two kinds of bodies constructed through formulaic combinations of costume and performing style, namely: the ancient body and the contemporary body.

The production of a body that was recognizably “ancient” in visual representations and performances was a fairly recent phenomenon based on a heightened awareness of an irretrievable separation between the ancient and the modern, as well as the pursuit of historical realism in representational art. Traditional opera, which was by then labeled as old and unrealistic, rarely differentiates ancient characters from contemporary ones through costumes or performances. It was not until the 1910s that “ancient costumes” were introduced to the stage,

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<sup>1</sup> Lu Xun, “Lue Lun Zhongguo Ren de Lian” [Brief discussion on the Chinese Face] in *Mangyuan* 2, 21/22, (November 1927): 801.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 800-801.

first in civilized plays and then in new style operas. Even so, when cinematic adaptations of traditional tales burgeoned in 1926, the use of contemporary *mise en scène* to portray an ancient story was generally accepted by the public. It was through the Ancient Costume Film Movement that the use of ancient costumes and sets became the norm in portrayals of characters from the dynastic past.

Ancient costume, both as a concept and material objects, is by and large a modern construction. It was the first fabricated material reification of the new conception of “ancient” as an objectified and representable “other” of the contemporary. It also entertained people with the possibility of embodying the ancient, of occupying a different temporality. This chapter traces the creation and circulation of ancient costumes from photo studios to theatrical stage and cinema, and examines the imbricated concerns for national image, historical accuracy, artistic innovation, and media specificity behind the design and usage of ancient costume films. The ambiguous relation between opera costume and ancient costume made filmmakers reluctant to apply the latter in cinema initially. Lacking effective means to surpass the stylistic designs of ancient costumes on stage, filmmakers turned to the material quality and qualities of the costumes and props to make “realistic” claims.

### **Costume and National Image**

Lu Xun’s observation on ancient costume films came from his viewing experience of *The Veil of Happiness* (dir. Édouard-Émile Violet, 1923)<sup>3</sup>, which was very likely to be the only “Chinese” ancient costume film he ever saw, and notoriously made him never want to watch

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<sup>3</sup> The original play was translated into Chinese by Lin Shu under the title of *Mowai Fengguang*, serialized in *Ziluolan Magazine* 19 & 22, 1926. The Chinese title of the film was *Shiren Wamu Ji* (A Self-Blinding Poet).

Chinese films again.<sup>4</sup> The film features a blind poet who witnessed the ugliness of the real world after his sight was restored and blinded himself again out of desperation. Between Lu Xun's watching of the film in Guangzhou in January 1927 and his writing of the article ten months later, ancient costume films quickly developed from a burgeoning novelty into the most popular genre in Chinese cinema. Lu Xun probably never realized that the film that made him give up on Chinese cinema was in fact a French production, and the costumes he deemed as unidentifiable were specifically designed and promoted as Ming dynasty (1369 – 1644) costumes.

Anticipating the Chinese debut of *The Veil of Happiness* at Shanghai Olympic Theater in March 1926, *Shenbao* published a detailed account of the intriguing production background of this “Ming Dynasty ancient costume history film,” summarized as follows:

Disillusioned by the cruelty of wars and the saddening reality of the world, former French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau resigned after the Paris Peace Conference to write the play *Le Voile du Bonheur* based on a story from Ming dynasty history. Chinese students in France found its use of Qing dynasty (1644-1911) costumes humiliating and quit the play in an uproar. They designated Xu Hu to indicate this critical mistake to Clemenceau, who then hired Xu as his consultant and commanded the theater production to change to Ming costumes. This correction further increased the appeal of the play among French audiences, and finally resulted in the French film production that “took over ten months and cost several hundred thousand (Francs). Upon its release, the entire city of Paris was hit by a mania.”<sup>5</sup>

Captivating as this narrative sounds, it is in fact hugely erroneous. *Le Voile du Bonheur* was written and premiered in 1901 rather than 1919. By delaying the completion of the work by nearly two decades, an amateur play from a politician-turned-journalist was transformed into a retrospective reflection on life and the world by one of the most powerful political leaders of the

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<sup>4</sup> Lu Xun watched the film on January 24<sup>th</sup> 1927 in Guangzhou, before the domestic production of ancient costume films actually hit Canton. He expressed his deep disappointment at the film in his diary and, according to his wife Xu Guangping, he never watched any Chinese film again. See Xu Guangping, “Lu Xun Zenyang Kan Dianying” [How did Lu Xun Watch Films] in *Lu Xun yu Dianying* [Lu Xun and Film], ed. Liu Siping and Xing Zuwen (Beijing Dianying Chubanshe, 1981), 170. *The Veil of Happiness* was one of the four Chinese films listed on Lu Xun's viewing list in the appendix of the book.

<sup>5</sup> “Zhongguo Mingdai Guzhuang Lishi Yingpian: *Shiren Wamu Ji*” [Chinese Ming Dynasty Ancient Costume History Film: *The Veil of Happiness*], *Shenbao*, March 11, 1926, 1.

First World War. A more perplexing issue is the historical setting of the play. Although not explicitly specified, it is not difficult to spot that the “current events” discussed in the play referred to significant political incidents during the late Qing, such as the burning of the Summer Palace and the Boxer Rebellion.<sup>6</sup> But why would the students claim it to be a Ming story and insist on changing the costumes to Ming style?<sup>7</sup>

The students’ knowledge of the play remains a mystery, but there is no doubt that their protest was not simply a reaction against anachronistic use of costumes. As the *Shenbao* report indicated, what really disturbed the students were “the hanging hair queues that blemished the national polity.”<sup>8</sup> Qing costumes, especially the male hair queues, were regarded as a shameful symbol to the Chinese nationalists not only because it signified the Manchu dominance over Han Chinese, but more importantly, they were featured in a highly derogatory national personification of China that started to be circulated in foreign representations from the mid nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> In order to counter this stereotypical image loaded with negative associations, the students savvily twisted their nationalist concern into the universal issue of historical accuracy.

The stage version of *The Veil of Happiness* is no longer accessible today, but from preserved stills from the film that was made of it, it is evident that the costumes revealed influences from opera tradition, mixed with conspicuous modern patterns and Westernized female hairstyles. (Fig. 2.1) Facing a primary Western audience, the students’ goal was not the

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<sup>6</sup> Georges Clemenceau, *The Veil of Happiness: A Play in One Act*. New York: Privately printed for the Members of the Beechwood Players, 1920. It was translated into Chinese, titled “Mowai Fengguang” [Sceneries Beyond the Retina] and serialized in the *Ziluolan Magazine* in 1926.

<sup>7</sup> Another *Shenbao* article published four days later indicated that it was Clemenceau himself who claimed that the story was adapted from Ming history. See Shen Ying, “Guan Kelimansha *Shiren Wamu Ji Hou*” [After Watching Clemenceau’s *The Veil of Happiness*], *Shenbao*, March 15, 1926, 17.

<sup>8</sup> “Zhongguo Mingdai Guzhuang Lishi Pian *Shiren Wamu ji*” [Ming Dynasty Ancient Costume History Film *Veil of Happiness*], *Shenbao*, March 11, 1926, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Wu Hung discusses the stereotypical image of the Chinaman with a long skinny “pigtail” in Western illustrations and the queue cutting movement in *Zooming In: Histories of Photography in China* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), Chapter 3.

creation of authentic Ming costumes, but recognizable Chinese costumes that would overwrite the stereotypical image of Qing style “Chinaman.” Such a struggle over what costume could properly represent ancient Chinese people remained a key focus throughout the Ancient Costume Film Movement.



Fig 2.1. *The Veil of Happiness* (1923)  
(*Shenbao*, March 14, 1926)



Fig. 2.2. *Lotus Blossom* (1921)  
(*Picture Play*, January 1922)

As discussed in the previous chapter, the genre of ancient costume films emerged under heavy Western influence, and aimed at placing China on the world stage. In fact, before filmmakers in China expressed their interest in the genre, it was overseas Chinese who first promoted “ancient Chinese costumes” in cinema. Directly exposed to and affected by stigmatic

stereotypes of “opium dens, singsong girls, slant-eyed mandarins with queues and long fingernails,”<sup>10</sup> they were most eager to “correct” the misconception of Chinese people.

Two years prior to *The Veil of Happiness*, the Wah Ming Motion Picture Company founded by Chinese Americans in Los Angeles produced its first film *Lotus Blossom* (dir. Frank Grandon and James Leong, 1921), which was the earliest theatrically released film by Chinese Americans and also the first to be labeled as a Chinese ancient costume film.<sup>11</sup> Adapted from Koizumi Yakumo’s (a.k.a. Lafcadio Hearn) *The Soul of the Great Bell* from his collection of *Some Chinese Ghosts*, it was an exemplary story about filial piety, featuring a young girl who threw herself into the furnace so that the bell that her father was making for the emperor could be perfectly toned.

Surrounded by a hostile environment where racist cartoons of the film crewmembers were sketched and newspaper reporters wondered “whether the dear little heathen’s daddy wears a pig-tail” (the nickname for the male hair queue),<sup>12</sup> members of the Wah Ming Company endeavored to counter these prejudiced images with a fresh portrayal of Chinese people on screen, to “show forth to the world the noble and beautiful side of the Chinese character.”<sup>13</sup> As in *The Veil*, men’s queues were completely abandoned, and Qing style robes covered by a short jacket or vest also gave way to pre-Qing gowns with overlapping collars and knotted side closures. (Fig. 2.2) A reviewer of the film in *Picture Play Magazine* even took the chance to educate American audiences that the story “antedates the Manchu period, wherein the first

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<sup>10</sup> Emma-Lindsay Squier, “The Dragon Awakens,” *Picture Play Magazine*, January 1922, 84-5.

<sup>11</sup> As early as 1916, a Chinese American woman Marion Wong directed *The Curse of Quon Gwon*, which was about several Chinese characters cursed by a Chinese god as they went through Westernization. The film was not formally released. Two out of six reels of the film survived.

<sup>12</sup> Grace Kingsley, “To Tell World China’s Ideals,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1921, III.

<sup>13</sup> “Biggest Picture Market,” *The American Cinematographer*, December 1, 1921, 13.

queues were worn, enforced emblems of the subjugation of the Chin (Han) race, whom the Manchus conquered.”<sup>14</sup>

However, late Qing female costume was not eliminated from this pre-Qing story. In the surviving eleven-minute segment of the film, the leading actress Lady Tsen Mei wears a loosely fitted robe with extremely wide sleeves, paired with double hair buns above the ears. At first glance, the straight-cut loose robe with an underskirt resembled a typical Han Chinese women’s over-jacket (*ao*) from the late Qing. But its extended length to the calf brought it closer to the full-body coverage of Manchurian robes. (Fig. 2.3) This eclectic style, however, was not unfamiliar to Western audiences. It appeared in Lady Tse Mei’s previous film *The Freedom of the East* (dir. Ira M. Lowry, 1918), as well as the original stage performance of *The Veil* in France. (Fig. 2.4, 2.5) More famously, it was featured in D.W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919) when the young Chinese boy transformed Lillian Gish’s Lucy into a “Chinese princess” with a “magical robe” and a strange hair-band that resembled the double-buns. (Fig. 2.6)



Fig 2.3 Loose, straight cut female robe in *Lotus Blossom* (1921)

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<sup>14</sup> Squier, “The Dragon Awakens,” 85.



Fig. 2.4 Manchu style dress in *The Freedom of the East* (1918)



Fig. 2.5 Stage Performance of *The Veil of Happiness*  
(Societe Lyonnaise de Phototypie, ND, ca 1906)



Fig. 2.6 Lilian Gish in *Broken Blossoms* (1919)

The producer and director of the film James B. Leong was reportedly an uncredited assistant director of *Broken Blossoms*,<sup>15</sup> and the film title *Lotus Blossom* purposely evoked that of Griffith's film.<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that although *Broken Blossoms* followed the convention of using Qing costumes, in contrast to most Western cinematic representations of Chinese characters that encountered protests in China, *Broken Blossoms*' sympathetic depiction of Chinese people was highly praised. Ironically, the film was banned on the fourth day of its Chinese release due to the vicious portrayal of the British, and its scheduled Hong Kong screenings were also canceled.<sup>17</sup> The concern for cinema's powerful potential in shaping national images in front of a global audience was not exclusive to China.

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<sup>15</sup> Rudy Martinez, "Lotus Blossom: The First Chinese-American Film and Made in Boyle Heights, Part One" in *Boyle Heights History Blog*, February 18, 2016. <http://boyleheightshistoryblog.blogspot.com/2016/02/lotus-blossom-first-chinese-american.html>. Last accessed on May 16, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Even the Chinese title of the film *Can Zhong Han* suggested a connection with the Chinese translation of *Broken Blossoms*: *Can Hua Lei*.

<sup>17</sup> *Broken Blossoms* was released at Carlton Theater in February 1923. According to Rui Kaizhi's report, when he watched the first screening of *Broken Blossoms* at Carlton Theater in February 1923, he was extremely excited by

Unlike men's costumes of the Qing that were stigmatized by images such as John Chinaman, Fu Manchu and Mr. Wu, female costumes were mostly associated with exotic oriental beauty, and therefore less a target of radical revision for ideological purpose. The visual reference to *Broken Blossoms* and other American films through female costumes helped Chinese American filmmakers claim a lineage within the Western film industry and ensured American audiences a sense of familiarity. But the film also introduced a new sartorial design of female costume: a full-body length white dress with a wide waistband and an attached collar, which possibly suggested the hems of a traditional blouse. (Fig. 2.2) Compared to the elaborate patterns on the late Qing style robe, this plain dress was simply decorated with grids around the lower edge of the sleeves and the collar. The use of modern geometrical pattern and the one-piece design was far from being "authentic" to Chinese tradition,<sup>18</sup> but its sharp contrast with the familiar Mandarin robe made this new dress feature in most publicity materials (Fig. 2.7). American reviewers assumed that "Chinese pictures sponsored by Chinamen" would eventually replace "a shoddy web of falsities" with a "clear gold fabric of (Chinese) tradition."<sup>19</sup>

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the young Chinese man's killing of the vicious British. But the scene was cut out in the evening screening that day, and the whole film was banned three days later. See Rui Kaizhi, "Dianying Zatan er" in *Shenbao*, May 19, 1923.

<sup>18</sup> Chinese female clothes were separated into the upper blouse (*yi*) and skirt (*shang*) at least since the Tang. Although the fashion of wearing a long over-jacket tended to conceal the upper-lower separation from the Song onwards, this principle persisted among Han Chinese until the prevalence of the *qipao* since the late 1920s as a result of Manchurian influence and the feminist desire to be equal with men in dressing codes.

<sup>19</sup> Squier, "The Dragon Awakens," 84.



Fig. 2.7. Advertisement of *Lotus Blossom* (*L.A. Herald*, November 27, 1921)

Costumes might seem to play a superficial part in the fabric of tradition, but its visibility, its direct contact with the body and the eye formed the battlefront of the contestation between “falsity” and “authenticity”, in the perpetual game of make-believe. New design in costumes was the first step in claiming the right to the recreation of the national image, which became effective even before the film narrative unfolded. “A costume” states Clare Wilkinson-Weber, “is deliberately engineered to be simultaneously depth and surface.”<sup>20</sup> Beneath the material and visual surface, sartorial choices were often determined by a deep field of old references and new meanings, intertwined concerns and cross-cultural influences. Their meaning also altered with the change of reception environments. If for American audiences, “ancient Chinese costumes”

<sup>20</sup> Clare Wilkinson-Weber, *Fashioning Bollywood: The Making and Meaning of Hindi Film Costume* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 135.

was more a marker of the spatial distance between the West and the Orient, for Chinese viewers, they primarily manifested the temporal abyss between the past and present.

### **The Problem of Accuracy**

When *Lotus Blossom* was released at Shanghai Olympic Theater in 1923, it was introduced as a Chinese production with authentic Tang dynasty (618 – 907) mise-en-scene based on historical research. Second and third round theaters also addressed it as “unprecedented Chinese ancient costume film” or “Tang-Song ancient costume history film.”<sup>21</sup> Whether *Lotus* could count as a Chinese production is debatable, but the claim of Tang (or Song) style was perplexing and never mentioned in its American promotion.<sup>22</sup> Koizumi’s *The Soul of the Great Bell* was set in the Ming dynasty, and its Chinese origin, according to Lu Xun’s research, is likely to be a morality tale of the Three Kingdom period (220 – 280 AD).<sup>23</sup> Therefore the reference to the Tang was not based on film narrative, but a promotional strategy addressing the visual style of the film. Despite the familiarity of the story, seeing Tang and Song setting on screen was truly “unprecedented.”

To the general Chinese public in the 1920s, the correlation between a costume style and a specific dynasty, except for the Qing, was a new knowledge yet to be acquired. The alleged Ming costumes or Tang costumes were recently created empty categories without clearly defined contents, and were often used as arbitrary labels. The failed effort to classify costumes in

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<sup>21</sup> *Shenbao*, September 4, 1923, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Due to the incompleteness of the survived footage, the setting of the film is unclear, but neither the sets nor the costumes bore traces of Tang style.

<sup>23</sup> Koizumi Yakumo states in the preface that the story was taken from *Baixiao Tushuo* [A Hundred Illustrated Stories about Filial Piety] composed by Yu Baozhen. But according to Lu Xun and Zhao Jingshen, the most similar story in *Baixiao Tushuo* was *Li’e Toulou*, which featured Li’e who sacrificed her life for the making of perfect weapons, not a bell. For a more detailed account about the circulation of the story, see Mou Xueyuan and You Xiaoli, “Lu Xun, Zhao Jingshen he Xiaoquan Bayun de *Dazhong de Linghun*” [Lu Xun, Zhao Jingshen and Koizumi Yakumo’s *The Soul of the Giant Bell*] in *Shihezi Daxue Xuebao* 25, 2 (2011).

accordance with dynasties was most telling in a costume pageant show held also at the Olympic Theater in 1926. It consisted of the contemporary fashion section and the ancient costume section, and the clothing styles from the latter were promoted as representing Han, Tang, Song, Ming and Qing dynasties.<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 2.8) But this claim was soon challenged in a *Shenbao* article, which maintained that these styles were in fact modeled after newly designed opera costumes by leading performers.<sup>25</sup> The organizers of the show intended to locate each style in a specific dynasty but the author of the article denied this association by tracing their actual usage to the opera stage. It was common sense to Chinese audiences that opera costumes signified role types of characters but never their historical period, which was also part of the reason why filmmakers constantly denied the influence of opera costumes on their own costume design.



Fig. 2.8. Ancient Costume Pageant at the Olympic Theater  
(*Zhongguo Sheying Xuehui Huabao*, no. 70, 1926)

Although the attribution of certain clothing or accessory styles to a specific dynasty already occurred in ancient time, its purpose and significance were rather different from that in

<sup>24</sup> The report on *The Pictorial Newspaper of Photography Society* followed this categorization on the original pamphlet of the show. Shu Hua, “Shinü Zhuangshu Zhanlanhui zhi Chuangju” [An Groundbreaking Exhibition of Female Costumes], *The Pictorial Newspaper of Photography Society* 69 (1926): 1.

<sup>25</sup> Li Ri, “Shizhuang Zhanlanhui zhi Niaokan” [A Bird’s Eye View on the Fashion Show], *Shenbao*, December 18, 1926, 19.

modern representations. Antonia Finnane stated that the return to styles of antiquities was a manifestation of Ming fashion.<sup>26</sup> Han (202 BC to 220 AD) caps, Jin (266-420) caps, Tang caps, and so on were among the prevailing styles of the late Ming.<sup>27</sup> Some were modeled after ancient paintings, but some were completely fabricated.<sup>28</sup> The fashioning of these styles was not generated by inquiry into what ancient people actually wore, which was crucial to costume design in modern theater and cinema. In the words of Ming scholar Fan Lian, “the real intention (of people who wore ancient style clothing) was to appear distinctive rather than to become ancient.”<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, it showcased an admiration for the past, which turned antiquity into a source for new fashion.

When it came to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, radical social, cultural and political changes were imposed on the body and its clothing, pushing antiquity out of everyday fashion trends and confining ancient costumes to the realm of performance, representation, and historical study. If the naming of a sartorial style after a specific dynasty in the late Ming could be understood as an effort to justify the new through antiquity, in 1920s’ China it became more of a gesture toward the manifestation of certain degree of specificity and accuracy, a recreation of the ancient through new requirements of realism. A generic ancient style that represents thousands of years of Chinese history may immediately sound problematic, but were dynasties adequate units to mark costume changes?

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<sup>26</sup> Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 46.

<sup>27</sup> Gu Qiyuan, *Kezuo Zhuiyu* [Unnecessary Words as a Guest], vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981), 23; Li Le, *Jianwen Zaji*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1986), 468.

<sup>28</sup> According to *Sancai Tuhui*, (first published in 1609), Tang cap mostly appeared in portraits of Tang emperors, and were not worn by officials and scholars during the Tang dynasty. But it was popular among scholars in the Ming. The so-called Han cap was a thoroughly new invention of the Ming. See Wang Qi and Wang Siyi, *Sancai Tuhui* vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1988), 1503.

<sup>29</sup> Fan Lian, *Yunjian Jumu Chao*, Compiled in Wang Liqi ed. *Yuan Ming Qing Sandai Jinhui Xiaoshuo Xiqu Shiliao* (Shanghai Guji Chubanshe: 1981).

Shifts of clothing trends did not necessarily correspond to dynastic transitions. For example, Han Chinese women's garments during the early Qing more closely resembled those from the Late Ming than the Late Qing. Despite foreigners' impression of a static clothing culture in China,<sup>30</sup> fashion in ancient time changed rather rapidly. Late Ming scholar Gu Qiyuan noted that changes in prevailing style of female costumes and accessories occurred every two or three years. The size of hairdo, the width and length of sleeves, the dyes of the fabric, etc. never remained the same. He further pointed out that this phenomenon was not new to his time, but had already been evident in records from earlier periods.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, even the most meticulous recreation of a dynastic costume style is inevitably based on generalization.

Accuracy is always relative rather than absolute. Film scholars have generally agreed that precise recreation of past costumes is neither intended nor feasible. What lies at the core of historical costume design was the integration of recognizable "signs and visual renderings of materials and movements that were deemed plausible" to the depicted period.<sup>32</sup> Whether the object of make-believe is a specific dynasty or the ancient in a more general sense, the outcome is necessarily a response to the audiences' expectation shaped by their knowledge and imagination of the period. The question is: when and how did the signification of antiquity through costume become a necessity in the representation of ancient characters?

### **Ancient Costume Phototaking**

Using "ancient costume" in visual representations to manifest "pastness" was largely a modern invention. David Lowenthal observed that in Europe, "up to the nineteenth century the

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<sup>30</sup> Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery*, (London: Allison and Busby, 1947), 58-9.

<sup>31</sup> Gu Qiyuan, *Kezuo Zhuiyan*, vol. 9, 293. In the entry of "costume," he referred to Zhou Hui's *Qingbo Zazhi* and Zhao Yanwei's *Yunlu Manchao* as examples that demonstrate the frequent change of clothing trends in the Song Dynasty.

<sup>32</sup> Clare, *Fashioning Bollywood*, 137.

historical past was generally thought much like the present. ... The chroniclers portrayed bygone times with an immediacy and intimacy that reflected the supposed likeness.”<sup>33</sup> This holds true in China as well. In his endeavor to create accurate illustrations for traditional stories, Lu Xun complained, “Images from the Ming dynasty are only accurate about Ming details. When it comes to ancient costumes (prior to Ming), they were unreliable. So were the stories of Shang and Zhou dynasties painted in the Wuliang Shine.”<sup>34</sup> Chinese pictorial representations of ancient characters were either depicted in the contemporary fashion of the painter or followed standardized visual tropes in painting tradition. Similarly, the costumes used on the traditional opera stage rarely distinguish contemporary figures from those in the past. From the late Ming onwards, opera costumes shared basic categorization and stylization that were largely modeled on daily clothing from the Ming dynasty and Song-Yuan Theater. Their primary function was to manifest the role types or the physical conditions of the characters.<sup>35</sup>

The term “ancient costume” was in fact rarely used in ancient text. In its occasional appearances, it commonly referred to an outdated dressing or makeup style, which connoted a feeling of absurdity or a person’s otherworldliness – extraordinary beauty, peculiar origin, likely to be an immortal, a goddess or a phantom.<sup>36</sup> In these texts, the ancient unexpectedly beckoned present beings in form of an apparition, traversing through time and transcending fluid

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<sup>33</sup> David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country Revisited*. (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4.

<sup>34</sup> Lu Xun, “Zhi Wei Mengke” [Letter to Wei Mengke], originally published in *Beiping Xinbao Wenyi Zhoubao*, 24, July 21<sup>st</sup>, 1934. The Wuliang Shine was completed in 151 AD. The carvings on its walls and ceiling were considered as the earliest extant example of narrative art in China. For the most detailed discussion on the images, see Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

<sup>35</sup> Song Junhua, *Zhongguo Gudai Xiju Fushi Yanjiu* [Studies on Ancient Chinese Opera Costumes] (Guangzhou: Guangdong Gaodeng Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2003), 107.

<sup>36</sup> The most famous example is the mysterious girl who bestowed Xing Feng with a poem in his dream that helped inscribe his name in *Collections of Tang Poems*. The girl was noted as wearing ancient clothing and a high hairdo. See Shen Yazhi, *Yi Meng Lu* [Records of Strange Dreams]. Collected in *Taiping Guangji* [Extensive records from the Taiping Era]. Ji Yun’s *Yuewei Caotang Biji* [Fantastic Tales from the Yuewei Study] and Xu Ke’s *Qing Bai Leichao* [Petty Matters From the Qing Dynasty] also contained similar usage of “ancient costume” to indicate a dubious identity. Even the blunt Piggy in *Journey to the West* was able to spot the female spirits from their antiquated hat and hairstyle (Chapter 82).

boundaries between the shadowy and living world. But as ancient and modern, and living and dead became too rigid categories to cross, ancient costume was turned into a signifier of antiquity that had to be framed in representational spaces. Instead of provoking an uncanny feeling, it was primarily displayed as an innovation for the modern gaze.

Photography played an important role in promoting an ancient identity through costumes. In the early 1890s, Shanghai photo studios competed to advertise their photo portraits with ancient costumes.<sup>37</sup> The late Qing novel *Dream of Shanghai Glamour* (*Haishang Menghua Lu*) vividly depicted two young courtesans' photo-taking experience with meticulous details. In their discussion on the choices of photo studios, one suggested that although Treasure Studio (*Baoji*) was known for excellent photography skills, she heard that Verisimilar Studio (*Zhizhen*) had tailored several ancient costumes and she was deeply impressed by a friend's stunning photo of "goddess scatters flowers." Such innovation in costumes eventually won over the two girls.<sup>38</sup>

Many details in the plot are rather realistic and verifiable by newspaper reports and photo evidence. The Verisimilar Photo Studio mentioned in the novel was indeed the first to promote their ancient costume portraits in 1891, around the same time the manuscript of the novel was written.<sup>39</sup> Treasure studio caught up three months later upon customers' requests.<sup>40</sup> Costume portraits soon became a fad in Shanghai and also spread to other major cities like Beijing,

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<sup>37</sup> *Shenbao* advertised ancient costume phototaking from the following studios: Zhizhen Photo Studio (August 11 to September 1, 1891); Baoji Photo Studio (December 1, 1891); Zhang Garden Photo Studio (Oct 11-7, 1891); Yuelairong Photo Studio in the Xu Garden (1892 – 1894); Erwei Photo Studio (1892), and Yaohua Photo Studio (1894-1896).

<sup>38</sup> Sun Yusheng, *Haishang Fanhua Meng* [Dream of Shanghai Glamour], chapter 22. The chapter also gives detailed price for different categories of costumes photos and print sizes.

<sup>39</sup> Duan Huaiqing looked into Sun Yusheng's personal memoir which states that the first 30 chapters of the book was written around 1891- 1892, before it was serialized in *Xiaolin Newspaper*. See Duan Huaiqing, *Qingmo Minchu Baoren Xiaoshuoja: Haishang Shushi Sheng Yanjiu* [Newspaper Novelists from the Late Qing and Early Republican Era: Studies on Haishang Shushi Sheng], (Taipei: Duli Zuoja Chubanshe, 2013), 319.

<sup>40</sup> "Xinkai Zhizhen Zhaoxiang" [Newly Opened Verisimilar Photo Studio], *Shenbao*, August 22, 1891, 5. "Baoji Kaojiu Zhaoxiang" [Baoji's Excellent Phototaking], *Shenbao*, December 1, 1891, 4.

Tianjin and Guangzhou.<sup>41</sup> Ancient costumes was just one category among many other options: Western costumes, Cantonese costumes, and Opera costumes, as listed in the novel; and Japanese costumes and Manchurian costumes, as well as all sorts of professional costumes, were advertised in newspapers.

Surviving photographs from the era demonstrate to us that ancient costumes designed for women all followed one particular style: a blouse with overlapped collar matched by a full-length skirt tied to the waist with a string-shaped belt, but that the hairstyles could vary from case to case. (Fig. 9a,b,c ) This sartorial style was commonly portrayed in ancient paintings and illustrations, but had been absent in operatic performances until Mei Lanfang's refashioning of the "ancient style" in the 1910s, which will be discussed in detail in the next section. It is unclear what inspired photo studios to initiate such a practice, but the idea of inviting people to actively participate in making an image of the ancient and preserve it in material form was undoubtedly an innovation.



Fig 2.9a Postcard from 1904



Fig 2.9b Photograph from Guangzhou, 1900

<sup>41</sup> Exemplary photos can be found in Tong Bingxue, *Zhongguo Zhaoxiangguang Shi* [History of Photo Studios in China, 1859 – 1956] (Beijing: Zhongguo Sheying Chubanshe, 2016), 197-206.



Fig 2.9c Hand-colored postcard of Courtesans in ancient costumes (Yaohua Studio Shanghai 1890s, courtesy Regine Thiriez, Paris)

The woman on the left is wearing ancient costumes, whereas the one on the right is in contemporary dress.

Except for celebrities like top-level courtesans and opera stars, photo-taking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was not a casual everyday practice.<sup>42</sup> Besides the fundamental desire “to snatch (bodily appearance) from the flow of time,”<sup>43</sup> the very activity of going to a photo studio was, to a large extent, an uplifting event that freed people from their daily routine. Placing the sitter in an artificially created time-space, which may or may not resemble their familiar environment, studio photo-taking captured a moment that was both from and transcended the continuous flow of life. In costume portraits especially, the purpose was not straightforwardly to record the features and contours of a person, but to entertain oneself with

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<sup>42</sup> One of the courtesans, Fengxia, had a tiny picture taken last year, and A’zhen did not even have a photo. Catherine Yeh argues “Shanghai courtesans were instrumental in making photography fashionable in the town.” They were frequent customers of photo studios that were usually located in cultural and entertainment districts, and courtesan and studio business could be mutually beneficial. See Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, & Entertainment Culture, 1850 – 1910* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 84.

<sup>43</sup> André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 9.

multiple possibilities of the self outside the orbit of mundane life. Even before the prevalence of trick photography in multiple-self pictures as analyzed in Zhang Zhen's book,<sup>44</sup> photo portraits already became playful experiments with self-images whose function far exceeded the purpose of mimetic mechanical reproduction.

The photographic medium generated and recorded people's fantasies as much as it captured their look. It carved a space for them to perform whom they wanted to be and register this moment in pictorial form, as personal memory, as gifts to friends, or even postcards circulated around the world. Unlike other categories, ancient costumes were the only kind that existed outside the actuality of their contemporary society, and were made precisely to accentuate what had been lost. The image of an ancient self could hardly exist elsewhere in reality except in framed photographs. If taking ancient costume photos could be understood as a playful game with the shadow of the past, costume is exemplary of what Giorgio Agamben calls "a toy," which embodies the pure temporality of history without attaining any historical value in itself. All it manifested was a "once-upon a time" and "a no more."<sup>45</sup> Although flirting with the possibility of transforming into an ancient figure, the ultimate object on display was still the body of the portrait-taker, with ancient costume as a toy at his or her disposal. It was fundamentally different from the application of ancient costume in stage plays and cinema, which contributed to the transformation of the actor's body into a believable ancient character.

### **From Shadow to Play**

As early as the mid nineteenth century, efforts to differentiate contemporary characters from ancient ones resulted in the use of contemporary costumes in newly composed opera plays

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<sup>44</sup> Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History*, 161-9.

<sup>45</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, Liz Heron (trans.) (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 71.

set in the present.<sup>46</sup> This practice was further standardized in new drama (or civilized play), which was influenced by modern Western plays and newly invented Japanese drama *Shipageki*. The use of contemporary costumes not only became a distinctive trait of new drama, but also turned opera costumes into a symbol of the past, a commonly recognized form of “ancient costume” in reality although not in name. However, such clear-cut division between traditional opera and new drama was soon disrupted by the impulse to innovate in both fields, entailing the introduction of ancient costume as a third category to contemporary and opera costumes.

Although civilized drama was established as a modern antithesis to traditional opera, marked by its contemporary relevance and naturalistic performance style, it gradually expanded the source of adaptation to classical literature and popular folk tales, but often disguised under a contemporary façade. Zheng Zhengqiu’s Xinmin New Drama Society, founded after he made the first Chinese narrative film *A Difficult Couple* (*Nan Fu Nan Qi*, 1913), was exemplary of reframing classical stories into family issue plays with contemporary or Qing settings.<sup>47</sup> Such practice also had an impact on early filmmaking experiments. The alleged first Hong Kong film *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (*Zhuangzi Shi Qi*, 1914), which was likely based on a new drama version of a traditional opera play, used all contemporary costumes.<sup>48</sup> (Fig. 2.10) Costumes

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<sup>46</sup> The first *shizhuang xinxi* was called *Yangui Tan* (*Regrets of the Opium Addicts*). In the 1860s, a play based on the Taiping Rebellion *Iron Rooster* was staged in its immediate aftermath. See Weihong Bao, *Baptism by Fire* (Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2006), 114.

<sup>47</sup> One week after the debut of Minxin New Drama Society, they put on a play *Ma Jiefu* adapted from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. In the same year, *Heng Niang*, *Hu Siniang* (both were *Strange Tales* adaptations), *Yuanyang Sword* and *The Mirror of Lust* (*Fengyue Baojian*) from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and a *tanci* play *Pearl Pagoda* (*Zhenzhu Ta*) were performed. *Heng Niang* was promoted to help people better deal with wife-concubine relationships, and the advertisement for *Pearl Pagoda* highlighted the detailed depictions of the characteristics of different social classes within a family, claiming the play as “a great remedy for corrupted families and corrupted society in the present day.” See “Xinmin Yanjushe” [Xinmin Drama Society Advertisement], *Shenbao* October 17, 1913, 12; “Xinmin Yanjushe: *Zhenzhu Ta*” [Xinmin Drama Society’s New Play: *Pearl Pagoda*], *Shenbao*, December 23, 1913, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Li Minwei and Li Beihai were commonly listed as the directors of the film, but according to Li Minwei’s recollection, his role was limited to providing context and finding actors. See Li Minwei, “Shibaizhe zhi Yan: Zhongguo Dianying Yaolan Shidai zhi Baomu” [Words of a loser – the Babysitter of Chinese Cinema’s in its Infancy], *Film Biweekly Hong Kong*, vol. 375, (1993). Collected in *Li Minwei: Ren, Shidai, Dianying* [Li Minwei:

visually distinguished new drama from old opera even though the division in content that initially entailed such distinction had already been blurred. But it did not wait long for this mismatch to be spotted out.



Fig. 2.10. Li Minwei in Contemporary Costume in *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife* (1913)

New dramatist Shen Suoyi speculated that although the audiences did not utter a word, they were deeply troubled by the use of Qing costumes in *Pearl Pagoda* and *Three Smiles*. “Audiences’ craving for ancient costumes is like waiting for a piece of cloud during a great drought ... Once such demand is fulfilled, how could they not rush to see the plays?”<sup>49</sup> Shen further reinforced his demand in a second article “Looking Forward with Eager Expectancy” where he called upon Zheng Zhengqiu, “the great reviver of new drama” to start the new trend.<sup>50</sup>

Zheng responded with his first “ancient costume new play” *Wu Song Kills Sister-in-law*, and a statement in *Shenbao*:

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The Person, The Times, and Cinema]. Luo Ka and Li Xi (ed.) (Hong Kong: Mingchuang Chubanshe, 1999), 169. Before the making of the film, Li’s Qingpingyue Vernacular Drama Society already adapted this popular opera into a new drama play.

<sup>49</sup> Shen Suoyi, “Chuaimo” [Speculations], in Zhu Shangyun (ed.) *Xinju Shi* [History of New Drama], originally published in 1914. (Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 2015), 161.

<sup>50</sup> Shen Suoyi, “Wangyan Jiang chuan yi” [Looking forward with eager expectancy] in *Xinju Shi*, 2015, 167.

Advocating history plays is indeed a pressing matter. But having Cai Yong and Tang Yin wear Qing dynasty costumes and hairstyle surely offends these eminent historical figures. The only solution to this problem is to change to ancient costumes. Following existing examples is easy but innovation is always hard. So we have to start with an easy choice. That is why we picked *Wu Song Kills Sister-in-Law* as the first step in ancient costume play, as a starting point of history play.<sup>51</sup>

In 1914, three years into the new Republican era, Qing costume was in a peculiar position between the historical and contemporary. Besides the symbolic cutting of men's hair queues and official promulgation of formal dressing codes, everyday fashion of the late Qing largely continued into the new era.<sup>52</sup> Sheng Suoyi and Zheng Zhengqiu rejected Qing costume both for its contemporary usage and its stigmatized association with Manchu dominance, as in the cases of *The Veil* and *Lotus Blossom*. The introduction of ancient costume as a new category aimed to maintain the novelty of new drama despite its return to familiar content, and the differences between ancient and opera costumes were especially stressed in advertisements for *Wu Song*, claiming that all the costumes were freshly tailored for this new history play (Fig 2.11).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Zheng Zhengqiu, "Wu Song Shasao Bao Xiong Chou" [On *Wu Song Kills Sister-in-Law*], *Shenbao*, June 11, 1914, 12.

<sup>52</sup> According to Antonia Finnane, early Republican fashion, such as narrower cuts of clothes, high collar, the replacement of woman's skirt with trousers, and men's wearing of Western suits, frock coats and top hats, could all be traced back to the late Qing. Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History*, 92-100.

<sup>53</sup> Zheng Zhengqiu, "Wu Song Shasao Bao Xiong Chou," *Shenbao*, June 11, 1914, 12.



Fig 2.11 Ancient Costume New Drama: *Wu Song Kills Sister-in-law* (*Kuaihuo Shijie*, 1, 1914)



Fig. 2.12 Ancient Costume New Drama: *Mulan Joins Army*, 1914

The success of *Wu Song* led to two more ancient plays *Mulan Joins the Army* (Fig 2.12) and *Diaochao* within one month, and numerous other adaptations of traditional tales in the years to come. “Ancient costume new play” (*guzhuang xinju*) became a new phrase that frequently

appeared in newspapers. Judging from existing promotional photos, the majority of ancient costumes in new drama were in fact inherited from the operatic wardrobe, but largely simplified to more realistically represent everyday clothes. The only distinctive stylistic difference lay in the clothes of young female characters, which largely resembled the ones used in photo studio portraits. However, the most striking visual quality of the photos did not reside in costume design, but the bringing of characters, even real animals, into a naturalistic environment, either a realistically decorated photo studio or a real location. (Fig. 2.11, 2.12) Although these photos do not directly reflect the actual stage performances, they manifest a strong desire to achieve realistic effects. The replacement of opera costumes with ancient costumes was a crucial step in the effort to diminish, if not eliminate, the difference between stage and reality.

“Ancient” in the theatrical context of the 1910s was incorporated into what Joshua Goldstein calls the overarching framework of newness “through which performances were being produced, marketed, and consumed.”<sup>54</sup> This applies not just to the new drama world, but also the traditional opera stage. Mei Lanfang’s first ancient costume new opera *Chang’e Levitates to the Moon* was composed by Mei’s adviser Qi Rushan for the celebration of the Moon Festival one year after Zheng Zhengqiu’s *Wu Song*. As Mei recollected, in order to ensure an impressive début of the moon goddess on the Peking opera stage, he and his helpers looked through ancient paintings for inspirations in costume design. They came up with the observation that female figures in ancient paintings always have their blouse tucked in, revealing the full length of the skirt (skirt over blouse), rather than covering the skirt under the extended blouse (blouse over skirt) as in opera costumes.<sup>55</sup> (Fig. 2.13, 2.14) To make the contrast between the new and old

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<sup>54</sup> Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings: Players and Publics in the Re-creation of Peking Opera, 1870-1937* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 91.

<sup>55</sup> Mei Lanfang, *Wutai Shenghuo Sishi Nian* [Forty Years of Stage Life] (Beijing: Tuanjie Chubanshe, 2006) 258-9.

styles even more compelling, Mei used traditional opera costumes in the first part of the play, and changed to the new dress after Chang'e stole the magic pill and levitated to the moon.<sup>56</sup>



Fig. 2.13 Mei Lanfang as Chang'e



Fig. 2.14 Mei in traditional opera costume

Over the next twelve years, Mei and his adviser produced thirteen more “ancient costume operas,” attracting numerous followers.<sup>57</sup> Whether Mei’s radical renovation of opera costume was inspired by earlier practices in photo taking and new drama plays is less important than

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> These plays are: *Chang'e Levitates to the Moon* (Chang'e Benyue, 1915), *Daiyu Buries Flowers* (Daiyu Zanghua, 1916), *Priceless Smile* (Qianjin Yixiao, 1916), *Goddess Scattering Flowers* (Tiannü Sanhua, 1917), *Mulan Joins the Army* (Mulan Congjun, 1917), *Ma Gu celebrates her Birthday* (Magu Xianshou, 1918), *Hongxian Stealing the Box* (Hongxian Daohe, 1918), *Lady Shangyuan* (Shangyuan Furen, 1920), *Farewell My Concubine* (Bawang Bieji, 1922), *Xi Shi* (Xi Shi 1923), *Goddess of the Luo River* (Luo Shen, 1923), *Qian Jinfeng* (Qian Jinfeng, 1923), *Unofficial Biography of Taizhen* (Taizhen Waizhuan, 1926), and *Handsome Xiren* (Jun Xiren, 1927). For more detail, see Wang Yong'en. “Mei Lanfang de Guzhuang Xinxi” [Mei Lanfang’s New Style Ancient Costume Play], *Zhongguo Wenhua Bao*, 68, 2004.

Mei's incentive to utilize a new design of ancient costume. Despite the enthusiastic response to Mei's innovation, some critics considered the term "ancient costume" inappropriate and redundant since to the general public, opera costumes were already ancient costumes.<sup>58</sup> Although Mei employed the rhetoric of historical accuracy to justify his new style, Mei's recreation was more a "transformative supplement, an original and rejuvenating addition, an emancipating and marketable novelty."<sup>59</sup> Unlike new dramatists who rejected the highly symbolic and overtly ornate opera costumes as the antithesis of reality, Mei's designs impressed the audience with extraordinary delicacy and stunning visual details that fully belonged to the stage. Compared to the loose fit and straight lines of traditional opera costumes that gravitate the characters downwardly (Fig. 2.13, 2,14), the streamlined contour of the new dress with accentuated waistline was more in tune with contemporary fashion and taste for a close-fit, neat style. It was the desire to innovate, to create a more aesthetically attractive image of the ancient that led to Mei Lanfang's ancient costume operas.<sup>60</sup>

Mei's stardom hugely accelerated the circulation of ancient costumes. Besides domestic performances, new style ancient costume films were featured in all of Mei's three overseas tours to Japan (1919), the United States (1930) and the Soviet Union (1935).<sup>61</sup> The Commercial Press made his *Goddess Scatters Flowers (Tiannü Sanhua)* into a film in 1920, and three years later Li Minwei shot 5 short films with Mei in Beijing, all of which were dancing scenes from new style

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<sup>58</sup> Zhou Shoulu, "Guzhuang Mingci zhi Budang" [Inappropriate naming of Guzhuang], *Xiju* 2 (1923): 52-4.

<sup>59</sup> Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings*, 94.

<sup>60</sup> Mei Lanfang also experimented with new style contemporary costume operas before making ancient costume operas, but it was the latter that boosted his stardom.

<sup>61</sup> Catherine Yeh provides detailed accounts and analysis on the program list during Mei's three oversea tours. Catherine Yeh, "Refined Beauty, New Woman, Dynamic Heroine or Fighter for the Nation? Perceptions of China in the Programme Selection for Mei Lanfang's Performances in Japan (1919), the United States (1930) and the Soviet Union (1935)," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, 1 (2007): 75-102.

ancient costume operas.<sup>62</sup> Photo studios in the 1920s used Mei's photos as their models of ancient costume portraits, promoting the "Goddess Scatters Flowers Picture" that prevailed decades ago as Mei Lanfang style.<sup>63</sup> (Fig. 2.15, 2.16) The popularized attribution of ancient costume to Mei Lanfang largely blurred the boundary between ancient costume and opera costume that new dramatists endeavored to establish, reducing the distinctiveness of ancient costume to a new form of opera costume.



Fig. 2.15 Photograph from ca. 1900



Fig. 2.16 Mei Lanfang as Goddess

### Contemporary Setting as Choice or Inertia?

<sup>62</sup> The Commercial Press made two films with Mei, the other one as a Kun opera excerpt *Chunxiang Interrupts the Schoolroom*. According to Li Minwei's diary, the Minxin Company filmed segments from *Goddess Scatters Flowers* (1917), *Mulan Joins the Army* (1917), *Lady Shangyuan* (1920), *Farewell My Concubine* (1922) and *Daiyu Burying Flowers* (1916). But in ZDFS, *Goddess Scatters Flowers* is replaced by *Xishi* (1923). These films were released in 1924.

<sup>63</sup> Mei adapted *Goddess Scatters Flowers* into an ancient costume opera in 1917. Lu Xun sarcastically commented on Mei's ancient costume photos in "Lun Zhaoxiang zhi lei" [On Photography], first published in *Yusi Zhoukan* vol. 9, January 12, 1925.

A great puzzle, or embarrassment, of early Chinese films as many film scholars now considered it, was the use of contemporary costumes to perform classical stories. The Tianyi Company was commonly credited with starting the trend of ancient costume films in 1926 – but mostly with contemporary costumes. Their first “history film”, as it was promoted, adapted from a well-known romantic tragedy *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* was an immediate hit, not only in China but also in Southeast Asia. Its huge success led to four more similar adaptations in the same year: *Tale of the White Snake*, *The Pearl Pagoda*, *Lady Mengjiang*, and *Three Smiles*. Two other companies, Great China - Lily and Peacock also joined the trend with *Ma Jiefu* (Dir. Zhou Shouju, 1926) and *Peacocks Fly Apart* (Dir. Cheng Shuren, 1926) retrospectively. All of these stories have been, or were still being and would continue to be, performed on the new drama stage, as well as in other popular forms. However, Tang Yin and Fang Qing who already started to wear ancient costumes over ten years ago on stage were now dressed in contemporary costumes again.

Tianyi Company’s founder Shao Zuiweng had managed the *Smiling Stage* with the pioneers of ancient costume play Zheng Zhengqiu and Zhang Shichuan since 1922. Cheng Shuren – the director of *Peacocks Fly Apart* - studied film in New York for two years and was a self-claimed fan of Japanese *Jidaigeki*.<sup>64</sup> They could not possibly be unaware of the option of using ancient costumes. Moreover, foreign “ancient costume history films” had been prevalent in China for quite a few years, and Chinese ancient costume films made overseas had also been presented to domestic audiences, as discussed earlier. Even locally made ancient costume films

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<sup>64</sup> Zhang Wei, *Dushi, Dianying, Meiti: Minguo Dianying Biji* [*Metropolis, Film, Media: Notes on Republican Cinema*] (Shanghai: Tongji Daxue Chuganshe, 2010), 75-6.

by foreign companies were released in 1925.<sup>65</sup> The use of contemporary costumes in these films must be a deliberate choice rather than a result of unreflecting inertia.

Cheng Shuren thoughtfully explicated his considerations for *Peacocks*, claiming that the choice of costume style was the first dilemma he faced. In theory, there was no doubt that ancient costume should be used, but due to the lack of adequate research he could not possibly make the film in “authentic ancient costumes.” Rejecting the use of opera costume, Cheng favored contemporary costumes, which could furthermore indicate the relevance of this Han Dynasty story to present society.<sup>66</sup> The Tianyi Company also cogently defended their choice of contemporary costumes, arguing that since the historical background of *Liang Zhu* was still under debate, no costume could be historically accurate. Moreover the real value of the story lay in its embodiment of the virtuous characteristics of Chinese people, regardless what period it was set in.<sup>67</sup> For the directors, since historical settings had little effect on the power of the narrative, relocating the stories in the present was a feasible compromise to the inability to achieve historical accuracy.

The decision to downplay historical setting was by all means based on the speculation about audience acceptance, which got well proved by the box office success of these films. One reviewer of Tianyi’s *Liang Zhu* wrote that if the historical setting is not crucial to the story itself, the director could save himself lots of trouble by using contemporary settings. He then

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<sup>65</sup> In tracing the origin of the ancient costume film movement, Gu Jianchen notes that several anonymously made ancient costume films were released prior to the ancient costume film movement. He had personally watched *Interlocked Ruses* (*Lianhuan ji*) and felt the production value was higher than average Chinese films. People at the time assumed that they were made in Japan or America or France. See Gu Jianchen, “Zhongguo Dianying Fadashi” [History of Chinese Cinema], in *ZWD*, 1370. In *ZDFS*, Cheng, Li and Xing list two ancient costume films under the British and American Tobacco Company: *Interlocked Ruses* and *Three Taoist Tallies*. One surviving film by the company, *The Willow Patterned Plate*, can be accessed at the British Film Archive.

<sup>66</sup> Cheng Shuren, “Daoyan *Kongque Dongnan Fei zhi yi fan yongxin*” [Thoughts on Directing *Peacocks Fly Apart*], *Kongque Gongsi Tekan* 1 (1926): 1.

<sup>67</sup> J. S. “Ying yu Fuzhang” [Film and Costumes], *Tianyi Tekan: Liangzhu Tongshi* (1926), collected in *ZWD*, 998-999.

recollected that he saw a Cantonese (yue) opera of the story when he was a kid, and assumed that the story was not contemporary since the characters were wearing opera costumes. But he could not tell from the costume which dynasty the story was set in. “So why does it matter? As long as the story has value in itself, we can appreciate it whether it happened in Tang or Song dynasty or the fifteenth year of Republican China.”<sup>68</sup> In fact, Contemporary costumes were still commonly used in ancient stories on stage outside Shanghai – possibly in Shanghai as well. In 1925, the Common Education Committee in Zhejiang Province published a notice to ban the use of Qing costumes in plays set in the pre-Qing dynasties, but ironically approving contemporary clothing.<sup>69</sup>

After over ten years of stage experiments, ancient costume was still an option rather than a necessity. In the eyes of Shao Zuiweng and Cheng Shuren, the so-called ancient costumes used on stage were merely one kind of unrealistic opera costumes, and resorting to such clothes in cinematic representation manifested a less serious attitude than adopting contemporary mise-en-scene. In other words, guarding the distinction between cinema and opera was regarded as more crucial than maintaining the line between ancient and present in visual representations. During the inception of the history film genre, critics had especially warned against the danger of “double-shadowed play” (*shuangchong yingxi*), which referred to direct recording and appropriation of opera performance.<sup>70</sup> If a film was considered as the shadow effect of a play, not only the shadowing technology but also the mise-en-scene per se was expected to maintain a clear distinction from traditional opera. This was probably part of the reason why early Chinese narrative films mostly engaged contemporary subject matters.

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<sup>68</sup> Zhang Yi’an, “*Lian Shanbo he Zhu yingtai ji yixie zhijie de hua*” [*Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai and some other Trivial Words*], *Shenbao*, June 22, 1926, 23.

<sup>69</sup> Fo, “Zhejiang Tongsu Jiaoyu Yanjiuhui Changhui Ji” [Notes on the Meeting of Zhejiang Province Popular Education Research Committee], *Shenbao*, April 20, 1925, 11.

<sup>70</sup> Bao Tianxiao, “Lishi yingpian zhi taolun” [Discussions on History Films], in *ZWD*, 631.

Among early discussions on history film and ancient costume film, traditional opera was always set as the object of comparison, but the crucial influence of civilized drama was rarely, if ever, mentioned. Even in Fei Mu's famous claim that new drama was the real "nutrition" of early Chinese cinema, he specifically emphasized its positive effect of delaying the emergence of ancient costume films by over a decade. For him, cinema only turned towards ancient costume and magic spirit after the decline of new drama.<sup>71</sup> But Fei Mu failed to acknowledge civilized drama's embrace of ancient costume long ahead of cinema. The belated appearance of ancient costume film should not simply be attributed to civilized drama, but a new pursuit for realism and contemporaneity shared by new dramatists and filmmakers. The requirement for historical accuracy and cinema's affinity with realistic effects made filmmakers especially cautious in their attempt to construct an ancient mise-en-scene.

### **Linked Play and Ancient Costume Films**

A new form of civilized drama call "linked play" (*lianhuan ju*) literally introduced "ancient costume" into domestic film production. It was inspired by Japanese "interlocked play" and was introduced to Shanghai new stages at the beginning of 1926, about a few months before the Tianyi adaptations. A linked play usually alternates between projected film scenes for mostly outdoor settings and stage performance for interior scenes, but the two can be shown at the same time, or even interact with each other in some cases.<sup>72</sup> The idea was to use cinema to extend the limited space of the stage and compensate film's lack of spoken dialogue with live

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<sup>71</sup> Fei Mu, "Za Xie" [Random Thoughts], *Lianhua Huabao* 5, 1 (1935): 16.

<sup>72</sup> According to *Shenbao*, in the Gong Stage's *Lotus Princess*, characters enter the stage from the screen without interrupting the projected image. See "Erben *Lianhua Gongzhu*" [*Lotus Princess* II], *Shenbao Zengkan*, October 14, 1926, 6.

performance.<sup>73</sup> The magical transformation between real figures on stage and two-dimensional shadows on screen enhanced a fantastical feeling that fit well the magic spirit theme of most linked plays. Ancient costume was frequently associated with supernatural beings, ranging from fairies in *Lotus Princess* and *The Cowboy and Weaving Fairy*, immortals in *Lingbo Fairy*, and spirits in *White Snake*, to knight errant with magical abilities in *Red Rose*.<sup>74</sup> These plays also set up the tone for magic spirit films that were soon to prevail.

The first linked play *Lingbo Fairy* was produced by new dramatists Xu Zhuodai and Wang Youyou, who co-founded the Kaixin film company in 1925. It was also made into a full-film version for independent screening, which became the first ancient costume film produced by a domestic film company. Ancient mise-en-scene, especially the costumes, and extensive usage of special effects were the two major selling points of the play as well as the film version. The advertisement of the film proudly compared the scene of the fairy ascending to the sky to that in *The Thief of Bagdad* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1924), claiming that the Chinese version was even more wondrous without using a carpet so that “nothing could be hidden at all.”<sup>75</sup> Ancient costumes were incorporated into the marvelous spectacle for its exotic look, indicating the otherworldliness of the characters and the time-space they belong to. This was probably why filmmakers with serious intentions to make “history films” were reluctant to use existing forms of ancient costume, whose popular association with fantasy could counter the convincingness of the image of the past.

However, the emphasis on stage tricks and special effects in linked plays was not entirely the antithesis of realism, but went hand in hand with the promotion of realistic sensorial

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<sup>73</sup> *Shenbao*, January 27, 1926, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Xue Feng listed fifteen linked plays produced between 1926 and 1935, twelve out of which used ancient costumes. See Xue Feng, “Kua Meijie Shijian: Lianhuan Xi yu Zhongguo Zaoqi Dianying” [Transmedial Practices: *Lianhuan Xi* and Early Chinese Cinema], *Wenhua Yanjiu* 3 (2017): 88-97.

<sup>75</sup> *Shenbao*, February 6, 1926, 20.

experiences. The effects created might be supernatural, but the experiences of magical actions were supposed to be natural, “as if happening in real life.”<sup>76</sup> Costumes too were not just signifiers of strangeness. Prior to his involvement in linked plays, Wang Youyou produced a history play *Emperors Hui and Qin of the Song Dynasty*, which was highly praised by Ouyang Yuqian for his careful research on costumes, and even motivated Wang to write a *History of Chinese Costume*.<sup>77</sup> Although Wang’s plan was never realized, the costumes in *Lingbo Fairies* carefully differentiated winter and summer clothes, another “realistic improvement” from opera costumes. The characters were not just treated as action-takers of the narrated story, but real people who responded to the change of seasons in their own world.

Critics and audiences considered ancient costumes as “pleasant to watch,” a popular opinion that Lu Xun ironically used in his article quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Indeed, the allure of ancient costume was hard to resist. In their deliberate choice of contemporary costumes, Cheng Shuren and Shao Zuiweng did not completely abandon ancient costumes. Cheng purposefully inserted a play-within-play *The Cowboy and Weaving Fairy* to showcase ancient costumes – or opera costumes as he called them – in *Peacocks Fly Apart* (Fig. 2.17), and the female lead’s photo in ancient costume was specifically advertised in *Liangyou* magazine.<sup>78</sup> Tianyi Company’s second folklore adaptation *Tale of the White Snake* incorporated Mei Lanfang-style ancient costumes in three fantastical scenes – *Celestial Palace*, *Stealing Celestial Medicine*, and *Flooding the Jinshan Temple*.<sup>79</sup> (Fig. 2.18) Even in a completely contemporary story film *Between Love and Filial Duty* (zhai xing zhi nv, 1925) female star Wang Hanlun got a

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<sup>76</sup> “Lianhuan Xi: Potianhuang de Guzhuang Yingxi” [Linked Play: Groundbreaking Ancient Costume Film], *Shenbao* January 24, 1926, 21.

<sup>77</sup> Ouyang Yuqian, “Yanju Xiantan” [Casual Talks on Drama Plays], *Shenbao*, January 31, 1924, 21.

<sup>78</sup> *Liangyou* 5 (1926): 13.

<sup>79</sup> Kui Gong, “Tianyi Gongsi *Baishe Zhuan*” [Tianyi Company’s *The Tale of the White Snake*], *Shenbao*, May 12, 1926, 17.

chance to play with ancient costumes in the scene of her hallucination.<sup>80</sup> Ancient costumes might not be able to fulfill the noble dream of historical accuracy, but they entered the shadowplay as an irresistible attraction.



Fig. 2.17 A-play-within-a-play in *Peacocks Fly Apart*



Fig. 2.18 Hu Die in *White Snake*

The association between ancient costumes and fantasy to some extent echoed the usage of the term in classical texts, but more importantly it revealed the modern attempt to engage the ancient through new art forms. Whether treating the ancient as historical reality or a realm of fantastic imagination, the creation of an image of the past on screen was necessarily a play with fantasy, the fantasy of bringing back a bygone world in front of people's eyes. Only by accepting this fantastic nature and the inability to achieve total realism in cinematic representation of the ancient could filmmakers fully embrace the idea of ancient costume films. Like new dramatists, filmmakers were soon to realize that what truly attracted the audience were not historical realism,

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<sup>80</sup> The film is no longer extant, but according to its advertisement, the opening scene of the film features the female lead Wang Hanlun standing by the sea in ancient costume. See "Changcheng *Zhaixing zhi Nü* Xingjiang Kaiying" [The Great Wall Company's *Between Love and Filial Duty* Will soon be Released], *Shenbao*, May 27, 1925, 7. The advertisement of the film noted that the ancient costume scene was shot on Putuo Island. Ancient costume was used to represent her fantasy and imagination. See "*Zhai Xin Zhi Nü*" [*Between Love and Filial Duty*], *Shenbao*, July 7, 1925, 1.

but realistic, even hyper-realistic, sensorial effects of the ancient, and the actual labor went into the realization of such a fantasy.

### **Make Believe Ancient Characters**

The practice of using contemporary costumes in films featuring ancient characters soon encountered severe criticisms and became rather rare after 1927. Fudan Company's adaptation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* with contemporary costumes was overwhelmed by negative reviews and had to defend itself by stressing the ambiguous setting of the original novel. Although the so-called ancient costumes used in most films were far from satisfying the critics for they too closely resembled the ones used on stage, it almost became nonnegotiable that ancient characters should wear ancient costumes. In her study of the making of the Republican citizen through the establishment of new dressing and etiquette codes, Henrietta Harrison argues that the idea of a "traditional Chinese costume" was constructed as a necessary counterpart of modern costumes, and the alleged traditional clothing, such as *qipao*, was in fact a new fusion of Chinese and Western styles.<sup>81</sup> The coining of ancient costume as a coherent category also resulted from the newly established opposition between modern and traditional China. But unlike "traditional costumes" that were invented for everyday life, the temporal concept of the ancient indicates a more definite sense of pastness and irretrievability, and ancient costumes were designated to ancient characters that could only be evoked through representations and performances.

Costumes only played a partial role in making a convincing character, but were crucial in signifying his/her ancient identity. The rivalry between the actor's body and that of the character, and the spectator's oscillation between belief and disbelief, according to Jean-Louis Comolli,

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<sup>81</sup> Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China 1911 – 1929*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 84-5.

were most telling in the history film. Unlike a fictional character that is solely defined by the actor's performance, a historical character presupposes a referential model, calling attention to its status as a simulacrum. The more the spectators know about the historical character the more difficult it is to believe in the screen image.<sup>82</sup> Characters in Chinese ancient costume films, most of which were adapted from popular tales, were closer to Comolli's concept of historical character. Despite the fictional quality of many of these characters, they usually had a long circulation history prior to their screen appearance and did not rely solely on cinematic representation for their existence. However, the referential model for these "historical" characters did not exist as an objective given.

In contrast to the popularity of these characters and their stories among the Chinese public, little was known about their visual appearance except through highly stylized operatic performances, which were undergoing increasing criticisms based on new requirements for realism. No "original referent" was available for actors to imitate, while at the same time, every spectator had their own imagined referent, vague as it might be, against which they would compare the new cinematic image. In this sense, it is impossible for film artists to create an utterly convincing character not because of the irredeemable gap between the original and its recreation, but the absence of the original. However, for Comolli, the launching foundation of the mechanism of cinematic fiction was the spectator's desire to believe, at the price of suspending one's knowledge and fooling oneself.<sup>83</sup> The spectators are not the opponents of film artists in the game of make-believe; rather, they are collaborators, without whom the transformation of an actor's body into a character could not be accomplished.

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<sup>82</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, "Historical Fiction: A Body too Much," *Screen*, 19, 2 (1978): 46.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

For the general audience, the convincingness of the characters had less to do with historical reality than their imagination of history and the degree they were attracted to the diegetic world, or their readiness to participate in the game. The design of ancient costumes had reached the limit of historical knowledge at the time; characters' facial expressions and gestures were even more difficult to recover. Filmmakers were well aware that amongst various new and traditional forms of storytelling, cinema must secure its audience by the unique capacity of the medium. Cinematic portrayal of individual characters might not be more historically realistic than new drama – in fact it had to borrow from the latter in terms of sartorial design and performing style. Film companies therefore invested in improving the quality of ancient costumes, and more prominently their quantity.

Cinema's ability to significantly expand the number of actors was already explored in the linked play *Lingbo Fairy*, which contained a film scene of an indoor concert with over thirty female musicians in ancient costumes. (Fig. 2.19) Later that year, Zhu Shouju gave up his plan to adapt *Romance of the West Chamber* and replaced it with an historical epic *Beauty Ruse* (Meiren ji) from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. He was convinced that a romantic love story that simply featured one male and one female lead was far more difficult to make realistic than a grand production with a massive cast.<sup>84</sup> When *West Chamber* was eventually adapted by director Hou Yao later that year, the spectacular battlefield scenes that were at the periphery of the original story were pushed to the foreground. (Chapter 3)

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<sup>84</sup> Chen Xiaodie, "Guan Meiren Ji" [Watching *Beauty Ruse*], *Shenbao*, June 8, 1927, 16.



Fig. 2.19. Linked Play *Lingbo Fairy* (1925)

The assumption behind such strategy was not simply that visual spectacles could divert the audience's attention from specific details in the creation of historical characters, but more importantly, the existence of other living beings helped to create a more realistic world for historical characters to inhabit. Spectacle and realism became two sides of the same coin in making believe the ancient. Human beings vivified space by generating movements and activating objects. Besides serving certain narrative functions, they demonstrated to the audience that the screen world was a lived space rather than an artificial stage for the display of central characters. In most cases, their faces were barely visible, and their bodies were hidden beneath ancient costumes. They existed as both individual human beings and decorative props, or what would later be addressed as “sets in motion” (*huodong bujing*).<sup>85</sup> Their in-between status helped

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<sup>85</sup> My invocation of the term “sets in motion” is inspired by Weihong Bao's talk on “Environment in Cinema” at SCMS in Chicago in 2017 where she elaborated the relation between things, environment and people.

to strengthen the link between leading characters and the environment, and in some instances, multiple bodies of extras in ancient costume became the environment per se. But the incorporation of multiple extras into the mechanism of make-believe required huge effort, especially in history films. Every single person needed to be dressed up before they could dress the environment.

### **Code: Costume Production in *Beauty Ruse***

Extensive use of extras was a new experiment in the Chinese film industry with the advent of ancient costume films. To transform such a huge number of contemporary actors into ancient characters, the demand for ancient costumes rocketed. Lacking any industrialized supply system, film companies had to mobilize their own resources and talents. The massive scale of costume and props production soon became a subject they competed to boast about. Minxin Company claimed that their costume budget for *Romance of the West Chamber* exceeded seven thousand silver dollars, and joked that the sound of tailors' scissors had become the main melody in the company.<sup>86</sup> Dan Duyu's Shanghai made five hundred costumes for Monkey Kings' minions in *Spider Cave*,<sup>87</sup> and in Dan's next project *Imperial Consort Yang*, which exhausted all his savings, the number of costumes for extras reached two thousand: four hundred for palace maids, four hundred for officials, and twelve hundred for soldiers.<sup>88</sup> Although these numbers could have been exaggerated, they nonetheless challenge the stigma of the genre as poorly made and purely profit driven.

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<sup>86</sup> "Xixiang Ji Dingzhi Dapi Guzhuang," [Massive Costume Production for *Romance of the West Chamber*], *Shenbao*, March 6, 1927, 20.

<sup>87</sup> "Xiyou Ji Zhong zhi Fuzhuang," [Costumes in *Journey to the West*], *Shenbao Zengkan*, October 28, 1926, 4.

<sup>88</sup> "Yang Guifei Pianzhong Zhi Fuzhuang Liangqian Tao" [Two Thousand Costumes Made for *Imperial Consort Yang*], *Shenbao*, March 20, 1927, 18.

One of the most exemplary films of this trend was Great China-Lily Company's *Beauty Ruse*. Co-directed by four important figures of the company – Zhu Shouju, Shi Dongshan, Wang Yuanlong and Lu Jie – it was the most expensive Chinese film up to its time, costing 150,000 yuan, about 10 times more than an average contemporary costume film.<sup>89</sup> It reportedly employed over ten thousand extras, and the production lasted for over half a year. The film centered on General Zhou Yu's fake marriage plot, which notoriously cost him his army and the princess of the Wu Kingdom. It was a well-known story widely circulated through various storytelling forms and the Peking opera excerpt *Ganlu Temple*. But to further familiarize the actors and actresses with the plot, a famous storyteller was invited to perform in the company.<sup>90</sup>

Like most Chinese films made around this time, *Beauty Ruse* is not extant, but consecutive reports on its production process allow us to access the film from a different perspective. Material details that recede to the background of the film occupy an important position in these reports. Visitors to the company portrayed the bustling production scenes with great enthusiasm, elaborating on how the company space was turned into a busy manufacturing site, occupied by tailors, blacksmiths and carpenters. Piles of fabrics were waiting to be turned into ancient style costumes, while finished products, such as robes, helmets, boots, and shields, had already filled up an entire room. Their words vividly conveyed an excitement over material abundance, over witnessing the materialization of an entire ancient world.

Among all those thick descriptions, special attention was paid to the making of military armor. Since the use of embroidered armor on opera stage was constantly attacked as a quintessential example of traditional opera's lack of realism at the time, new methods had to be

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<sup>89</sup> Zheng Junli, "Xiandai Zhongguo Dianyng Shilue" [A Brief History of Modern Chinese Cinema], in *ZWD*, 1411. Director Zhu Shouju claimed that the film cost 120,000, which was considered as a modest estimation by his friend. See Chen Xiaodie, "Guan *Meiren Ji*," *Shenbao*, June 8, 1927, 16.

<sup>90</sup> "Ji Kongqian Guzhuangpian *Meiren Ji Wu*" [On An Unprecedented Ancient Costume Film: *Beauty Ruse*, Part 5], *Shenbao*, November 5, 1926, 17.

applied. The original goal of the company was to recreate pure copper armor, which would weigh over fifty kilograms per set, and the estimation of total copper consumption exceeded ten thousand kilograms.<sup>91</sup> Such an overly ambitious plan was, unsurprisingly, scaled down for practical reasons. The final result was a satin-made military robe with small pieces of copper densely stitched onto it.<sup>92</sup> This kind of “scale armor” could also be found in later ancient costume films of this period, such as *Romance of the West Chamber* and *Mulan Joins the Army* (Fig. 2.20a, b). Compared to the elaborate operatic armor, *kao*, (Fig. 2.21) whose meanings needed to be interpreted through coded signs, the new invention was more directly recognizable as ancient armor. The fluttering copper pieces were in fact more decorative than functional, more symbolic than realistic, but their metallic luster that was well captured by the camera manifested an improvement in realism. If this armor was indeed more realistic than embroidered *kao*, it was in terms of plausibility rather than historical accuracy.



Fig. 2.20a Copper-piece covered armors in *Romance of the West Chamber* (1927)

<sup>91</sup> “Dazhonghua baihe gongsi zhi kuijia” [Great China-Lily Company’s Armors], *Shenbao*, November 14, 1926, 22.

<sup>92</sup> Cheng Yan, “Cangan *Meiren Ji* de Fuzhuang yu Bujing” [Visiting the Sets and Costume Production of *Beauty Ruse*], *Shenbao*, December 9, 1926, 17-8.



擒 被 伏 中

Fig. 2.20b Military Armor in *Mulan Joins the Army* (*Dianying Yuebao*, no. 3, 1928)



Fig. 2.21 Kao in *Dingjun Mountain*



Fig. 2.22 Zhou Yu's Mang in *Qunying Hui*



Fig. 2.23. *Mang* in *Beauty Ruse* (*Beiyang Huabao*, no. 96, 1927)

Besides such conspicuous changes in material, sartorial designs did not reveal substantial differences from costumes used on stage. Official robes for Liu Bei, Sun Quan and Zhou Yu were mostly based on operatic *mang* (fig. 2.22), only the sleeves were significantly widened to accentuate the loose and floaty characteristic of ancient costumes and also to slow down actors' movements (fig. 2.23).<sup>93</sup> The Wu princess Sun Shangxiang's featured dress was clearly modeled on Mei Lanfang's new style ancient costume, with strings of beads replacing the sashes and hair buns rotated 90 degrees. (Fig. 2.24a, b) More noticeable than the subtle changes in the aesthetic quality of these costumes was the boost in the quantity of ancient costumes appearing on screen, which significantly altered the experience of the familiar story. To create a convincing ancient environment with massive casts, filmmakers had to resort to external resources, both the actors and the space, interacting with the actual fabric of a real place, as we will see in the next chapter.

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<sup>93</sup> *ibid*



Fig 2.24a Mei Lanfang as Lin Daiyu



Fig 2.24b Zhang Zhiyun as Sun Shangxiang  
(*Zhongguo Dianying Zazhi*, Vol.1, No. 5, 1927)

From the utilization of ancient costumes in portrait-taking to their participation in new and traditional stage plays and the establishment of ancient costume as a cinematic genre, historical accuracy in costume design is not a productive criterion to understand its development despite frequent evocations of the term. As a concept, ancient costume was employed to reinforce the dichotomy between ancient and modern; as a practice, it revealed concerns about national image and artistic creativity. Although the establishment of this concept simultaneously marked its retrieval from everyday clothing practice, it re-entered contemporary reality in the form of fantasy making. Cinema burgeoned because people always had unfulfilled dreams. To make-believe a constructed ancient world was not simply a play with shadows, but also to play with reality, to make people believe in the wonders that cinema was capable of bringing, in and beyond the flickering frames.

### Chapter 3: Reimagining Temporal Continuity: Ancient Landscape and Location Shooting

In January 1927, a film crew of over seventy people from the Great China–Lily Company and two boats of costumes and props arrived in Suzhou, a historic city about fifty miles west of Shanghai. For over three weeks, local people gathered to watch soldiers in scale armor and copper helmets marching through the streets, armed generals riding horses on the mountains nearby, and a spectacular wedding parade centered around an archaic double-horse bridal carriage, with rows of ancient-looking maids and guards extending for about half a mile. Hundreds of local coolies acted as “Three Kingdoms” soldiers each day, and the horses of the entire city were mobilized to “join the army.” The head of the police department and the president of the local Business Association enthusiastically reviewed the troops. Even the abbot of the West Garden Temple bargained for a shot of himself in the movie as a condition for lending the temple for filming.<sup>1</sup> *Beauty Ruse* became the city’s trendiest, most enchanting conversation topic.

Four months later in Hangzhou, another famous city near Shanghai, thousands of spectators gathered on a gigantic viewing deck under the guidance of forty security guards. This newly built platform overlooked a valley where soldiers dressed in ancient costumes were lining up. Among them were six cameramen, each pointing their camera in a different direction. The voice of director Hou Yao came from the top level of the Liuhe Pagoda. Amplified by a loudspeaker, it immediately filled the entire valley. With four beats of a gong, the Baima General rushed ahead on a white horse, closely followed by his soldiers. The battle between the army and the bandits in *Romance of the West Chamber* was about to begin.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yao Xiuqiu, “Wugong Xingguang Ji” [Films stars in Suzhou], *Shenbao*, January 27, 1927, 3.

<sup>2</sup> “*Xixiang Ji zhong zhi Hongwei Zhanjing*” [Spectacular Fighting Scenes in *Romance of the West Chamber*], *Shenbao*, May 18, 1927, 18.

By 1927, film production was no longer a novelty to local people in Suzhou and Hangzhou. The two cities had been the most popular destinations for film crews since the beginning of the decade thanks to their geographic proximity to Shanghai, historical fame, and beautiful scenery. But *Beauty Ruse* and *Romance of the West Chamber* caused unprecedented sensations among locals for their grand production scales and ancient themes. More essential than the presence of modern filmmaking apparatus and a large number of actors and extras in ancient costumes was a wondrous sense of transformation—the transformation of the spectators’ familiar living space into an ancient setting, and its eventual integration into a coherent ancient world on screen. Although any use of real locations in a fiction film necessarily involved some kind of transformation, it was particularly enchanting in ancient costume films since it crossed the ancient/present division that was fundamental to the establishment of the very genre.

The experience of transformation requires the recognition or awareness of two different identities of a given location. The more divergent and unbridgeable these identities are, the more wondrous such transformation may be felt. Ancient costume films from this period reveal a clear tendency to foreground the transformation of renowned contemporary sites into settings of historical tales, not only through intense media publicity and public display of shooting locations and processes, but also by preserving the significant traits of selected sites and maximizing their recognizability in the film. However, such honest exhibition of shooting locations risked distracting the audience from an immersive experience of the diegetic world. Indeed, judging from the criteria of a coherent and convincing diegesis, location shooting, besides its use of actual historical sites and ahistorical nature, did not seem to be an ideal choice for ancient costume films because of an intrinsic incompatibility between the presentness of the site and the pastness of the story world. Moreover, working with a given place inevitably limited

filmmakers' control of the aesthetic outcomes of their project as compared to using a set of their own design. This was why Hollywood and European period films of this time mostly relied on studio sets. Why would Chinese ancient costume filmmakers be so fascinated with location shooting?

The answer to this question is multifold, relating to technical, economic, aesthetic, and ideological issues. Instead of simply treating it as a cheaper alternative to studio constructions as some contemporary critics argued, it will be more productive to approach it from the enabling effects of location shooting.<sup>3</sup> Audiences' realization of the diegetic space as transformed from present sites might temporarily alienate them from an enclosed cinematic world, but it also brought people's attention to the connection between the diegesis and the real world, between ancient and present times. In other words, perfect coherence and autonomy of a constructed diegesis did not seem to be the ultimate goal of Chinese filmmakers. Rather, they intentionally left porous spaces through which cinematic mediation between the actual and diegetic worlds could be discerned. This was not the same as being consciously self-reflective about the constructedness of filming, but a subtle display of cinema's capacity in transforming spaces with an enchanting effect.

What was put on display was not simply a contemporary scenic site but more importantly a relation with the past, a transformation realized through cinematic mediation. If the fabrication of ancient costumes resulted from and in turn reinforced the separation between ancient and modern China (chapter 2), the use of present locations smoothed the rupture with a sense of continuity. The land Chinese people inhabited remained the same despite the changes over the look of its landscapes. Through careful selection of sites and the technical mediation of cinema, a

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<sup>3</sup> Xin Leng, "Guzhuang Re yu Juben Huang" [Ancient Costume Mania and Script Famine], *Guowen Zhoubao* 4, no.47, 1927.

deeply grounded connection with the past was brought forth in the transformation of contemporary places into ancient settings. Compared to the construction of a past world in studio, excavating a past temporality in present sites activated a dynamism between the now and once-upon-a-time. By piecing together preserved and imagined aspects of the ancient, cinema not only exhibited the most vivid phenomenal experience of a past world, but also provided people with a transformative experience of present landscapes that led them to imagine how they could have been inhabited in ancient time.

Centering on the idea of an enchanting transformation, this chapter analyzes the mutual influence between filmmaking and the understanding of ancient/present relation from the perspective of location shooting. The first part of the chapter discusses the ideological and technical conditions that made location shooting in ancient costume films possible, even desirable to Chinese filmmakers as an attraction. Instead of holding a strong desire for totalizing control of the *mise-en-scène* and its environment to perfectly craft a coherent cinematic world, Chinese filmmakers took film production as a negotiation between artificial creation and natural environment. Ancient costume films offered filmmakers a chance to “retrieve” the past not just through construction but also by appropriating present reality. The second part of the chapter then focuses on the kinds of contemporary sites that were considered as “appropriable” in ancient costume films and the practical limitations filmmakers encountered during actual production. The concept of landscape is central to the discussion here. Situated between culture and nature, landscape generally indicates a natural site shaped by human inhabitation and imbued with cultural significance, or artificially constructed places that epitomize nature and human relation with it—“a medium of exchange between the human and the natural” as W.J.T. Mitchell puts it,<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, “Imperial Landscape.” in *Landscape and Power*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5.

and between past and present, I would add. Finally, a surviving version of *Romance of the West Chamber* (1927) will be analyzed to demonstrate how filmmakers incorporated real landscapes into a classical story and what effects they might generate.

### **Ancient China and Chinese as Ancient**

It is not immediately self-evident why Chinese filmmakers preferred to incorporate real locations in ancient costume films. To make believe a bygone world, period characteristics are always indispensable—mostly constructed in studio space, and with occasional luck matched by historical sites of the featured period. But this was not the case in 1920s China. Although film companies used studio sets to show off their unique designs and technical competence, their free employment of location shooting went far beyond what would be considered acceptable by today's standard, or by their Hollywood contemporaries. This could be easily ascribed to the lack of knowledge of period details, the same problem encountered in the making of costumes that was discussed in the previous chapter. But as the use of contemporary costumes was criticized and eventually abandoned, the use of contemporary places encountered far fewer objections. To unpack this puzzle and other related issues behind it, let us start from the set of Zhou Yu's study in *Beauty Ruse*.

As the first of twenty-four sets constructed for the film, Zhou Yu's study impressed many visitors to the company, who documented its production in great detail. Eight delicately carved floor-to-ceiling windows delineated the boundaries of the room, six in the back and two on the side. The opening between two pillars served as a doorway for characters to enter and exit. It was said that the patterns on the beams were all drawn with imported pigments, and the windows

were repainted over five times in order to best match the colors of the characters' costumes.<sup>5</sup> The floor tiles were specially ordered and fired in a famous kiln in Suzhou.<sup>6</sup> A giant ceramic jar filled with scrolls stood next to a hardwood table and a high-back chair that occupied the center of the room. A number of small objects, such as an incense burner, a brush holder, and an ink stone were carefully arranged and displayed on the table (Fig. 3.1).



Fig. 3.1. Zhou Yu's study in *Beauty Ruse* (*Beijing Huabao* 1, no. 5, 1926)

Zhou Yu's study could seem somewhat familiar to a Chinese audience in the 1920s, as it assembled traditional elements that were still widely used in daily life at the time. Although most objects, such as the long window, the high-rise table and chair, and the scroll paintings, had not yet appeared during the Three Kingdoms era,<sup>7</sup> anachronism did not bother those who were not

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<sup>5</sup> “*Meirenji Zhou Yu Shufang Zhong zhi Qihua*” [Wall paint in Zhou Yu's Study in *Beauty Ruse*], *Shenbao*, December 12, 1926, 21.

<sup>6</sup> “*Dazhonghua Baihe Gongsi Qijian meiren ji shufang*” [Great China-Lily Company Started to Build Zhou Yu's Study for *Beauty Ruse*], *Shenbao*, December 5, 1926, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Chairs were not commonly used in China until the Tang dynasty, and long windows came even later. Based on the study of ancient paintings, Song Zhiyi and Liu Su dated the origin of floor-to-ceiling windows to the Five Dynasties

prepared to spot it. Meticulous efforts were spent on enhancing the artistic subtlety of the set, which contributed to an appealing “Chinese style” as opposed to a “Western look.” The Ancient Costume Film Movement was, to many, a reaction against Western influence on Chinese mise-en-scène, and some film critics even addressed it as a movement of anti-Europeanization (*qu ou’hua*).<sup>8</sup> If the concept of ancient costumes rested upon a separation between past and present, the construction of an ancient environment reinforced a dichotomy between the Chinese and Western styles. In other words, ancient costume was defined against contemporary costume, both Chinese and Western, whereas the creation of an ancient set took a contemporary understanding of “Chinese style” as its starting point.

In contrast to ancient costumes, ancient-style furniture and architecture remained a part of everyday practice. Even in the most cosmopolitan city, Shanghai, they coexisted or eclectically fused with foreign styles. The boundary between a film set and everyday life was therefore more fluid than that in costume designs. One visitor to the set was deeply attracted to the traditional-style table and chair in Zhou Yu’s study. Reflecting on his “mistake” of using Western magazines such as *House and Garden* and *Ideal Home* as models for home decoration, he borrowed the drawings of furniture design for future usage.<sup>9</sup> This anecdote drives home two crucial points: the dichotomy between China and the West, and the possible application of designs of ancient sets in real life. Zhou Yu’s table, a delicately crafted piece of traditional furniture, could also be placed in your own home, or it might have been modeled on one in your collection. The rupture between ancient and contemporary manifested in costume designs was smoothly bridged by the two-directional flow between film sets and contemporary living

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period. See Song and Liu, “Luodi Changchuang Xiaokao” [A Study of the History of long windows], *Zhongwai Jianzhu* 6 (2010): 50-52.

<sup>8</sup> Zheng Junli. “Xiandai zhongguo dianying shilue” (A Brief History of Modern Chinese Cinema), in *ZWD*, 1049.

<sup>9</sup> “Dazhonghua Baihe Gongsi zhi gushi jiaju shengping zui’ai” [Ancient Style Furniture from Great China-Lily Company is My Favorite], *Shenbao*, December 15, 1926, 18.

environments. Moreover, Qing styles, which posed a big problem in costumes, were also seamlessly integrated into a so-called traditional Chinese style.<sup>10</sup> In fact, material details with a distinctive taste of the Qing provided the basis of ancient set designs since they were the most familiar and widely available traditional style at the time. In the face of the fast spreading Western influence, Chinese tradition was flattened into a coherent style upon which a national identity could be claimed.

Like interior designs, the shapes of exterior landscape could also be reduced to a dichotomized confrontation between Chinese tradition and Western influence, according to which any place with distinctive Chinese characteristics, or more broadly speaking, any place that did not reveal Western or modern traces could serve as a film set almost for any dynasty. The ancient world had not yet been completely turned into an exotic land, but could be “reassembled” or “discovered” in the present. However, the plausibility of location shooting cannot necessarily justify its common usage. The actual advantages that Chinese filmmakers found in location shooting beg for more explanation.

### **Film Studios and the Control Thesis**

Studio sets were costly yet ephemeral, but they facilitated precise control over a place that was created solely to satisfy the needs of filmmaking. Zhou Yu’s study hosted five scenes. Compared to the meticulous production of the set mentioned above, the filming process, which lasted no more than two days, seemed rather anti-climactic, and the set was immediately torn down to make room for the next one: Wu Princess’s boudoir. Studio sets were taken as a crucial part of the art of cinema, and Chinese filmmakers with artistic ambitions were often rather

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<sup>10</sup> Zhou Yu’s table manifested a clear Qing taste. Compared to Ming style furniture, the design of Qing furniture is usually distinguished by its larger scale and more delicate carvings.

generous with investment in set constructions (chapter 5). As the biggest-budget Chinese film made up to its time, *Beauty Ruse* was an exemplary case. Each material detail was carefully created to manifest the filmmakers' artistic taste and their control over the visual quality of the film. But this also marked the limitations of their understanding of studio control as primarily a matter of set construction. Once the set was completed, it was treated as any given space where actors performed their roles in front of cameras.

In his study of film studios prior to the classical Hollywood studio system, Brian Jacobson emphasizes filmmakers' strong desire to control the environment of cinematic production, arguing that even real locations are largely treated as an extension of studio space through various control mechanisms.<sup>11</sup> In mid-1920s China, however, film studios provided only rather limited facilities to control the filming process and its environment. It has rarely been mentioned in previous scholarship that for the majority of film companies, including the Great China-Lily Company during their production of *Beauty Ruse*, "film studio" simply meant an empty field in the open air. Filmmaking was still a profession that *heavily* depended on weather conditions (*kaotian chifan*).<sup>12</sup> By 1926, six years after the building of the first glass-shield studio at the Commercial Press, only a handful of Chinese film companies among over a hundred registered ones owned glass studios, although carbon arc lamps were more commonly employed to facilitate night production.<sup>13</sup> In Hollywood, the total reliance on artificial lighting had long

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<sup>11</sup> Brian R. Jacobson, *Studios Before the System: Architecture, Technology, and the Emergence of Cinematic Space* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Gong Jianong, *Gong Jianong Congying Huiyilu* [Memoir of Gong Jianong] (Taipei: Wenxin Congkan, 1947), 33.

<sup>13</sup> The exact number is not clear, but based on my current research, at least five companies owned glass studios by the end of 1926. 1) The Star Company built their first glass studio in 1925, and a second one in 1926; 2) Guoguang Film Company inherited and expanded the glass studio from its predecessor the Commercial Press; 3) The Great Wall Company, which was started by Chinese patriots in New York, established their studio in Shanghai based on American standards; 4) Li Minwei's Minxin Company relocated from Hong Kong to Shanghai in 1926 and built a glass studio within 2 months; 5) Dan Duyu's Shanghai Shadowplay Company finished their glass-shield studio in June 1926, and finished the *Spider Cave* and *Imperial Consort Yang* in the studio. Other companies, such as Peacock Film Company, Xinren Film Company, Qingnian Film Company, Aimei Film Company, Xin Shaonian Film

become the norm, whereas in Europe glass studios were commonly used well into the late 1920s.<sup>14</sup> The prevalence of open-air studios in China was closely related to but not completely determined by economic conditions. The companies equipped with glass studios were not necessarily the best funded ones, and the Great China–Lily Company, which was among the “Big Three”<sup>15</sup> film companies in the mid-1920s, did not announce the plan to build one until the completion of *Beauty Ruse*.<sup>16</sup>

The glass studio was considered a sign of advancement but not a necessity. For Chinese filmmakers at the time, it was the constructed sets rather than the studio space as a whole that hosted studio shooting. Without glass walls and roof, sets could still be built and performances be recorded despite certain inconveniences and occasional embarrassment. Film reviewers taught the audience how to distinguish interior scenes filmed in glass-shield studios from those made in the open air through the perception of the wind, not in order to make fun of the latter, but as a bit of “behind-the-scenes” knowledge of film production.<sup>17</sup> As late as 1932, films with trembling sets were still accepted for theatrical release.<sup>18</sup> Western film critics appreciated the wind caressing leaves in the background as a sign of camera’s indiscriminate capture of the phenomenal world, but only under the premise that such spontaneity of nature contributed to the plausibility of the diegetic world. The wind was desirable in so far as it eased the sense of

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Company, and Grand China Film Company all announced in *Shenbao* their plans to build glass studios, but the completion of the studios needs to be further verified.

<sup>14</sup> Tim Bergfeler, Sue Harris, and Sarah Street, *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s European Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), chapter 1.

<sup>15</sup> The three strongest companies were Star, Great China-Lily and Tianyi, with a starting capital of 50,000 yuan. See Rao Shuguang, *Zhongguo Leixing Dianying: Lishi, Xianzhuang yu Weilai* [Chinese Genre Films: Past, Present and Future] (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 2013), 6.

<sup>16</sup> According to *Shenbao*, the company planned to build a glass studio after completing *Beauty Ruse* and *Poor Qiuqiang*, which were made simultaneously in early 1927. See “Dazhonghua Beihe Jingxing Kuochong” [Great China-Lily Starts to Expand], *Shenbao*, April 28, 1927, 18. Lu Jie’s diary also gave detailed descriptions on the difficulties of filming in outdoor studios.

<sup>17</sup> Wei Xiao, “Lang Die Shiyong Ji Er” [Test Screening of *Social Butterfly*], *Shenbao*, November 16, 1926, 21.

<sup>18</sup> A 1932 article noted that due to the lack of a glass-shield studio, Youlian Film Company’s interior sets were about to fall apart in the wind, and the actors could barely hold their clothes. See “Youlian Gongsi Meiyou Bolipeng Zhi Ku” [The Hardship of Youlian Company’s Lack of a Glass Studio]. *Kaimaila* 120 (1932): 2.

artificial control and constructedness of cinema, but the “inappropriate” presence of wind that failed to fit into the diegesis would not be tolerated. For Chinese critics, the unmotivated movement of curtains and draperies became a means to peep into hidden production conditions. Such an effect was likely to be regarded as a flaw, but was nonetheless accepted. Why?

For the audience of an outdoor theatrical performance, the set shaken by a sudden gust of wind would probably be less problematic since such audiences are often highly aware of the double status of the set as both a fictional place in the play and its material existence in the world, and do not necessarily see them as contradictory to each other. It is completely natural that the set and actors, as part of the physical world, are inevitably affected by the natural environment. But in cinema, filmmakers implement strict controls to make sure the set is perceived as nothing but a specific place in the film that stands as an independent world on its own and is not subjugated to a larger reality. Chinese filmmakers and audiences’ tolerance for the extra-diegetic wind indicates their acknowledgement of the set as a construction in the real world. In the Chinese performative tradition, the boundary between the stage and the external world was rather fluid, and it was not until the modern era that the idea of a coherent narrative world as separate from reality was imposed on Chinese performance.<sup>19</sup> The introduction of cinema also brought a set of new understandings of the story world, but a coherently, self-contained cinematic diegesis was not, at least not yet, an ultimate goal of Chinese filmmakers. After all, it was never a secret to anyone that cinema was indeed a construction of this world.

An enclosed studio, most straightforwardly, provided a shelter for the sets and film crews, making sets of interior space literally interior and enabling film production in bad weather condition. For Chinese filmmakers in the 1920s, it was one of the ways to negotiate with the

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<sup>19</sup> For more detailed discussion on the transition from traditional stage to modern theater stage, see Joshua Goldstein, *Drama Kings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

environment rather than a mechanism of totalizing control as Jacobson argues in the case of film studios in Hollywood. These two different attitudes towards the film studio to some extent reflected two approaches to filmmaking. If for Hollywood filmmakers, the making of a fiction film was first of all a matter of commanding production resources, personnel, and environment to achieve desired results while presenting the final product as a natural given by concealing means of controls, Chinese filmmakers were more willing to treat filmmaking as a constant negotiation with contingent conditions. It does not matter here whether the less-developed cinematic technology and infrastructure in China were the cause or result of this flexible approach; the point is that without strong desire and specific technological means to implement strong control over the film process in a studio, the distinction between studio and location shooting was greatly reduced.

Chinese cinema started from outdoor space with constructed sets and real locations (Fig 3.2), and was gradually “interiorized” into glass-shield studios throughout the 1920s. While Jacobson saw location shooting in Hollywood as operating under the same control system of studio practice, and “the best location was an ideal studio,”<sup>20</sup> in China it can be argued that studio sets, once finished, were not treated too differently from a real location during actual filming, and studio shooting was not necessarily prioritized over locations. The prevalence of ancient costume films overlapped with a significant transition in the Chinese film industry from common usage of outdoor sets to expansive construction of glass studios: some built studios with the profit gained from ancient costume films;<sup>21</sup> some expanded or built new ones in preparation

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<sup>20</sup> Jacobson, *Studios Before the System*, 171.

<sup>21</sup> Grand China Company started building a glass studio upon completion of a popular serialized linked play, *Lotus Princess*, in 1926. See “Dazhongguo Yingpian Gongsì zhi Kuochong” [The Expansion of Grand China Film Company], *Shenbao*, August 3, 1926, 22. The Tianyi Company, known for making ancient costume films, built its glass studio in 1929. See “Tianyi Gongsì Jiang Kuochong” [Tianyi Film Company is Going to Expand], *Shenbao*, January 31, 1929, 22.

for ancient costume film production.<sup>22</sup> Without extant film texts for comparison, it is hard to tell how such change actually affected the quality of ancient costume films. But it paved the way for the rise of martial arts–magic spirit films, which demanded more carefully designed manipulations and presented an autonomous fantastic world more detached from reality. The ancient, however, was treated less as a self-contained other world, but rather bled into the fabric of present reality.

### **Location Shooting and Pursuit of the Real**

By late 1926, location shooting had become a rather common practice in Chinese cinema. In a series of short films directed by Zhang Shichuan in 1913, real life locations were already used. Lacking control of the surrounding environment, the outcome was usually open to contingencies, and sometimes unexpectedly comic. During the shooting of *Romantic Monks* (*Fengliu Heshang*, 1913) in Pudong, a group of monks from a funeral ceremony accidentally ran into the film crew, and the hilarious encounter between performed and real monks was captured by the camera and turned into an unplanned scene in the film.<sup>23</sup> In such early practice, locations were not only used as sets for scripted actions, but were also lived space that actively generated actions which intersected with the actor's performances. With the growing intention to tell a specific story instead of depicting simple scenarios, the utilization of locations became more selective but by no means less common.

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<sup>22</sup> The Star Company announced their plan to build four more glass studios where ancient costume films would be made. See “Mingxing Gongsi Qianju” [Star Film Company Moves to a New Address], *Shenbao*, March 18, 1927, 17.

<sup>23</sup> According to Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin, the cinematographer of the film was an American man Arthur Israel (Yishener), who captured the real monks and included it in the final film. See *ZWDS*, 54.



Fig. 3.2. Outdoor set of the Asiatic Film Company, 1914

Location shooting was often addressed as the shooting of exterior scenes (*waijing*), as opposed to interior scenes in studios (*neijing*). Inaccurate as such division was, it stresses an important characteristic of location shooting—the engagement with an infinite world beyond the constructed studio space. As discussed in chapter 1, in the early 1920s, cinema was best appreciated for its affinity with the real, both in terms of its realistic perceptual effect and its capacity to engage the phenomenal world. The pursuit of the real was not only associated with the nature of the cinematic medium, but also became an overarching criterion that was applied to judge and reform stage performance. Opera and new drama strived for more realistic effects by utilizing perspectival backdrops, constructed sets and even live water and fire shows.<sup>24</sup> A

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<sup>24</sup> In Xinmin New Drama Society's third ancient costume play, *Diaochan*, innovative sets of a royal palace and ancient garden had already replaced the novelty of ancient costume and became the strongly promoted new attraction in its advertisement. When Zhang Shichuan's Minming Society re-performed *Wu Song* two months after its debut by the Minxin Society, they choreographed Wu Song and Ximen Qing's fight around a constructed set of

plethora of sensory stimuli and their immediate effects were unique advantages of theater in creating lively experiences, but what cinema had at its disposal was its ability to mediate space. Location shooting was the most direct demonstration of how cinema could capture the infinite real world in the limited space of the screen.

The first three feature length Chinese films, *Yan Ruisheng*, *Sea Oath*, and *Beauty Skeleton* all employed location shooting to make a certain truth claim.<sup>25</sup> Based on a sensational murder case, the film *Yan Ruisheng* aimed to maximize realistic effect by utilizing the actual objects and locations related to the crime, or as Bao Weihong puts it, “to make hyperbolic claims of indexical and iconic realism.”<sup>26</sup> In *Sea Oath*, the ocean was treated as more than a natural location. Its rough waves also served as a visual metaphor for the female protagonist’s disturbed mind, a literal reification of her “emotional waves.”<sup>27</sup> The detective film *Beauty Skeleton* strongly advertised the scenes of fighting in water, rolling down a hill, jumping off a bridge to promote the realistic sensation generated by location shooting. Even more sensational was the publicity of the drowning of an actor during the filming of a diving scene.<sup>28</sup> The heightened risk further diminished the boundary between acting in a film and real life activities. Although working on different levels, these films all tended to demonstrate cinema’s ability to portray nature and societal reality and convey the psychological or sensorial real by incorporating the real world.

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the Lion Restaurant. After a startling jump from the second floor of the building, the two resumed their combat on the ground. Ever since then, the Han Pass standing amidst a vast desert, a Song palace consisting of thirteen nesting layers of built and painted scenes, dragon boats lit by silk lanterns, and even a spooky Hell with walking skeletons all made their appearances on stage.

<sup>25</sup> *Yan Ruisheng* and *Beauty Skeleton* rented Commercial Press’s new glass studio for interior scenes; only Dan Duyu’s *Sea Oath* continued to use sets constructed in the open air. Strictly speaking, *Sea Oath* was not a feature-length film. It consists of six reels, roughly 40 minutes long, but it took almost a year to produce, made single-handedly by Dan Duyu, who served as the director, set-designer, cinematographer, film-developer, and editor.

<sup>26</sup> Bao Weihong, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915 – 1945*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 49.

<sup>27</sup> Zhou Shoujuan, “Ji Haishi” [On *Sea Oath*], *Shenbao*, February 4, 1922.

<sup>28</sup> Ming Yue, “Dianying Jie zhi Zuixin Xiaoxi” [Latest News from the Film World], *Shenbao*, May 12, 1922, 18.

Real-life locations also helped to embed a story in contemporary Chinese society, making the film diegesis more relatable to the local audience. In *A String of Pearls* (1925), the earliest extant Chinese feature film, director Hou Yao transformed Maupassant's nineteenth-century French story into a contemporary Shanghai moral tale. The employment of real locations and quasi-documentary footage of bustling Shanghai streets, labor reformatory, and textile factory effectively oriented the story in the social reality of 1920s Shanghai, and somehow compensated for the artificiality of the overtly Westernized interior décor (Fig. 3.3). If constructed sets are capable of locating a story in any time-space, historical or imagined, location shooting strengthens cinema's connection with the here and now. This is especially evident when the location coincides with the setting of the story, in other words the place "being itself" in the diegesis. However, what if the two are mismatched, like the use of location shooting in ancient costume films? How could a film set in the past benefit from incorporating contemporary sites, which may easily belie the credibility of an ancient world?



Fig. 3.3. Western Style Interior Set in *A String of Pearl* (1925)

To answer this question, it is necessary to go back to the two key issues of this chapter, which also run throughout the dissertation: the intricate relation between past and present, and filmmakers' understanding of the capacity of cinema. To start off, the audience expected ancient costume films to lift them from their mundane life, especially after a long period of the dominance of contemporary issue films that intended to reflect social reality. "The audience's palate was craving a new flavor" was a common explanation for the popularity of ancient costume films at the time.<sup>29</sup> According to this understanding, ancient costume films were appreciated for their distance from reality, the fresh visual qualities that differentiated them from earlier films. But at the same time, ancient costume films of this period also marked a return to familiarity, based upon but not limited to the narrative. Domestic films could hardly compete with foreign imports in terms of technological novelty and the depiction of an exotic world, but they appealed to the Chinese audience for their relevance to life, both material and cultural. Novelty was always in dialectic relation with the habitual, best achieved through defamiliarizing the familiar, or familiarizing the unfamiliar.

The transition from social issue films to ancient costume films was not simply a shift of concern from present reality to the past, but could, to some extent, be understood as a change in the object of depiction from people's everyday life to a different aspect of their daily reality – familiar characters and stories they encountered in cultural and daily practices. The modernization process in China significantly increased the divergence between the material reality and the world brought forth in omnipresent representations of the past, but did not eradicate the latter. On the contrary, Chinese dramatists and filmmakers, among other artists,

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<sup>29</sup> Chen Zhiqing, "Duiyu Shezhi Guzhuang Yingpian zhi Yijian" [Opinions on Making Ancient Costume Films], *Shenzhou Gongsu Daoyi Zhijiao Hao*, 1926; E Chang, "Guzhuangpian zhong Ying Zhuyi Zhe" [Issues in Ancient Costume Films], *Fudan Gongsu: Honglou Meng Hao*, 1927.

took advantage of new methods and technologies of storytelling to infuse old narratives with new vitality. Sumptuous sets and newly designed costumes quickly made their appearance on stage, which provided filmmakers existing examples and models to learn from, but also posed challenges for further cinematic innovation.

Chinese filmmakers had great enthusiasm for cinema's ability to engage the real world, to integrate iconic Chinese landscapes and cultural relics into cinematic representations of the past.<sup>30</sup> Spectacular sets could be awe-inspiring, but "rediscovery" of the past in present material existence best demonstrated the possibility of cinematic mediation, and allowed people to rethink their relation with ancient time. It was only through cinema that the past surviving in written accounts or performed stories could be united with other scattered material traces, from antique objects to cultural sites, and brought into life as a full-fledged world with vivid visual details and lively movements. The ancient era that Chinese filmmakers hoped to showcase was not simply an artificial fabrication, but a world that was deeply grounded in the land and could be brought forth through cinematic transformation of present reality.

## DOCUMENTING AND STORYTELLING

The burgeoning of Chinese ancient costume films was closely related to location shooting. The first ancient costume film made in China, *Interlocked Ruses* (*Lianhuan Ji*, 1925), adapted from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, was shot entirely on location, although as a result of financial constrains. The film was directed by Japanese filmmakers in Dalian, but upon its release in Shanghai, it was mostly taken as a Chinese production.<sup>31</sup> Chinese ancient costume

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<sup>30</sup> Bao Tianxiao, "Lishi Yingpian zhi Taolun" [Discussions on History Films], *Mingxing Gongsi Tekan* 6 (1926). Collected in *ZWD*, 629-632.

<sup>31</sup> According to Gu Jianchen, the film was released without identifying its production company, and Chinese filmmakers in Shanghai were intrigued by its production background. Some guessed it was made by Chinese

films, as mentioned in the previous chapter, first appeared in “linked plays” to complement the spatial limitation of the stage performance. In order to better elaborate the spatial contrast between film and stage, location shooting was incorporated from the very first experiment and later became a rather standard practice in the film versions of linked plays.<sup>32</sup> *The Lingbo Fairy* (1926) marked the earliest endeavor of such practice. Lingyan Mountain in Suzhou was chosen as its filming location thanks to its “un-Europeanized” landscape and a wide range of historical sites from the Spring-and-Autumn period to the Qing, which were all recorded and included in the film.<sup>33</sup> Although none of the historical sites listed in the advertisement had any direct connection with the fantastic narrative of the film, they were believed to form a cultural atmosphere of the landscape, and “with the presence of characters dressed in ancient costume films, [the audiences] feel as if they have entered a wonderland.”<sup>34</sup>

The use of real-life locations, and especially the deliberate inclusion of historical sites, seemed to counter the effort to present a convincing heavenly world since these recognizable traces clearly anchored the audience in this world. Early Hollywood filmmakers, according to Jacobson, went to the wild nature of California to look for unidentifiable sites as shooting locations for western films, or employ various means of control to render a popular shooting location barely recognizable.<sup>35</sup> But the Chinese case showed an opposite approach. Instead of erasing the original identity of the place and imbuing it with new meanings and identity defined by the diegesis, the wonderland consisted of iconic sites. This later became a common trait in ancient costume films. The rhetoric of the film advertisement suggested that the incompatibility

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Americans, some thought it was a French production. See Gu Jianchen “Zhongguo dianying fada shi” (History of Chinese Cinema). Collected in *ZWD*, 1355-1380.

<sup>32</sup> The cinematographer of *Interlocked Ruses*, Kawatani Shohei, also worked with Wang Youyou and Xu Zhuodai on early linked plays, such as *The Lingbo Fairy*.

<sup>33</sup> Fang Hongye, “*Lingbo Xianzi: Lingyan Shan Shequ Waijing*” [*Lingbo Fairy: Location Shooting at the Lingyan Mountain*], *Shenbao*, February 4, 1926, 19.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Jacobson, *Studios Before the System*, chapter 7.

between historical traces and the heavenly world could be dissolved by their common embodiment of Chinese culture, as opposed to other Europeanized landscapes. Similarly, the barrier between past and present also became less relevant under the name of traditional culture. The choice of film location was often based on the cultural significance of a place, rather than entirely determined by the need to create a coherent narrative. Of course, harmonious integration of the two was often the aim of filmmakers, but their agenda to incorporate scenic sites was always in negotiation with narrative needs rather than completely submitting to them. Just as an ancient story represented Chinese culture, so did famous sites. The true magic of cinema derived from its ability to combine the two.

In ancient costume films, the chosen locations were intended to be recognizable, and even served as an important attraction of the film, at the price of belying the coherence of the narrative world. Such treatment of real locations was somehow reminiscent of Tom Gunning's concept of the "Cinema of Attraction." The attraction here does not simply refer to the exhibition of a renowned cultural site, but a magical transformation of a present place into a world inhabited by ancient characters.

This dual agenda of filmmaking revealed Chinese filmmakers' contending interests in the two major functions of cinema: documenting and storytelling. They were not yet ready to entirely subordinate the former to the latter. This was not a unique character of ancient costume films, but a continuation of a common practice in the Chinese film industry from the early 1920s. The Commercial Press was the first company to openly promote its use of scenic attractions. The advertisement for *Finding Gold in Barren Hills* (Dir. Ren Pengnian 1923)<sup>36</sup> listed a variety of

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<sup>36</sup> *Finding Gold in Barren Hills* was one of the four adaptations of traditional tales made by the Commercial Press from 1922 to 1923. The original story was called *Song Xiaoguan Unites with his Family Through an Old Hat* from Feng Menglong's (1574-1646) *Ordinary Words to Warn the World*. The other three adaptations are *Soup from a Filial Daughter-in-Law* (*Liaofu geng*, 1923) and *A Taoist Dream* (*Qingxu meng*, 1922) from *Ghost Stories from a*

famous natural and historic sites in Suzhou as its shooting locations, including the Tai Lake, Xuwu Temple, Shantang Canal, Tiger Hill, and Lingering Garden, promoting the film as a combination of scenery, romance, and adventure.<sup>37</sup> Since the founding of its shadowplay department in 1918, the Commercial Press divided film productions into five categories: scenic landscape, contemporary issues, education, new drama, and ancient drama.<sup>38</sup> *Finding Gold* featured their initial attempt to break the rigid divisions and introduce scenery into storytelling. Soon after that, director Ren Pengnian went all the way to Mt. Lu, about five hundred miles from Shanghai, to film *Umbrella of Patriotism* (*Aiguo san*, 1923). In 1927, *Chinese Film Year Book* published a list of “Pictures and Their Locations” and revealed the shooting locations of nineteen contemporary costume films made between 1924 and 1926, most of which were sites of attractions in the Jiangnan region.

To some extent, frank admission or even promotion of the dual agenda of filmmaking could even be understood as a response to the persistent tension between documenting and storytelling that has constantly intrigued filmmakers and film scholars. It was summarized by Martin Lefebvre as a spectators’ tug-of-war between contemplation of the landscape and investment in the narrative.<sup>39</sup> Philip Rosen explains it as two levels of spectatorial engagement: documentary and diegetic. Such tension was most exemplary in Hu Shi’s response to one of the earliest feature-length Chinese films. After watching *Beauty Skeleton* (1922), the great pioneer of the New Culture Movement complained in his diary that the ending of the film was totally

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*Chinese Studio*, and *Falling of the Lotus Flower* (*Lianhua Luo*, 1923) from the old tale of Zheng Yuanhe and Li Yaxian, which was later turned into a Peking opera play, *Brocade Dress* (*Xiuru Qun*). Although all these stories were relocated in contemporary times, they were commonly considered as the precursor of ancient costume films.

<sup>37</sup> “Shangwu Yinshuguan Youchu Xin Yingpian” [A New Film from The Commercial Press], *Shenbao*, May 15, 1923, 17.

<sup>38</sup> Cheng, Li and Xing, ZDFS, 31. Ancient drama referred to the documentation of traditional operas rather than ancient costume films.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Lefebvre, “Between Setting and Landscape,” in *Landscape and Film*, ed. Martin Lefebvre (New York: Routledge/AFI Film Reader, 2006), 28-29.

unreasonable since the setting suddenly jumped from Shanghai to the Treasure-Belt Bridge in Suzhou. To further express his disappointment, Hu mockingly copied the film advertisement into the diary to contrast his viewing experience.<sup>40</sup> Hu Shi's recognition of the bridge immediately made him identify the place in the film as the actual location of the physical bridge, and thus questioned the narrative coherence of the film. The almost instinctive reaction to the indexical nature of photographic image prevented him from seeing the bridge as solely belonging to a fictional world. This confusion was probably not unique to Hu Shi. Anyone who recognizes a place's different identity outside the film diegesis would, for at least a split second, sense a tension between believing and knowledge, between the two spectatorial engagements as Rosen would say. The "Hu Shi Confusion" could be reduced through an improved apprehension of film language, and, on the filmmakers' side, more skillful editing techniques, but it would hardly disappear.

The tension between documenting and storytelling stemmed from the presumption that all recorded details ought to be subordinated to the order of a coherently constructed diegesis, which was also the ultimate purpose of strict control mechanisms. However, by openly admitting the constructedness of a cinematic world, and taking the audiences' vacillation between the two spectatorial modes as constitutive of rather than destructive to the viewing pleasure, the tension would naturally relax, if not completely dissolve. For Chinese filmmakers, to delineate a diegetic world was one end, and to document and exhibit contemporary sites served the other, and the audience had the freedom to adjust their expectations along the spectrum. Of course, in a fiction film, narrative often stood at the forefront and provided a structure for the organization of various places, but it did not necessarily wield a definitive power over how these locations

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<sup>40</sup> Hu Shi also mentioned other unrealistic aspects, such as sudden shifts between mountains and river, and random combination of operatic combat gestures and fighting with real knives and guns. See "Diary Entry October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1922." in *Hu Shi Riji Quanbain*, Vol. 3. (Anhui Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2010), 871-72.

should be perceived. The film diegesis could also open up new imaginations of the shooting locations back in reality. This is true of any narrative films, but ancient costume films had two unique advantages: first of all, adapted from familiar tales, ancient costume films relied less on unexpected plot development, and thus allowed the audience freedom to digress from the narrative focus; secondly, the conspicuous tension between contemporary locations and ancient places in the diegesis could thus be turned into a demonstration of the transformative power of cinema, as well as a past-present continuum that had been increasingly questioned, even denied, in modern times.

The dynamic interaction between documenting and storytelling also helps to explain some of the early experiments with locations that were later rejected as ineffective. In the making of its first contemporary costume “history film”<sup>41</sup> *Liang Zhu*, the Tianyi Company sent cinematographers to shoot footage of Liang Zhu’s tomb, temple, stele, and other related monuments.<sup>42</sup> These posthumously established sites could not be integrated into the narrative, and were therefore added as vignettes to the end of the film. However, since the characters in the film were all dressed in contemporary costumes, the audience was troubled by the rupture between the present-day look of the story and the antiquity of the sites at the end.<sup>43</sup> The company explained their use of contemporary costumes by the intention to reorient the tale in present reality (chapter 2), but the documented sites tended to bring the audience back to a past world, destabilizing the diegetic world established right before. Although both the fictional story and the

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<sup>41</sup> I follow Robert Rosenstone’s distinction history film and historical film here, using “history film” to refer to a film that “evokes and makes meaningful the world of the past” and reserving the term “historical film” for any film that is considered historically important. See Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film, Film on History* (Harlow: Pearson, 2012), xi.

<sup>42</sup> The original and location of Liangzhu is still under debate. The tomb used in Tianyi’s version was in Yixing, one of the claimed hometowns of Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai. The film also employed shooting locations in Suzhou, Hangzhou and Ningbo. See *Shenbao* April 13, 1926, 11; April 29, 1926, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Xin Leng, “*Liangzhu Tongshi* Juqing zhi Shangque” [Issues in the Narrative of *Liangzhu*], *Guowen Zhoubao* 3, no.17 (1926): 35.

documentary footage aimed to demonstrate the relevance of this traditional tale in the present, the juxtaposition of the two were at odds with each other.

The incorporation of sites that were built to commemorate a character or an event immediately rendered the film a retrospective look upon that story, blocking the possibility of unfolding with the narrative as actual happening. To some extent, it was similar to the use of historical ruins. As Wu Hung argues, ruins in the traditional Chinese context did not mean preserved remnants of destroyed architecture, but mainly referred to empty land where something significant used to exist. It resides in the contrast between present-day nothingness and a past existence.<sup>44</sup> But could such “emptiness” contribute to the cinematic creation of a past world? In *Beauty Ruse*, the Ganlu Temple in Zhenjiang stood as a key venue where Zhou Yu and Sun Quan plotted to capture Liu Bei at the engagement banquet. However, by 1927, the temple had already been destroyed, and the scene was thus relocated to the West Temple in Suzhou.<sup>45</sup> Curiously, after completing all the shooting in Suzhou, director Lu Jie took a small group of actors to Zhenjiang to film a horseracing scene on the ruins (*yi zhi*) of the Ganlu Temple.<sup>46</sup>

No explanation was given for the decision, but it was certainly not out of a concern for the coherence or aesthetic quality of the film diegesis. Traveling an additional hundred miles to film the ruin of the temple could be motivated only by the historical meaning attributed to the site. In some sense, this could be traced to the Chinese literati tradition of “meditating on the past” (*huai gu*) that took the erasure of historical traces from a place as the object of lamentation, through which a historical sensibility would be aroused.<sup>47</sup> However, such introspective and

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<sup>44</sup> Wu Hung, *Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), chapter 1.

<sup>45</sup> The Ganlu temple is now rebuilt and promoted as an important site of the Three Kingdoms era. In fact, it is not featured in the historiography of Three Kingdoms, but appeared only in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*.

<sup>46</sup> “Suiwei Niantou zhi Dazhognhua Baihe Gongsi” [Great China-Lily Company at the Turn of the Year], *Shenbao* February 5, 1927, 23-24.

<sup>47</sup> For an elaborate discussion on the tradition of *huagu*, see Wu Hung, *Story of Ruins*, chapter 1.

largely personal aesthetic experience was not immediately compatible with how the cinematic medium worked. In the making of an ancient costume film, the camera records what is lying in front of it, not just as a present location but more importantly as a specific historical world in the diegesis. It foregrounds presence rather than absence. Of course the camera could cast a nostalgic gaze upon the landscape to invite contemplation on the dematerialized historical reality, but such gaze stresses the audience's alliance with the present and the intangibility of a past world. The agenda of storytelling is precisely to take the audience to that vanished past, not as a void to be filled but as a vividly inhabited world as it once was or could have been. An existing temple had to be used instead of the ruin, but unwilling to completely give up on the unrepresentable link between the story and its historical location, filmmakers nevertheless included it in the film to show the audience a "past life" of this empty land.

In fact, neither the *Liang Zhu* story nor the narrative around Ganlu Temple had solid historical grounding. The former was a folk tale with a supernatural ending, whereas the latter was largely a fictional plot circulated among storytellers and consolidated in the Ming dynasty novel. It was probably not a coincidence that around the same time as these films, progressive Chinese intellectuals started to systematically study popular tales and destabilize them by exposing layers of constructions throughout their long formation and circulation history. *Liang Zhu* was among them.<sup>48</sup> Although the Tianyi Company allied their adaptation of folklore with this academic trend, their aim was quite the opposite of the intellectuals'. Instead of deconstructing the familiar tales, filmmakers tend to stabilize them, and even to historicize them by utilizing documentary footage or locating them in historical sites/ruins.

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<sup>48</sup> Qian Nanyang published an article on Liang Shangbo and Zhuying Tai in 1926, following Gu Jiegang's study of *Lady Mengjiang*, which was also adapted into film by the Tianyi Company.

## Appropriating the Contemporary Landscape

Using historical locations in film shooting soon proved to be impractical as most places featured in those ancient stories no longer existed or had changed beyond recognition, not to mention that many stories from ancient folklore did not have a clearly defined location to start with. The choice of filming location had to be based on the look of a place in the present rather than its past. Throughout Chinese history there was very little, if any, clear intention to preserve historical architecture on a large scale. It has been argued that immortality in China was not seen as lodged in the physical entity of buildings, but in written words.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Chinese timber structures were relatively vulnerable to decay and destruction, and even when they did survive, most of them have been repeatedly renovated or even completely rebuilt, during which process current architectural and decorative elements were freely incorporated.<sup>50</sup> For this reason, even in the use of a real historical location, its architectural details do not necessarily correspond to the time period of the story. But precisely for the same reason, filmmakers acquired more freedom in appropriating existing places without being ostensibly anachronistic.

What kind of locations can be potentially used as an ancient setting in films? The basic requirement would be places that do not defy the audience's belief in an ancient world, and ideally they should contain recognizable historical details to anchor the audience in a specific period. Most locations used in the 1920s bore minimal historical specificity. As discussed earlier, in the realm of set design, the dichotomy between ancient and present was replaced by a division between China and the West, or Chinese tradition and Western modernity. A traditional-looking place could thus fit freely into a wide temporal spectrum from past to present. But when it came to the actual film production, the situation was never that simple.

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<sup>49</sup> Arthur F. Wright, "Symbolism and Function: Reflections on Changan and Other Great Cities," *Journal of Asian Studies* 24, no. 4 (August, 1965): 667-69.

<sup>50</sup> Wu Hung, *Story of Ruins*, 13.

The Commercial Press's first cooperation with Mei Lanfang to make opera films—or “ancient story films,” as they put it—provides a good example. One of the two films, *Goddess Scatters Flowers*, was a newly composed ancient costume opera (see chapter 2), and therefore was shot entirely on the Tianchan stage for documenting purposes. The other one, *Chunxiang Disturbs the Schoolroom*, was filmed mostly in the Commercial Press's new glass-enclosed studio with painted stage backdrops and real props. But Mei innovatively added an outdoor scene of Chunxiang playing in the garden, which was hinted at but not presented in the original opera performance. The shooting took place in a private garden on the bank of the Suzhou River in Shanghai. As Mei recollected, although the architecture style was Chinese, the presence of a large lawn in the garden betrayed Chinese tradition. A Western-style building stood right outside the garden, and people curiously stuck their heads out of the windows to watch the film production. The scene was therefore jokingly described as “a spectacular fusion of ancient, present, Chinese, and foreign essences.”<sup>51</sup>

It was not difficult to spot traditional-looking architecture even in the metropolitan city of Shanghai, but finding an authentic Chinese style without conspicuous Western influence was a real challenge. Moreover, location shooting was mostly used for outdoor scenes and commonly employed long or extreme long shots to establish the environment. The selected site was rarely viewed in isolation but often as a part of a larger landscape, which frequently included modern elements, from billboards to Western style buildings. Even when the film crews went beyond Shanghai for location shooting, electric poles, which provided the most fundamental energy supply for the film industry, ironically became filmmakers' biggest headache and had to be avoided through cautious composition and restricted camera movements (Fig. 3.4). The camera's indiscriminate capture of what lies in front of it largely confined the choices of locations.

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<sup>51</sup> Mei Lanfang, *Wo de Dianying Shenghuo* [My Film Life] (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 1962), 3-10.



Fig. 3.4. Suzhou in the 1920s: Traditional scenery spoiled by electric poles

### a) Cultural and Natural Landscapes

A shooting location should best be viewed as a landscape, a synthesized environment rather than an isolated architectural structure. Landscape, as Tim Ingold emphasized, “is constituted as an enduring record of—and testimony to—the lives and works of past generations who had dwelt within it, and by doing so, having left there something of themselves.”<sup>52</sup> Ingold’s “dwelling perspective” of landscape has two implications: first of all, a selected location had been shaped by generations of cultivation, which refers to both the work on the material form of the land and cultural representations that conditioned people’s perception of it. Secondly, when turned into an ancient setting in the film, the landscape represented the world the characters inhabited, showing, through technological manipulation, a possibility of how it could have been dwelt in in ancient time. Although Ingold would certainly reject the deduction of multiple layers

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<sup>52</sup> Tim Ingold, “Temporality of Landscape,” *World Archaeology* 25, no. 2, Conceptions of Time and Ancient Society (October, 1993): 152.

of temporalities in the formation of a landscape into an oversimplified dichotomy between traditional and modern, the integration between human activity and the land is crucial to the understanding of the significance of location shooting in the 1920s.

The idea of cultivated nature is best embodied in Chinese gardens, which are artistic reconfigurations of natural landscapes. A typical Chinese garden often contains artificial mountains piled up by rocks, a pool that represents a vast lake or ocean, a careful selection of various plants that could be appreciated throughout four seasons, and pavilions, halls, and buildings where people can rest. It symbolizes an infinite natural world in a limited cultural space. As early as the late nineteenth century, gardens served as a popular setting for portrait taking, especially ancient costume portraits (Fig. 3.5). In 1892, the Pleasant Appearance (Yue lai rong) photo studio in the Xu garden put up an advertisement in *Shenbao* in response to other studios' imitation of ancient costume portraits:

Our garden sceneries are imbued with the energy of nature. The seemingly unpurposeful arrangements of ancient-style objects and our female ancient costumes all contain deep meanings. The garden scenery and costume form a picture that reveals real spirit. Other studios that copy our ancient style get only a similarity in appearance. Only those who know how to appreciate paintings could understand the inexhaustible differences.<sup>53</sup>

This advertisement articulates the importance of garden landscape in conveying an authentic ancient atmosphere that more closely resembled ancient paintings than artificial interior sets used by competitors. Built in 1883, the Xu garden was merely nine years old when it first served as an ancient setting, but the cultural significance of a garden space and its natural look promised an inexplicable authenticity in the creation of an image of the past.

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<sup>53</sup> This advertisement started in *Shenbao* on January 26, 1892, and repeatedly appeared until 1894.



Fig. 3.5. Ancient Costume Portrait with Garden Scene. (*Kuaihuo Shijie* 2, 1914)

Besides such philosophical and aesthetic understanding of gardens' connection to nature and culture, filmmakers also used gardens for more straightforward narrative purposes. As a reoccurring literary trope, gardens frequently appeared in ancient stories as important sites where male and female protagonists met, and their wide availability in the Jiangnan region around Shanghai made them an obvious choice for location shooting. By enacting ancient narratives in contemporary garden landscapes, filmmakers brought forth a connection between past and present that was not immediately apparent in other forms of storytelling. Although the way people dwelt within gardens had been significantly changed from ancient times, garden landscapes and cultural appreciation of them persisted. Through the cinematic medium, it was possible to reveal a different temporality of a contemporary landscape, not as what it exactly was but what it could have been. A natural affinity between ancient characters and gardens as

represented in numerous traditional paintings and tales contributed to a realistic perception of this ancient world.

Temples were another frequently used shooting location in ancient costume films for pretty much the same reasons, and most temples in the Jiangnan region also contained a garden space. But temples even more clearly manifested a past-present continuum, because they were largely inhabited the same way as in ancient times. In some sense, a temple was the most convenient site for ancient costume films, as it was probably the only place where the inhabitants did not need to change into ancient costumes for filmmaking. Temples' reclusion from the mundane world allowed them somehow transcend the progress of time, but the narratives they were featured in often brought them back into connection with the everyday. Temples were indeed never separated from Chinese social and cultural life. Moreover, the physical architecture of temples and pagodas usually make up an important part of mountain sceneries in China, placing a clear cultural mark on a natural landscape.

Natural landscapes were indispensable in ancient costume films for both functional and aesthetic purposes. Although nature did not tend to bear immediately recognizable cultural or historical signifiers, natural landscapes were usually mediated through culture. Most natural sceneries used in ancient costume films were renowned cultural sites near Shanghai that had been represented in various literary and artistic works, most famously the West Lake. Even before turning into ancient settings, these places were already "half in the past."

#### **b) The West Lake and *The Legend of the Willow Pattern Plate***

The West Lake had been a cultural symbol of the Jiangnan region since the Song dynasty. Besides endless literary depictions, it was most famously associated with the tale of the White

Snake, which was known in almost every household in China. When the Tianyi Company first adapted the tale to the screen, they immediately seized the chance to unite the story with its setting.<sup>54</sup> The landscape of the West Lake not only embodied the Chinese aesthetics of an ideal combination of water and mountains, but also well synthesized gardens, temples, pagodas, and other historical sites (Fig. 3.6). It made a near perfect site for the shooting of ancient stories.



Fig. 3.6. West Lake in 1926

Chinese audiences' familiarity with the tales also helped to define the perception of the diegesis as an ancient world: this is the world where the White Snake dwelt, so it must belong to the past. For a newly composed story, it would require more effort, because no previous knowledge helped to orient the audience in the past. It was completely the responsibility of the *mise-en-scène* to create an imaginary ancient world. In these exceptional cases, carefully selected locations played a crucial role in placing the newly composed story in ancient China. One of the

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<sup>54</sup> "Mingsheng Beijing Biao" [List of Pictures and Locations], *Zhongguo Dianying Nianjian 1927*.

earliest ancient costume films, *The Legend of Willow Pattern Plate* (1926), makes use of the West Lake scenery to emplace this fabricated legend in Chinese tradition.<sup>55</sup>

Made by the British American Tobacco Corporation, *The Legend of the Willow Pattern Plate* tells a tragic story that largely resembles *Liang Zhu*: a beautiful girl, Jinzhi, married a humble man, Zhang, against her father's will, and the two eloped to a small island. Jinzhi's vicious fiancé killed Zhang in revenge, which resulted in Jinzhi's suicide. In the end, the two lovers were transformed into a pair of doves, living together forever. The narrative indeed sounded like a typical Chinese folkloric tale, but it was in fact fabricated to promote the sales of blue-and-white porcelain decorated with willow patterns—a typical Chinoiserie landscape inspired by Chinese pavilion landscape patterns from the eighteenth century (Fig.3.7). The story was utterly unfamiliar to Chinese people in the 1920s, but it had been circulated in Britain and other Western countries for about one hundred years and had been adapted into a film in 1914.<sup>56</sup> It was a “Chinese legend unknown to Chinese people.”



Fig. 3.7. Willow Pattern Plate



Fig. 3.8. The plate in *The Legend of the Willow Pattern Plate*

<sup>55</sup> My debt to Chris Berry and Zhang Hua for introducing me to this film. The film is accessible at the British Film Archive, but only the first six reels are available.

<sup>56</sup> The Edison Company made a film titled *The Story of the Willow Pattern Plate* in 1914.

In order to make it a convincing Chinese story for local audiences, director William Jansen starts the film by portraying the porcelain tradition in China. The opening sequence of the film depicts a busy working scene at a porcelain workshop and gradually focuses on an old man painting a plate. A little boy emerges from the background and asks his grandpa to tell him the legend behind the scenery. This request immediately turns the “newly painted” plate into a pictorial representation of a “once upon a time” story. It then cuts to a close-up shot of the plate, which was not the standard willow pattern, but similar enough to be recognized as such with key elements including a pavilion, a bridge, a boat, an island with houses, and of course the willow trees (Fig. 3.8). The image on the plate magically dissolves into a shot of the West Lake with similar composition and the same elements, still framed by the plate rim. The dissolve not only marks the transition from storytelling mode to the story world, from the present to the past, but also a transformation from the still pictorial representation to the animated cinematic representation of the story that unfolds in real space, both of which serve to affirm the validity of this invented legend.

Although the place remained anonymous throughout the film, the director included quite a few famous sites of the West Lake to make it readily recognizable, or at least recognized as a Chinese landscape. For those who could not bring external cultural references to spot “Moon Reflection Pond” (*san tan yin yue*) or “Mind Imprinting Pavilion” (*wo xin xiang yin ting*), the architectural style and piled miniature mountains manifested a distinctive Chinese flavor. The film was largely dismissed by Chinese audiences and was screened for only three days at the Carlton Theater. But compared to its poor reception in China, it was hugely successful in the UK with 263 screenings in England and Ireland alone.<sup>57</sup> Even the Queen was extremely pleased with

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<sup>57</sup> Zhang Hua, “*Liudie Yuan*, ‘Zhongguo’ Dianying de Kuaguo Jingyu” [*The Legend of the Willow Pattern Plate: International Reception of “Chinese” Cinema*], *Wenyi Yanjiu* 3 (2018): 95-105.

this Chinese photoplay.<sup>58</sup> For Chinese people, it was probably no more than an inferior imitation of their beloved *Liang Zhu* story, but British audiences were happy to see one of their favorite porcelain patterns and its legend being grounded in the landscape where it originated.

### ***Romance of the West Chamber***

Made by a British filmmaker, *Legend of the Willow Pattern Plate* might not be a typical example of Chinese ancient costume film, but it shared some distinctive traits in its use of locations with its Chinese counterparts, and well demonstrated the filmmaker's desire to place the story in a Chinese landscape. Another surviving film from this period, *Romance of the West Chamber* (Hou Yao, 1927), also took the West Lake as its major location. Unlike *Legend of the Willow Pattern Plate*, the story could be dated back to the Tang dynasty (618–907) *chuanqi* tale *Yingying Zhuan*, and has been adapted into numerous forms ever since.<sup>59</sup> In this sense, it is more representative of the genre from this period. Director Hou Yao resourcefully integrated a wide range of renowned sites all over Hangzhou into his ideal ancient world.

*Romance of the West Chamber* features the romantic encounter between Student Zhang Gong and Yingying, the daughter of a late prime minister, in the Pujiu Temple and their eventual happy marriage after overcoming a series of obstacles. The extant version was reedited and shortened for European release. The lengthy romantic courtship between the two protagonists after the bandit besiegement was entirely omitted and replaced by Zhang's heroic dream that should happen much later in the film, and the climax of the play—Zhang and Yingying's secret rendezvous at night eavesdropped upon by Maid Crimson (*Jia qi*)—was moved to the end to

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<sup>58</sup> “*Willow Pattern: The Queen Sees Chinese Film: Congratulations for British Producer*,” *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong, May 24, 1927, 8.

<sup>59</sup> The circulation of the story has been detailed in Kristine Harris, “*The Romance of the Western Chamber and the Classical Subject Film in 1920s Shanghai*,” in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*, ed. Zhang Yingjin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 51-53.

represent their marriage night. It is not clear who made the reediting, but the outcome of these changes was significant. It downplayed the romantic plot and foregrounded the martial arts scenes, turning the sentimental, lovesick scholar into a smart, resourceful, and quasi-heroic figure. In fact, such a tendency could also be discerned in the original version. A reviewer complained that treatment of the besiegement (*si jing*) felt unproportionally long,<sup>60</sup> and Zhang's dream, which in the play expressed his anxiety of losing Yingying, was developed into his heroic deeds of saving Yingying from the hand of the bandit. By bringing these peripheral plots to the center of the film, Hou earned a chance to showcase the massive number of extras and the spectacular horse fighting in the martial arts scenes and the amusing special effects in the dream sequence, all of which demonstrated the uniqueness of cinematic effects in contrast to the stage.

Although the current film has been significantly abbreviated, it preserved all the filming locations from the original version, each of which was reported in detail in newspapers. In some sense, they were valued almost equally to other spectacular visual effects, promising the potential audience a pleasant treat of beautiful Hangzhou scenery for their eyes “without exhausting their body from traveling”<sup>61</sup>—familiar rhetoric commonly used in landscape documentaries. But besides promoting the film as “a sort of travelogue which allowed the viewers to transcend geographic... distance,” as Kristine Harris stated,<sup>62</sup> newspaper reports also elaborated on the procedure of filming on location, and even detailed the number of cameras used and how they were positioned. The ultimate goal was not to truthfully record the landscapes as they were, but to transform them into the world of Yingying and student Zhang. It was the process of cinematic mediation that brought new experience to these famous sites. Cinematic

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<sup>60</sup> Chen Guang, “Zai Tan Shezhi *Xixiang Ji*” [A Second Discussion on the Making of *Romance of the West Chamber*], *Zhongguo Dianyng Zazhi* 1, no. 8 (1927): 12.

<sup>61</sup> “Minxin Gongsi Yaowen Liangze” [Two Pieces of Important News on the Minxin Company], *Shenbao*, May 26, 1927, 18.

<sup>62</sup> Harris, “*The Romance of the Western Chamber* and the Classical Subject Film,” 60.

images were not compromised substitutes of the actual sites, but familiar places abstracted from everyday experience and relocated in a narrativized context. Familiarity with shooting locations often increased rather than reduced people's enthusiasm for the film.<sup>63</sup>

The fictional space of the Pujiu Temple in the film consisted of at least five renowned sites, according to *Shenbao* reports: Lingyin Temple and Yuquan Temple in Hangzhou, Liuhe Pagoda by the Qiantang River, the Liu Garden at the West Lake, and the South Garden in Shanghai, supplemented by studio sets for some of the interior scenes. These sites were at least some miles away from each other, and were able to represent an integral space only through cinematic editing. This was not uncommon to Chinese films of this period, which were shot mostly with static cameras, and the spatial relations between sites depended almost completely on “stitching” in post-production, but such extensive use of segmented sites could be quite exceptional.

The film opens with consecutive shots introducing the main characters of the film. Scholar Zhang consults a lodge waiter about the most scenic site nearby. As the waiter points at somewhere beyond the frame, the film cuts to an iris shot of the Liuhe Pagoda, and then cuts back to Zhang, who is now getting ready to set off. The next scene shows Yingying and her maid Crimson walking across a stone bridge in a long shot (Liu Garden), and dissolves into a medium shot of them talking and smiling. The same pointing gesture generates a cut to a close-up of a fishpond (Yuquan Temple), followed by a set of intercuts between the two girls feeding the fish and the pond until they are finally united in an extreme long shot. We then see Scholar Zhang visiting a Buddhist Hall (Lingyin Temple), and Yingying and Crimson traversing a stone terrace with a Buddhist Pagoda in the background. This sequence sets up the parallel editing pattern

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<sup>63</sup> As Fan Yanqiao reported, whenever films with scenery from Suzhou were shown, local people would certainly rush to see them in cinema. See Fan Yanqiao, “Dianying zai Suzhou” Films in Suzhou, *Dianying Yuebao* 3, (1928): 1-3.

between Student Zhang and Yingying that converges at their encounter by the stone bridge where Yingying first appeared.

As the sequence comes full circle, the space of Pujiu Temple is also mapped out through segments that are smoothly stitched together by the characters' gazes, gestures, and movements. Under the guidance of Student Zhang and Yingying, the spectators are not just presented with a series of consecutive images of scenic landscape, but are moved through the diegetic space of the temple. The characters are filmed mostly in long or extreme long shots that orient them in the landscape, whereas close-ups are reserved for the pagoda, fishpond, and Buddhist statues. Unfolding at a relaxed pace, the leisurely narrative allows the spectator to focus on beautiful scenery and also to familiarize themselves with the temple space.

The extra effort put into integrating so many renowned sites was not simply for the purpose of creating a believable diegetic space. In fact, the shift between the temple in the mountains and the lake view of the garden is potentially disorienting if scrutinized rationally. But as the intertitle at the beginning of the sequence indicates to us, what the filmmaker aimed at was the construction of "the most scenic site," and according to Chinese tradition, water and mountain are two indispensable elements of an ideal landscape. In this sense, the Pujiu Temple is more than a specific place where the romance between Yingying and student Zhang unfolds, but a symbolic landscape that embodies a cultural idealism, while at the same time comprising components literally locatable in real life.

The mountain/water rupture in the film is naturalized by associating different landscapes with different moods in the narrative. The tranquil space of the garden and lake accommodates romance, whereas mountains are associated with masculine fights and battles. As the parallel between Student Zhang and Yingying at the beginning of the film merges into an intertwined

romantic narrative, a new parallel structure between burgeoning love and lurking danger of the bandits emerges. Although the temple is geographically located in the mountains, as manifested by the pagoda's position, and both the bandits and soldiers traverse a long distance through mountainous space, the romance magically transports the protagonists and the audience to the peaceful environment of the garden by the lake. As the tension with the bandits dominates the narrative after the temple is besieged, lake scenery disappears and does not return until the romantic plot reemerges. As the film swings between two distinctive narrative moods, the juncture between mountain and lake becomes less noticeable to the audience. It may be argued that various locations help to serve different narrative functions: water for romance and mountain for violence, but the opposite argument could also be made, that narratives were used to conceal the incompatibility of selected locations.

The intention to include more beautiful scenery resulted into the breaking down of spatial continuity. Sometimes even different shots in one given scene were taken at two different locations. The scene of student Zhang taking a walk in a garden and watching Yingying burning incense consists of three separate places. He first paces back and forth in an arched corridor, stepping on the stunning shadows casted by the moonlight. As he can no longer hold his love in, he pushes open one of the doors and walks out. We then see him watching the moon in the courtyard, but the windows in the background differ significantly from the ones in the corridor. The scene then cuts to Yingying and Crimson coming to the garden to burn incense to the moon. Attracted by the sound, Zhang walks to the fences to peep through, but the background of this shot reveals no continuity from before. Even within such a small space in the diegesis, three different places are incorporated, although it is possible that they were taken from the same garden. Spatial coherence is sacrificed for the exhibition of carefully framed individual images,

but the use of continuity editing helps to conceal the fissure and unite them through the movement of Zhang. Whether an audience sees continuity or rupture solely depends on viewers' focuses of attention.

However, narrative or action does not always solve the digression caused by the filmmaker's substantial investment in sites. The sequence of Bandit Sun and his gang leaving the cave for Pujiu Temple lasts for almost two minutes.<sup>64</sup> It consists of seven shots with five different compositions, two inside the cave and three at the entrance, all of which convey one simple fact: the bandits start to take action. With an overt straightforward narrative function and heavily repetitive movement, the sequence feels unnecessarily long. But as a *Shenbao* report revealed, the sequence was taken with special attention since it was filmed in the famous Purple Cloud Cave in Hangzhou. The interior of the cave was lit by electric lights, among which six cameras were placed, each capturing the cave from a different position.<sup>65</sup> The narrative plot was completely rendered secondary, and used as an opportunity to display the shape of the cave and the strange rocks at its entrance with various camera angles.

The lengthiness of the sequence also served the purpose of showing off the massive number of extras employed in the film. Ho Yao and Minxin's manager Li Minwei borrowed a troop of five thousand soldiers to perform the roles of bandits and official soldiers. By extending the length of each shot, Ho allowed the audience to feel the vast numbers of the extras involved in the filming process by sensing time passing by. Due to the immobility of the camera, the best way to show such a big number of people was to let them pass the camera individually, and the fatigue of watching such repetitive movements would be potentially "rewarded" by the

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<sup>64</sup> The sequence here refers to the second half of the entire scene shot in the cave. The first part introduced Sun and his followers.

<sup>65</sup> "Xixiangji Waijing yi Shejun" (Location Shooting for *Romance of the West Chamber* has been Finished), *Shenbao*, May 27, 1927, 19.

realization of the grand scale of film production. This also holds true with the scene of the bandits, as well as the soldiers, running through the mountains towards the Pujiu Temple. In order to include more people in the frame, most shots were taken from extreme long distance, which weakened the sense of urgency and presented the event with a rather detached view. As soldiers dressed in ancient costumes run across the beautiful landscape of the Yuelun Mountain, entering and exiting the frame one after another, it no longer matters whether they pose a threat to Yingying in the diegetic world; they form a spectacle in themselves.

Hou Yao did not simply invite the audience to see through the cinematic construction into an autonomous world of the past; he also drew their attention to the very surface of the construction while engaging the narrative. Harris has pointed out that the film is rich in moments of “cinema attraction” with “self-conscious references to the act of looking and moments of direct confrontation of the spectator.”<sup>66</sup> Besides these, landscapes, too, were used to address the audience’s attention beyond their narrative function, noting the beauty of cinema, and its ability to utilize and transform contemporary sites. A site can simultaneously be a documented present place and an ancient setting in the diegesis only when the audience recognizes the constructedness of cinema—constructedness not as the antithesis of credibility, but as a productive exchange between diegesis and reality.

### **Code: Beyond the Jiangnan Region**

Although the Jiangnan region preserved a good variety of culturally significant landscapes for filmmakers to use, it became inadequate when it came to stories set in the north, especially the northwest. As some reviewers pointed out, Jiangnan was incapable of representing

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<sup>66</sup> Krinstine Harris, “*The Romance of the Western Chamber* and the Classical Subject Film,” 51.

the whole of China.<sup>67</sup> The situation should not be ascribed to filmmakers' perfunctory attitudes or their obsession with Jiangnan scenery; it was caused by the poor travel conditions of the time and the outbreak of the war. The railway system was limited to the east part of China and it was being used largely to mobilize military troops under wartime conditions. The ancient costume film movement happened to overlap with the National Revolutionary Army's Northern Expedition,<sup>68</sup> which largely limited the mobility of film crews. Traveling was especially difficult for ancient costume film crews with additional volumes of costumes and props. Many film crews had to change their filming locations at last minute, and studios in Shanghai were exposed to the danger of aimless bullets and bombs.<sup>69</sup> Staying close to Shanghai for location shooting was not a choice but determined by historical conditions.

In early 1927, Tianyi Film Company and Star Film Company competed to film *Zhaojun Bidding Farewell over the Frontier*.<sup>70</sup> Star Company announced in January that they would use the real desert as their shooting location, with eight thousand extras and three thousand horses.<sup>71</sup> Twenty days later, Tianyi claimed that they were expecting to head to the north in a few days to film the desert and palace. However, neither of them realized their plan because of the

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<sup>67</sup> Zhou Jianfeng, "Shizhuangpian de Fuzhuang Tan" [Costumes in Contemporary Costume Films], *Zhongguo Dianying Zazhi* 1, no. 3 (1928): 13. Although the article mainly refers to the use of locations in contemporary costume films, the situation in ancient costume films was rather similar.

<sup>68</sup> The Northern Expedition aimed to put an end to the dominance of regional warlords since the overturning of the Qing dynasty, and unify China under the Nationalist government. By the end of 1926, all of Eastern China was affected, and traffic between regions around Shanghai was largely restricted.

<sup>69</sup> In preparation for the filming of *Beauty Ruse*, director Zhu Shouju and Shi Dongshan went to major sites in the story—Nanxu (Zhenjiang), Chaisang (Jiujiang), and Jingzhou—to search for remnants from the past as potential locations. But the journey of the film crew ended in Suzhou. For the same reason, Shanghai Shadowplay Company's *Spider Cave* also readjusted its shooting location from Hangzhou to Suzhou. The set of the Wu palace in *Beauty Ruse* was bombed during a fight between the Nationalists and the warlords, and Shanghai Shadowplay Company's set for *Imperial Concubine Yang* was partially destroyed, thanks to the protection of the glass roof. See "Qianglin Danyu Zhong zhi Dazhonghua Baihe Gongsì" [Great China-Lily Company Surviving the Battle], *Shenbao*, March 27, 1927, 18.

<sup>70</sup> The Star Company was entrusted by the Dacheng Film Company to shoot the film.

<sup>71</sup> "Mingxing Yingpian Gongsì Shezhi Guzhuang Yingpian" [Star Film Company's Scheduled Ancient Costume Films], *Shenbao*, January 28, 1927, 1.

“current political situation,” as the Star Company explained.<sup>72</sup> Guan Haifeng eventually adapted the story in November, but instead of using real locations, Guan’s version relied mostly on built sets.

Against such background, Minxin Company’s *Mulan Joins the Army* was truly an exception. Back in 1924, the company had already showed the story on the silver screen through Mei Lanfang’s ancient costume opera. Although director Hou Yao finished the script in October 1927, the project was shelved for the lack of proper shooting locations. During this period, the Tianyi Company quickly shot the film in Suzhou and Hangzhou, and released it on December 1. Instead of dropping the project, Hou got in touch with the Eleventh Army through personal connections, and decided to make an extended filmmaking journey with military assistance. It was strongly supported by the company founder Li Minwei, who had been an ardent follower of Sun Yat-sen—the father of the Chinese Nationalist Revolution—shooting newsreel footage of him in early years.

The film crew traveled by boat along the Yangtze River to Hankow, where they changed to a train to go north towards their first shooting location—Xiaogan in Hubei Province. After days of filming, they continued heading north to Henan, the alleged hometown of Mulan. From there the crew was split into two: Li Minwen took one group to the Juyong Pass to film against the backdrop of the Great Wall, and Hou Yao took the other to Zhumadian, and then turned back to Nanjing and Suzhou for additional scenes. The entire journey took over four months.<sup>73</sup> For the first time, the initial wish to incorporate the magnificent Great Wall and gorgeous Yellow River into history films was realized.

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<sup>72</sup> “Mingxing Shezhi Guzhuang Ju” [Star Film Company’s Ancient Costume Film], *Shenbao*, April 28, 1927, 18.

<sup>73</sup> Hou Yao, “Wanli Sheying Ji” (Filmmaking Across Ten Thousand Miles), *Dianying Yuebao* 2, (1928): 109.

However, even with such extensive travel the film crew still did not reach the real desert. Instead, they resourcefully turned a sand-covered riverbed into a desert scene (Fig. 3.9). The sand area extended for several miles, with dunes and odd-looking trees sparsely distributed on the riverbank, forming a special landscape that closely resembled a desert. With the presence of a camel caravan borrowed from the army and over a hundred specially tailored tents, a convincing desert scene was created. The filmmakers borrowed an entire legion, about thirteen hundred soldiers and horses, for filming and dressed an infantry battalion in ancient costumes. The rest were arranged in the background.

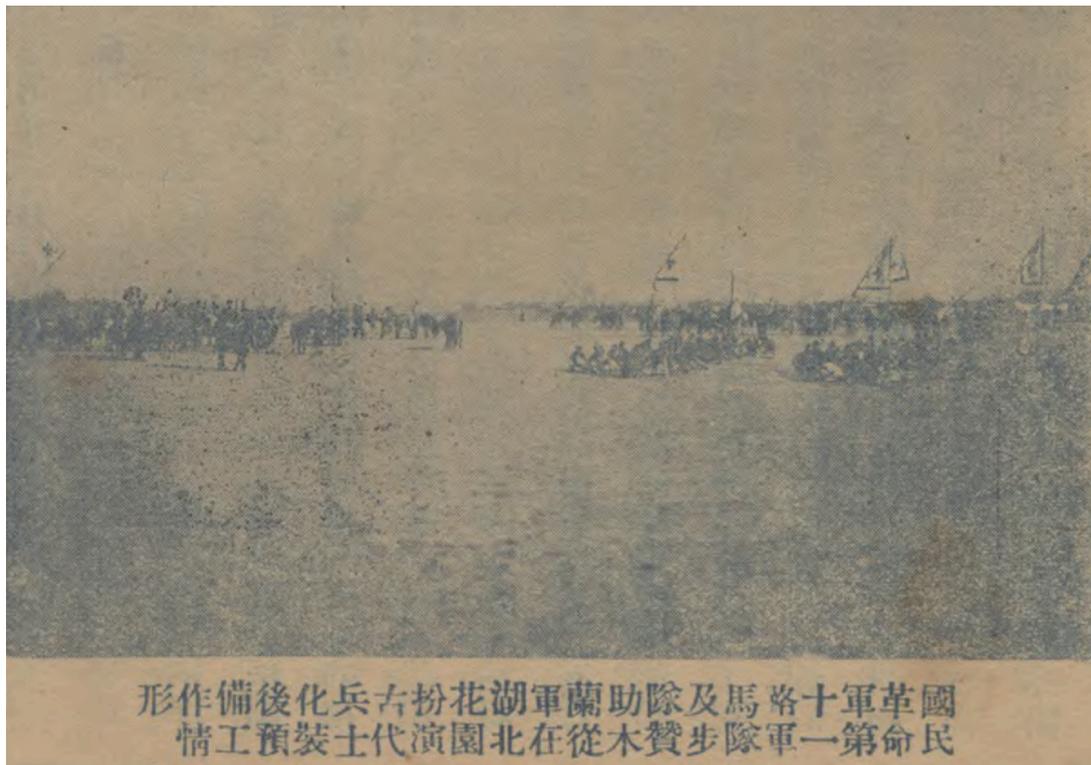


Fig. 3.9. The Desert Scene in *Mulan Joins the Army* (*Dianying Yuebao* 1, 1928)

It was probably not a coincidence that this military subject film was accomplished with the help of the army, which not only hosted the crew throughout the long journey, providing basic supplies and guaranteeing the smoothness of their transportation, but also participated in the filming process. In return, Hou and Li took documentary footage of the Eleventh Army's

military training, traveling and mobilizations for the Northern Expedition. Some of the footage was later edited into Li Minwei's documentary on the National Revolutionary Army.<sup>74</sup> The simultaneous production of a fictional film and documentary footage literally reified the interconnected relation between cinema's documenting and storytelling function.

Unfortunately, this epic film accomplished with great difficulties did not receive the reputation it deserved, partly because of the Tianyi Company's earlier release of the same story, partly because the audience's interests had been shifting towards martial arts–magic spirit films. Li pessimistically concluded that his company's later products could no longer compete with the new genre.<sup>75</sup> By the mid of 1928, martial arts–magic spirit films had overtaken ancient costume films and became the most popular genre at the time. With the victory of the Northern Expedition and the founding of the new Nationalist government, the film industry started to be regulated through censorship, and the martial arts–magic spirit genre was banned entirely in 1931. Although the newly established film bureau strongly encouraged the making of films with positive historical subject matter, the ancient world disappeared from the Chinese screen for almost six years. About a decade after Minxin Company's *Mulan*, the re-adaptation of the same story revived ancient costume films under the disenchanting conditions of the War of Resistance Against Japanese.

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<sup>74</sup> Feng Qun, *Li Minwei Pingzhuan* [Biography of Li Minwei] (Beijing: Wenhua Yishu Chubanshe, 2009), 122.

<sup>75</sup> Li Minwei, "Shibaizhe zhiyan—Zhongguo dianying yaolan shidai zhi baomu" Li Minwei, "Shibaizhe zhi Yan: Zhongguo Dianying Yaolan Shidai zhi Baomu" [Words of a loser – the Babysitter of Chinese Cinema's in its Infancy], *Film Biweekly* Hong Kong, vol. 375, (1993).

**PART II. Enchanting Wartime Audience:  
The Resurgence of the Ancient (1937- 1941)**

## Chapter 4. Charting the Genre Cycles: Ancient Costume Films and the War

From 1932 to 1937, ancient costume films almost disappeared from Chinese silver screen, and it was only the War of Resistance (also known as the Second Sino-Japanese War) that saw the revival of the genre. By the end of 1937, Japanese occupation of parts of Shanghai and its surrounding areas literally turned Shanghai's foreign concessions into an "Orphan Island," which lasted until December 1941 when Japan declared war against the Allies and took over the entire city. State owned film studios migrated westward to Wuhan and then Chongqing with the Nationalist Government, and the Shanghai film industry that survived in the Orphan Island was mostly in hands of commercial film companies under Western, and increasingly Japanese, supervision. Ancient costume films quickly regained popularity in Orphan Island Shanghai, and reached their peak in 1940 as 54 out of 67 Chinese films released this year featured ancient subject matters.<sup>1</sup>

The "blank period" of ancient costume films coincided with the "golden era" of early Chinese cinema when filmmakers increasingly engaged contemporary social problems and issues in their productions. For this reason, ancient costume films are largely overlooked in the studies of early Chinese cinema, and are generally associated with times of turmoil. Moreover, the fact that no ancient costume films were made in state-owned studios during the war further reinforced the stereotype of the genre as profit-driven or an involuntary compromise under the pressure of censorship. Although selected works of wartime ancient costume films were recognized as progressive and patriotic in their effort to use the past as an allusion of the present, such differentiation only perpetuates the dichotomy between social awareness and entertainment. Recent Chinese film scholars have reconsidered the division between leftist films and "soft"

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<sup>1</sup> Ai Yi, *Shanghai Tan Dianying Dawang Zhang Shankun* [Zhang Shankun, the King of Shanghai Cinema] (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2007), 105.

films from the 1930s, but little effort has been made to challenge the binary understanding of wartime ancient costume films.

What caused the dramatic decline of ancient costume films in the early 1930s? Was it really the War that brought the genre back to public attention? How was this second wave of ancient costume films different from its precursor in the 1920s, not only in terms of content but also formally and stylistically? These are the questions that will be addressed in the second part of this dissertation. In this chapter, I will reexamine the development of ancient costume films throughout the so-called “blank period” and the Orphan Island era (1937-1942). Drawing upon a wide range of new materials and especially through a comparative study of theatrical representations of the past, I argue that instead of causing the resurgence of ancient costume films, the advent of the War in fact delayed the revival of the genre. The intricate reasons behind its fall and rise complicate our understanding of filmmakers’ relationship to censorship and the function of ancient costume films. The desire to engage the past and the urge to use it as a reflection of the present are in constant tension with each other. The next two chapters will analyze the dynamism between an immersive experience and cinematic reflection by focusing on the two new features of ancient costume films of the Orphan Island: total reliance on studio sets and the development of sound cinema.

### ***The Legend of Hong and Yang and the Resurgence of the Genre***

On the Chinese New Year’s Eve of 1935, people in Shanghai found a new way to celebrate this traditional festival. One of the most prestigious movie theaters, The Grand Cinema, unprecedentedly hosted a midnight screening. More surprisingly, this “best theater of the Far East” that had been reserved only for first run Western films was now showing a domestic

production, *The Legend of Hong and Yang* (*Hong Yang Haoxia Zhuan*, dir. Yang Xiaozhong),<sup>2</sup> featuring the leaders of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1851-1864), Hong Xiuquan, Yang Xiuqing and others. Besides its unique premiere, *Hong Yang* was also the only prominent ancient costume film made and released in Shanghai during the “blank period.” As an intriguing exception in its time, *Hong Yang* impels us to ask what motivated the production of this film in the first place, and why its success did not attract immediate imitations. These questions will disclose a hitherto imperceptible strand of Chinese cinema of the golden era.

### **a) The Decline of Ancient Costume Films**

With the establishment of the Nanjing Nationalist government in 1927, the film industry was soon taken under official control. The new censorship regulation implemented by the government was fatal to ancient costume films and the martial arts–magic spirit genre. With the official ban on *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* in 1931, film companies cautiously stayed away from “superstitious elements” and representations that potentially “destabilize social orders.”<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that ancient costume films, especially historical films, were not on the blacklist. In fact, the censorship committee encouraged the representations of meaningful historical stories.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, it was not representations of the past but destabilizing martial forces that bothered the newly established government. If during the Northern Expedition, martial arts films were potentially related to a revolutionary enthusiasm of smashing old orders and

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<sup>2</sup> The Chinese title of the film literally translates as “the legend of the red lamb.” Red lamb refers to the year of rebellion in Chinese history, and the surnames of two leaders of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom happen to be the homonym of red lamb. Therefore, the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom was also informally referred to as the red lamb.

<sup>3</sup> The Film Censorship Regulation was published on November 3, 1930, and executed in 1931. Recently banned films were given a grace period for theatrical screenings until the end of 1931.

<sup>4</sup> “Guochan Dianying Ying Guli qi Zhizao zhi Biaozhun” [Criteria for Domestic Films that Should be Encouraged] in *Zhongyang Dianying Shiye Gaikuang* [Overview of the Central Film Industry] (December 1, 1932): 18, collected in *Shanghai Wenxian Huibian* [Compilation of Shanghai Documents], *Wenhua Juan 5* (Tianjin: Tianjin Guji Chubanshe, 2013), 02945.

rejuvenating the nation, or “neo heroism” as Weihong Bao forcefully argues,<sup>5</sup> for the new government, they became increasingly associated with rebellious and anarchist energies that posed a threat to social stability. The ambiguous boundaries between ancient costume films and martial arts films, as discussed in chapter one, held filmmakers back from the production of ancient subject matters.

A more important factor was the increasingly critical situation of the 1930s that anchored filmmakers’ attention in the present. The Japanese army invaded Northeastern China in September 1931 and attacked Shanghai the following January. They soon “legitimized” its occupation of Manchuria through the establishment of the Manchukuo puppet government and actively promoted the independence of Northern China, which eventually led to the outbreak of a total war in July 1937. Chinese cinema of this period revealed growing concerns for contemporary issues whereas the ancient seemed to lose its appeal to filmmakers. But if we move our attention to popular stages in the 1930s, we will find a completely different picture. Even in the most cosmopolitan Chinese city, Shanghai, ancient subject matters still dominated the stage, featuring trick sets, martial arts, and magical effects, just like the 1920s. Traditional operas, reformed operas and civilized plays continued to provide people familiar and novel sensorial experiences of the past. These programs both attested to and sustained grassroots interests in the ancient.

Without necessarily endorsing the idea of a more progressive status of cinema, there was admittedly a growing divergence in subject matters between the popular stage and the screen compared to the 1920s. Chinese films were still heavily in debt to stage performance, especially in terms of acting style and the incorporation of singing with the advent of sound in cinema. But

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<sup>5</sup> Bao, *Fiery Cinema*, 58-63.

direct adaptation of operatic stories was rare.<sup>6</sup> Even when opera sequences were included in films, as in *Songstress Red Peony* (*Geny Hong Mudan*, dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1931) and *Two Stars in the Milky Way* (*Yinhan Shuangxing*, dir. Shi Dongshan, 1931), they were showcased as an attraction in a modern context, either through the agent of a songstress or framed in the “play within the play” (*xi zhong xi*) format, as Jean Ma observes.<sup>7</sup> Sound might also have pushed filmmakers to self-consciously avoid stage repertoires as screen characters started to talk and sing like those in theater. The gap would gradually diminish with the resurgence of ancient costume films, as well as the rise of spoken drama, and the wartime witnessed unprecedented overlaps between the stage and the screen. But in the year of 1934, *Legend of Hong and Yang* was a special effort to bridge the two media.

#### **b) *Legend of Hong and Yang* on Stage**

*Legend of Hong and Yang* attracted public attention first as a linked Peking opera play in August 1934. The form of linked play that alternates between stage and screen performances prevailed in Shanghai in 1926 and 1927 (chapter 2), but soon faded into oblivion mysteriously. In order to re-present this spectacle on stage, Gong Stage’s manager Zhang Shankun invited Wang Youyou, the pioneer of linked plays in the 1920s, to direct this production. Aiming at groundbreaking effects, they incorporated the latest sound technology with the help of Denton Film Company to present a live duet between the character on screen and that on stage, before the latter entered the “cinematic world.” With the characters penetrating the physical boundary

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<sup>6</sup> From 1930 to 1934, only one opera film *The Fourth Son Visits His Mother* (*Silang Tan Mu*, 1933) was made. The Xinhua Film Company made three short opera films in 1935.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Ma, *Sounding the Modern Woman: Songstress in Chinese Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 32-54.

between the two media visually and acoustically, Zhang successfully made his first step towards filmmaking.

Besides the attraction of the linked play, *Hong Yang* tended to have an exceptionally high production values in other audiovisual aspects. Zhang commissioned Li Jinhui to compose songs for the play, mixing modern music and dance with Peking opera singing and performance. The Star Company's chief art director Zhang Yuguang served as the stage designer, and created spectacles of storm over the ocean, burning of vast fields, and instant change of backdrops.<sup>8</sup> Even director Ying Yunwei participated in the production during the making of *The Plunder of Peach and Plum* (*Taoli Jie*, 1934). But what really made *Hong Yang* stand out from other stage plays was its revolutionary theme.

Representations of the Taiping had long been circulated in literature, theater and cinema since the early Republican era, but the evaluation of the Taiping regime changed dramatically from a ruthless rebellion that brought huge disasters to the nation to a celebrated revolutionary effort aiming at overthrowing the Manchu government. In November 1914, *The Plunder of Hong and Yang* (*Hong Yang Canjie*) produced by Zheng Zhengqiu's Xinmin New Drama Society severely criticized the Taiping. However, such attitudes soon became outdated. At the military parade for the founding of the Nanjing Nationalist Government in 1927, Chiang Kai-shek openly praised the Taiping and established it as an important chapter in modern China's revolutionary tradition that the Nationalist Government carried on.<sup>9</sup> Textbooks and popular novels immediately changed their tone in depicting Taiping.<sup>10</sup> Zheng Zhengqiu also planned to adapt Zhang Xunzi's

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<sup>8</sup> "Hong Yang Haoxia Zhuan: Yugao Wu" [*Legend of Hong and Yang: Preview No. 5*], *Shenbao*, August 3, 1934, 25.

<sup>9</sup> "Jiang Zongsiling zai Guomin Zhengfu Jiandu Nanjing Yuebing Dianli Xunhua" [President Jiang's Speech at the Military Parade for the Establishment of Capital Nanjing], *Shenbao*, May 22, 1927, 7. This is a second part of a serialized report on Jiang's speech.

<sup>10</sup> The film *Taiping Heavenly Kingdom* (dir. Xia Chifeng, 1928) featured one of the leaders of the Taiping, Shi Dakai, but the narrative was about a fictional love story between Shi and a Miao princess. Shanghai Funian Film

new novel *Legend of Hong and Yang* into a film in the early 1930s, probably to demonstrate his new understanding of this historical event. But the ban on martial arts-magic spirit films put an end to this project.<sup>11</sup> No matter how proudly the nationalist government promoted their revolutionary tradition, the page of revolution (*junzheng shiqi*) had been turned over. As their primary mission shifting to social and economic construction (*xunzheng shiqi*), destabilizing revolutionary forces became problematic.

Zhang Shankun's stage adaption of *Hong Yang* was a timely choice. On March 1, 1934, the last Qing emperor Puyi was crowned Emperor of Manchukuo under Japanese manipulation. The Taiping Army's anti-Manchu sentiment well spoke to Chinese people's anger towards the last Qing emperor, and undoubtedly the Japanese behind him. Although the Nationalist government repressed overt anti-Japanese expressions, the rhetoric of "national revolution" appealed to both the officials and the furious people. The advertisement of the play claimed its overarching purpose was to pay tribute to revolutionary martyrs and to uplift national spirit. It was the first time a popular stage play openly engaged history to allude to present political situations, a common strategy that was going to prevail with the approaching of the war.

However, underneath its revolutionary banner, *Legend* showed no essential difference from other entertaining plays that aimed at maximum sensorial pleasure. One reviewer wrote dismissively, "stage tricks, sensual dances, and fighting scenes typical of Shanghai style Peking opera ... the *Legend* is no more than a martial arts play combined with a touching narrative of national revolution."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the revolutionary significance of the play is hard to detect in the

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Company made a martial arts film *The Two Musketeers* (*Er Jianke*, 1929) about the Taiping. It was a typical martial arts film that focused on fighting scenes and special effects.

<sup>11</sup> Zhang Xunzi, "You Zhipian dao Wutai Shang" [From Paper to Stage], *Guangmang* 1, no.12 (1934): 7.

<sup>12</sup> "Hongyang Haoxia Zhuan Jiangshang Yinmu le" [*Legend of Hong and Yang* will Appear on Screen], *Huanghou* 20 (1934): 27.

detailed description of its content,<sup>13</sup> but was simply taken for granted as the nature of the subject matter. Historical aspects were completely overshadowed by emphasis on modern experiences of innovatively designed Peking opera costumes, new style popular songs amplified through loudspeakers, and recently renovated theater space cooled with air-conditioning.<sup>14</sup> Instead of pushing the audience to realize the necessity of revolution, the stage production drew them into a modern fantasy that conspicuously exhibited the commercial stage's galvanized energy for novelty.

### **c) The Martial Arts-Magic Spirit Genre and Relaxation of Censorship**

If prioritizing spectacles over content was a common trait of the popular stage, the magic spirit elements represented in the film segments of *Hong Yang* were more intriguing and problematic. Besides the magical interactions between the screen and the stage, the film parts also presented fantastic experiences of flying on clouds, swallowing a live person, and dancing in the palm of the hand,<sup>15</sup> which had been banned with the magic spirit genre. How did Zhang Shankun and Wang Youyou manage to incorporate them into a revolutionary play? Zhang claimed that even though the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's affinity with Christianity naturally lent itself to a fantastic portrayal, they restrained all the magical effects in a dream sequence to eliminate any superstitious implication.<sup>16</sup> Zhang's statement not only attributed magic spirit elements to the intrinsic religious foundation of the Taiping, but also stressed his anti-superstition position by rationalizing its supernatural aspects.

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<sup>13</sup> Shenbao serialized a seven-part advertisement of the play from July 17 to August 5, 1934.

<sup>14</sup> "Hongyang Haoxia Zhuan: yugao qi" [Legend of Hong and Yang: Preview no. 7], *Shenbao*, August 5, 1934, 18.

<sup>15</sup> "Hongyang Haoxia Zhuan: yugao wu," 25.

<sup>16</sup> "Hongyang Haoxia Zhuan jiangshang Yinmu le," 27.

Framing special effects in dreams and hallucinations was not a new tactic at all (chapter 1), and it was certainly not enough to fool the censors. A more substantial reason was the ambiguous status of these filmed sequences between theatre and cinema. Popular stages easily eluded the attention of the censors, and stage directors often enjoyed more freedom to push the envelope. Those fragmented, short sequences produced for a stage play would certainly not go through the same scrutinization as films intended for theatrical release. *Hong Yang* went on for another ten episodes, and immediately after that, Zhang Shankun turned the prototype of the martial arts–magic spirit genre *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* into a more ambitious serialized Peking Opera play. In addition to the popularity of the banned film, Charlie Chaplin’s private viewing at the Gong Stage was advertised as an authoritative stamp of approval for this sumptuous production.<sup>17</sup>

Zhang Shankun’s ventures to challenge the restrictions in cinema and bring them to the stage might seem audacious, but they were in fact in accordance with a less perceptible trend of Chinese cinema in 1934. As leftist films absorbed most of the energy of the censors, the ban on martial arts–magic spirit films had been relaxed. Zhang Shichuan, the film director of *Red Lotus Temple* got Chiang Kai-shek’s verbal promise to lift the ban on the film.<sup>18</sup> Although it was not re-released until 1938, the Star Company already started to reprint some of the episodes in 1934.<sup>19</sup> In November 1933, two previously banned magic spirit films that based on *The Arabian*

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<sup>17</sup> It was emphasized in the advertisement that Chaplin marveled at the play’s consistent change of fourteen backdrops. See “Damingxing Zhuo Bielin Telai Bentai Guanju” [Super Star Chaplin Came to Watch our Play], *Shenbao*, March 11, 1936, 20.

<sup>18</sup> According to Zhang Shichuan, he lobbied to Jiang to lift the ban on *Red Lotus Temple*. Jiang replied that it was not a problem as long as the film did not violate the principles of the Nationalist Party. He would find a time to watch the film and lift the ban. But he was soon overwhelmed by more important works. See “Honglian Si Jiejin yu Jiang Weiyuanzhang” [Lifting the Ban on *Red Lotus Temple* and Jiang Jieshi], *Diansheng Zhoukan*, 42 (1938): 826.

<sup>19</sup> Dan Feng, “Lun Shenguai Yingpian Fuhuo zhi Yuanyin” [Causes for the Revival of Magic-spirit Films], *Shenbao*, September 1, 1934, 29.

*Nights* were released on the same day.<sup>20</sup> These domestically produced fantasies set in foreign countries paved way for the rescreening of some native martial arts-magic spirit stories.<sup>21</sup> Although no new production of the genre was released, many critics had noticed a secret resurgence of magic spirit film production that aimed exclusively for the South Asian market.<sup>22</sup> These all seem to suggest that the repressed martial arts-magic spirit genre was lurking beneath the surface. Above that, the worsening national crisis brought forth new appreciations for martial spirit that had been suppressed with the ending of the Northern Expedition. Heroes and heroines were awaiting new representations and ideological framings to bring them back on screen. In this sense, the film *Hong Yang* is a pioneering work of the forthcoming wave of ancient costume films.

#### **d) The film Version of *The Legend of Hong and Yang***

The film version of *Legend of Hong and Yang* was the first production of Zhang Shankun's Xinhua Film Company, which would soon become the leading film company of the Orphan Island. Directed by the veteran martial arts filmmaker Yang Xiaozhong, it depicted a series of events that bring together the leaders of Taiping to rise up against the Manchu government. Opposite to Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai and Xing Zuwen's description of the film as a cheap and quick appropriation of stage performance and costumes,<sup>23</sup> surviving materials reveal that except for the same production crew and basic storyline, the film bore little similarity with

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<sup>20</sup> The two films are *Aladdin* (*Ai La Ting*, dir. Ye Yisheng) and *1001 Nights of the West* (*Xifang Yetan*, dir. Wang Tianbei). Ling He pointed out in his critic of *Western Nights* that the film was banned three years ago, and the advertisement of *Aladdin* also revealed that the film production started three years ago. See Ling He, "Ping *Xifang Yetan*" [Review of *1001 Nights of the West*], *Shenbao*, November 16, 1933, 25; *Shenbao*, November 15, 1933, 1.

<sup>21</sup> For example, *Seven Swords*, *Red Knight*, and *Jade Butterfly* were re-screened around this time.

<sup>22</sup> See Li Yi, "Mimi Shezhi Shenguai Pian Deng Wenti" [Secret Filming of Magic Spirit Films and Other Issues], *Shenbao*, August 20, 1934, 25; Hong Cha, "Wuxia Shenguai Fuhuo de Yiyi" [The Meaning of the Revival of Martial Arts-Magic Spirit Films], *Shenbao*, August 22, 1934, 23;

<sup>23</sup> Cheng, Li and Xing, *ZDFS*, 484.

its stage version. Revolution that artificially attached to the linked play for promotional purposes became the main theme of the film, attracting the attention of many prominent figures of the Nationalist Party. Sun Ke, the son of Sun Yat-sen, Wang Jiangwei, Yu Youren, and Huang Fu all congratulated the film production with their calligraphy writing, an extraordinary privilege that no film had enjoyed before (Fig. 4.1).

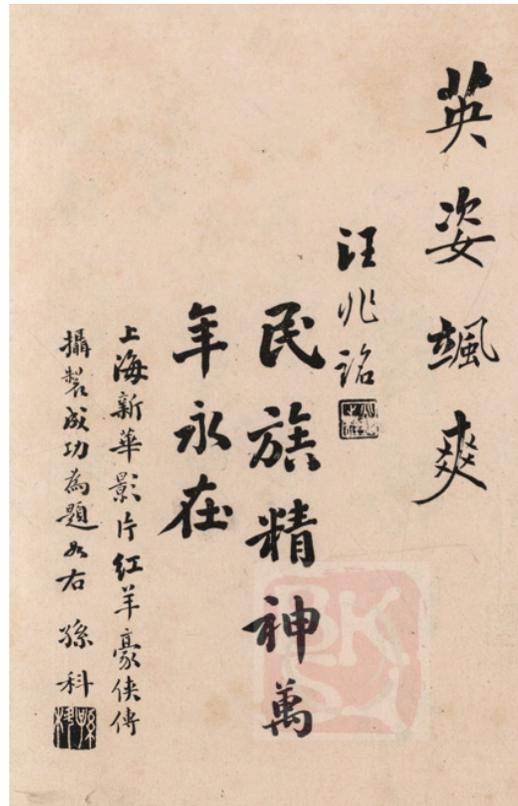


Fig. 4.1 Wang Jingwei and Sun Ke's Calligraphy for *The Legend of Hong and Yang* (*Hong Yang Haoxiashuan Tekan*, 1935)

The film opened with a brief palace scene of Qing officials kneeling and kowtowing to the emperor, which was likely to refer to Pu Yi's coronation in Manchukuo. The following sequence shows Hong Qiuxuan and Feng Yunshan witnessing Manchu officials torturing Han people.<sup>24</sup> Compared to the dancing scene of half-naked Miao women that opened the stage play of *Hong Yang*, this sequence turned a flirtatious exotic gaze on ethnic minorities into a

<sup>24</sup> "Ping *Hong Yang Haoxia Zhuan*" [Review of *Legend of Hong and Yang*], *Yingxi Nianjian* 1934, (1935): 374.

provocation of anger towards the Manchu ethnicity, and set a much more somber and serious tone for the film. Similarly, masculine stone miners working on a vast slope replaced the stage spectacle of flowers on a tree transforming into pretty young girls (Fig. 4.2). As its advertisement suggested, the film did not tell romantic love stories or display sensuous female bodies; what it showed was the bloody history of how revolutionists inscribed their names in Chinese historiography.<sup>25</sup>



Fig. 4.2 Stone Miners in *The Legend of Hong and Yang*  
*Hong Yang Haoxiazhuan Tekan*, 1935

It is worth mentioning that the screening of the film overlapped with Gong Stage's performance of the eighth episode of *Hong Yang*, which was packed with the attractions that were not available in the film version. The divergence between the stage play and the film should not be ascribed to the nature of the two media, but be understood as responses to different sets of expectations, or even the producers' own bifurcated desires to represent the past as a fantasy space filled by wild imaginations and astounding inventions, and to make use of the past to serve

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<sup>25</sup> *Shenbao*, February 13, 1935, 31; Wan Li, "Guan *Hong Yang Haoxiazhuan Hou*" [After Watching *The Legend of Hong and Yang*], *Shenbao*, February 13, 1935, 27.

present purposes. These two attitudes were not always neatly divided as in this particular case, but the tension between fantasy and realistic concerns underlined every historical play and film throughout the War.

The acoustic elements of this “first full-sound Chinese history film” were also designed to enhance a revolutionary atmosphere. Peking opera singings and dialogues were all eliminated from the film. Even songs composed by Li Jinhui were completely left out, so were the sensibilities of indulgence and decadence commonly associated with his music.<sup>26</sup> The two songs in the film served as affective tools that elicit sympathy for the character or invite the audience to feel aroused by the vibe of revolution. Early on in the film, a songstress sings *The Song of Falling Flowers* to tell her miserable experience of fleeing from homeland, a clear allusion to the Mukden Incident (1931) that caused millions of refugees to flee from Northeastern China, and the Taiping Army’s collective singing of *The Song of Jintian Uprising* brings the film to its narrative and emotional climax at the end.

Both the figure of the songstress and the form of collective singing were common tropes in leftist films in the 1930s. *Song of the Four Seasons* in *Street Angel* (*Malu Tianshi*, 1937) is the most famous example of using lyrical description and pictorial illustration to imply Japan’s invasion of Manchuria. Collective singings at the end of *Big Road* (*Da Lu*, 1934), *New Women* (*Xin Nüxing*, 1935), and *Children of the Storm* (*Fengyun Ernü*, 1935) conclude these films with an inspiring note. *Hong Yang* in fact preceded most of these canonical works. Although the scene of two thousand workers toiling in the mine was not punctuated with a forceful *Song of the Stone Miners*, as leftist critic and playwright Yu Ling wished,<sup>27</sup> it could still be seen as a clear

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<sup>26</sup> For detailed discussions of Li Jinhui’s music, see Andrew Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), chapter 3.

<sup>27</sup> Yu Ling (You Jing), “Ping Hongyang Haoxia Zhuan” [Review of *The Legend of Hong and Yang*], *Shenbao*, February 8, 1935, 29.

reference to the mining scene in Bu Wancang's *Glory of Motherhood* (Muxing zhi Guang, 1933), changing the setting from contemporary South Asia to Late Qing Guangxi. Without the involvement of any leftist figures, *Hong Yang* has never entered the historiography of Chinese leftist cinema. But its revolutionary theme was generally well received by both the Nationalist Government and progressive critics.<sup>28</sup>

Strictly speaking, *Hong Yang* falls ambiguously between the ancient and the modern. According to the division line of 1911, it depicts China's dynastic past, but the Taiping has generally been regarded as part of modern Chinese history, and the theme of nationalist revolution further connects it with the modern nation. Nevertheless, the film sets an example of engaging the present through a historical perspective. Revolution has been established as a sacred term in 1930s China, but its meanings varied according to different political interests and demands. Contextualizing revolution in a different historical period facilitates consensus on the more abstract concept of the revolutionary spirit despite the divergent understandings of its contemporary implication. Xinhua Film Company's second production *Peach Blossom Fan* (Taohua Shan, dir. Ouyang Yuqian, 1935) continued this strategy. The story was set during the Northern Expedition (1926-1928), presenting the Nationalist Party as the agent of revolution. Its scriptwriter and director Ouyang Yuqian also added another historical layer by interweaving the title play into the narrative, connecting the spirit of the late Ming with the contemporary situation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Intriguingly, the film was banned by Chen Jitang's Guangdong Government, which maintained relative independence from Nanjing, for "disgracing revolutionary martyrs. It was not clear how long the film was banned. See "*Hong Yang Haoxia Zhuan Guangzhou Mengnan Ji*" [The Misfortune of *The Legend of Hong and Yang* in Guangzhou], *Yingxi Nianjian* 1934, (1935):189.

<sup>29</sup> After the outbreak of the war, Ouyang more faithfully adapted the *Peach Blossom Fan* into a spoken drama, and the film *Li Xiangjun* was made in 1940.

If ancient costume film directors in the late 1920s saw their mission as to adapt the reservoir of well-cherished classical stories for the screen to promote of national culture, under the new political situation, the value of the past seemed to be increasingly judged by its relevance to the present. Pure indulgence in the spectacles of the ancient marked the commercial stage as the backwater of Chinese culture, whereas the film industry prioritized ideological functions under increasing government intervention and intellectual participation. The film *Hong Yang* set a new trend to project contemporary situations into the past, but it would take another three years for ancient costume films to re-enter the silver screen. What happened during these three years?

#### e) Pre-war Resurgence of Ancient Costume Films

From *Hong Yang* to the modern tale of *Peach Blossom Fan*, and then to Xinhua's third feature film *The Palace of Eternal Youth* (*Changsheng Dian*, dir. Shi Dongshan, 1936), which had very little connection with the classical play it referred to, Xinhua seemed to be drifting away from ancient costume films despite some unresolved longings implied in the film titles. Productions from other film companies in Shanghai also stayed with contemporary subject matters until the end of 1937. Based on the list of newly released films during this period, only two opera films told stories of the past, one was a Cantonese Opera Film from Hong Kong called *Daiyu Buries Flowers* (*Daiyu Zanghua*, dir. Jin Pengju, 1936) and the other is *Murder in the Oratory* (*Zhan Jingtang*, dir. Zhou Yihua, 1937), a Peking Opera film starring Zhou Xinfang.<sup>30</sup> But these only show us a small part of the whole picture.

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<sup>30</sup> The Xinhua Film Company also made three short Peking opera films with synchronized sound: *The Death of Zhou Yu* (*Zhou Yu Guitian*, 1935), *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang Bie Ji*, 1935) and *Lin Chong Flees at Night* (*Lin Chong Yebe*, 1936).

In 1935, the government-owned Central Film Studio (*zhongyang dianying sheyingchang*) invited the most eminent directors at the time, including Bu Wancang, Shi Dongshan, Fei Mu, Sun Yu and Cai Chusheng to discuss the production of history films and ask each of them to draft a budget. The high cost that the directors estimated compelled this well-founded studio to put off the project temporarily.<sup>31</sup> Before its relocation during the War, the studio only completed two feature films *Warriors* (*Zhanshi*, dir. Yu Zhongying 1936) and *Secret Telegraph Codes* (*Mi Dianma*, dir. Huang Tianzuo, 1937), both set during the Northern Expedition for the promotion of revolutionary spirit.

The Star Film Company also announced its plan to make *Yue Fei Sacrifices for the Nation* in 1936 as the company's first "National Defense Film."<sup>32</sup> In fact, earlier that year, the Wan brothers already made a short animation about Yue Fei's childhood as a "play within play" in *Parents and Children* (*Fumu Ziniu*, Dir. Hu Xinling, 1936), and it was widely praised as the first ancient costume animation in China (Fig. 4.3). In early 1937, the Star and Lianhua companies agreed to collaborate on the production of *Imperial Consort Yang* (*Yang Guifei*) while the Xinhua Company was advertising its plan of seven ancient costume films. Many film critics predicted a return of the genre based on film companies shooting schedules. None of these plans was realized before the outbreak of the war. Besides the huge production cost as mentioned before, the poor reputation of the genre from the previous wave, especially its later mutation into martial arts-magic spirit films, made filmmakers very cautious about their execution. The nationalist government's newly imposed censorship of film scripts also put many scheduled

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<sup>31</sup> The report indicates that Bu Wancang's budget was 200,000 yuan, followed by Shi Dongshan's 180,000 yuan. Other directors' budgets were around 100,000. "Zhongyang Sheyingchang you You Xin Jihua: Nizhi Lishi Guzhuangpian, Zaijian Weida Sheyingchang" [Another New Plan of the Central Film Studio: Plans on Making Ancient Costume History Films and Building a Grand Studio], *Diansheng Zhoukan* 4, no. 46 (1935): 1000.

<sup>32</sup> "Mingxing Gufen Youxian Gongsi: Gexin Xuanyan" [Manifesto from the Star Film Company], *Shenbao*, July 9, 1936, 1.

films on hold.<sup>33</sup> But in Hong Kong, the Tianyi Film Company branch's first Cantonese ancient costume film *Burning of the E'fang Palace* (*Huoshao E'fang Gong*, dir. Shao Zuiweng, 1935) had already set a new trend of adapting Cantonese operas into cinema.<sup>34</sup>



Fig. 4.3 The Wan Brother's Animation of Yue Fei in *Parents and Children* (*Beiyang Huabao*, 28, no.1356, 1936)

If ancient costume films in Hong Kong presented a continuation of the genre from the 1920s in their connection with traditional operas and folklore, the rise of historical plays in spoken drama provided a new model for filmmakers in Shanghai. Spoken drama, also addressed as “amateur drama,” was distinguished from the commercial stage in its emphasis on conveying meaning through pure dialogue. It was formed as a progressive alternative to the increasingly

<sup>33</sup> The Yihua Company also submitted their script of *Wang Baochuan* to the censorship bureau for a pre-production censorship. See “*Wang Baochuan Zhuizong Chu Bawang*” [*Wang Baochuan Following The Autocrat Chu*], *Dianying Zhoukan* 22, (1939): 727. According to Liu Siping's biography of Zhang Shichuan, Zhang planned to turn Hong Shen's three *Water Margin* stories: *Wu Song*, *Lu Zhishen*, and *Lin Chong* into films. But during the filming of *Wu Song*, the new censorship regulation came out, and while the company was waiting for permission to continue the production, the death of the tiger rented from a circus terminated the film. See Liu Siping, *Zhang Shichuan Congying Shi* [The Film Career of Zhang Shichuan] (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 2000), 134.

<sup>34</sup> “Guzhuang Pian Fuhuo zai Nanyang” [Ancient Costume Film's Revival in Southern China], *Jingbao*, December 21, 1935, 3; “Guzhuang Yueyupian Shengxing Nanyang” [The prevalence of Cantonese Ancient Costume Films in South Asia], *Fu Er Mo Si*, November 5, 1936, 2.

commercialized and “degenerated” civilized plays, and therefore closely associated with highbrow intellectual culture. Historical spoken drama started in 1936, and further boomed during the war. Unlike ancient costume films that were only produced in the Orphan Island and Hong Kong, these plays were written and performed in both Shanghai and Government controlled areas.

In 1936, Xia Yan published his first historical play *Sai Jinhua*, featuring a late Qing courtesan who saved millions of Chinese people through her affair with German General von Waldersee against the backdrop of the Boxer Uprising. The play was soon established as the first “National Defense Drama” by leftist intellectuals and put on stage in Shanghai in November. If it had not been banned in Nanjing, audiences would have had the chance to see “the queen of Chinese cinema” Hu Die impersonating the most famous courtesan of the late Qing.<sup>35</sup> Controversial as *Sai Jinhua* was, it brought playwrights’ attention to historical figures. Parallel to the busy preparations for ancient costume films in 1937, the writing of historical plays was also seen as the “most trendy thing” among intellectuals.<sup>36</sup> On the eve of the war, Song Zhidi’s *Empress Wu (Wu Zetian)* already started a second run in theatre, and Chen Baichen’s *Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (Taiping Tianguo)* was ready for public performance. All these subjects were made into films in the Orphan Island.

The revival of the genre was not simply the result of wartime conditions, but conceived during anticipation of the war. By clarifying this difference, I hope to indicate certain continuity before and during the War, and challenge the perception of ancient costume films as a

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<sup>35</sup> “Jinrongjie Youren Yuan Touzi Mingxing: Zhiding Hu Die Shezhi *Sai Jinhua* Yingpian” [Investment in the Star Company from the Financial World: Appointing Hu Die to Perform in *Sai Jinhua*], *Diansheng Zhoukan*, 5, no.49 (1936): 1304.

<sup>36</sup> According to the news, Tian Han was researching for a play on Shi Kefa; A’ Ying was writing *Imperial Consort Yang*; Yang Hansheng’s *The Death of Li Xiucheng* was now in progress; and Tang Na had finished *Chen Yuanyuan*. See “*Sai Jinhua* Gongyan Hou Lishiju Chengle zui Shimao de Dongxi” [History Play Became the New Trend after the Public Performance of *Sai Jinhua*], *Diansheng Zhoukan*, 6, no. 17 (1937): 781. Xiong Foxi pulished another play on *Sai Jinhua*, and Xia Yan also wrote a second historical play about Qiu Jin.

completely isolated phenomenon formed in the self-contained environment of the Orphan Island. Both the government and the intellectuals started to use representations of the past to serve their present purposes in preparation for the War. It is also important to understand the rise and fall of ancient costume films not just as a result of censorship and changing political situations, but also as a natural genre cycle of the film industry. Popular interest in narratives of the past had never faded. The return of ancient characters and stories to the screen was almost inevitable after a long absence. The audience desires novelty, and filmmakers also have the incentives to take new challenges to revitalize their creativity.

### **Remapping a Commercial Cinema**

The War of Resistance presents us with an interesting paradox: the increasing ambiguity and complexity of social and political reality is always represented and discussed in a hugely reductive dichotomy between patriotism and treason. Filmmakers and actors who fled to the hinterland with the government were considered as patriotic in contrast to those who ran the commercial cinema in the Orphan Island. Films portrayed self-sacrificing heroes and heroines were praised for their contemporary relevance whereas beauty-scholar romance was condemned as escapist entertainment. In the cinematic diegesis, heroes and villains were always unmistakable, and the confrontation between patriotic protagonists and vicious traitors was featured in almost all “progressive” ancient costume films. Such dichotomies were omnipresent in wartime press and largely determined later analysis of Orphan Island cinema. In order to fully understand the repressed ambiguity and complexity in the context and text of ancient costume films, I will examine this new wave of the genre with a specific focus on the conditions and effects of the war. By freeing the “contemporary relevance of the past” from the grip of

patriotism, it will become clear that the cinematic representations of the past reflect and matter to the present in many different ways. What remains unsaid reveals more than the clear messages delivered through the films.

### **a) From Magic Spirit to Patriotic Spirit**

The commercial nature of Orphan Island cinema determined that competition for audience and markets was the primary concern of film companies during this period. The absence of top-down government intervention facilitated a tight feedback loop between the audience and film productions. Censorship in the foreign concessions focused exclusively on criticisms of contemporary situations, leaving film companies ample freedom to experiment with potentially profitable genres. The prevalence of ancient costume films in the Orphan Island was often compared to the chaotic martial arts-magic spirit phase a decade ago for its lack of social consciousness and brazen pursuit of profit.<sup>37</sup> But opposite to the late 1920s, the magic spirit genre was completely overshadowed by ancient costume films in this period.

Five million residents in the Orphan Island formed a solid market base for the film industry to quickly recover from the Battle of Shanghai. For most of 1938, Zhang Shankun's Xinhua Film Company was the only provider of new Chinese films, and its productions ranged widely from comedy, horror, and family drama to ancient costume film, martial arts-magic spirit film and Peking opera film. Most of these films were hastily made to meet the huge demand and test the market. The only exception among them was a blockbuster ancient costume film *Sable Cicada* (*Diao Chan*, dir. Bu Wancang), which became a successful example that the company endeavored to replicate in its future production. The film not only set a new box-office record, but was also selected to screen at the Metropolitan Opera House as part of a China Night relief

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<sup>37</sup> Tang Na, "Fakan Ci" [Editor's Note for the Inauguration Issue], *Kangzhan Dianying*, 1, 1938.

fundraiser on November 18, 1938, and then entered a theatrical run at the Belmont Theater in New York.<sup>38</sup>

*Sable Cicada* was not the first ancient costume film released in the Orphan Island. On the Chinese New Year's Eve in February 1938, a popular tale about Jin Yunu was shown on the silver screen under the title *A Beggar Lady* (*Qigai Qianjin*, dir. Bu Wancang, 1938).<sup>39</sup> But the production of *Sable* started much earlier in 1937 as the beginning of Xinhua's ambitious ancient costume film series before the war. Besides extravagant sets of the imperial palace, ancient mansions and gardens, it was claimed that the company hired 165 tailors and commissioned twenty blacksmith workshops to make costumes and weapons for 3000 soldiers. Fifty-eight costumes were tailored for the leading female role alone, and the number of decorative objects in the background reached 478.<sup>40</sup> But the war broke out before the completion of the last two scenes. Principle actors Jin Shan, Gu Eryi, and Wei Heling all fled to Wuhan with the government and refused to return to the shameful Orphan Island that was under the control of Western powers. As a compromise, the remainder of the film had to be finished in Hong Kong in a rented studio.<sup>41</sup>

The film was initially scheduled to premiere at the Lyric Theater (*Jincheng*), one of the two major cinemas for first run domestic films. However, the news of the lifted ban on *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* gave it an unexpected twist. After careful evaluation, the owner of

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<sup>38</sup> "Diao Chan zai Meiguo Gongying" [Screening of *Sable Cicada* in the U.S.], *Xinhua Huabao* 4, no.1 (1939): 8. For more detailed discussion on the film's circulation in the U.S., see Weihong Bao and Nathaniel Brennan, "Cinema, Propaganda, and Networks of Experiences," in *American and Chinese Language Cinema: Examining Cultural Flows*, ed. Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 118-135.

<sup>39</sup> The film is based on the story *Jin Yunu Beats the Heartless Lover* (Jin Yunu bangda boqinglang), collected in Feng Menglong's *Enlightening Stories to Instruct the World* (*Yushi Mingyan*). It is known as *Jin Yunu* or *Hongluan Xi* in many different opera forms.

<sup>40</sup> "Diaochan Tongji" (Statistics of *Sable Cicada*) in *Dongfang Ribao*, April 28, 1938, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Mao Fu, "Lü Bu Dong Zhuo You Han Fei Gang" [Lü Bu and Dong Zhuo Flew from Hankou to Hong Kong] in *Xi* 3 (1938): 13-4. Poshek Fu claimed that Zhang Shankun had to rent a studio in Hong Kong because on the remnant studio in the Orphan Island was not spacious enough to host the extravagant sets of the film. This could also be a reasonable explanation, but I have not found such an account in contemporary reports. See Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 6.

Lyric, the Liu brothers, decided to schedule this canonical magic spirit film before *Sable*. Zhang Shankun therefore retrieved the right to premiere *Sable* out of anger, and negotiated a new contract with the Grand Theater.<sup>42</sup> This incident marked the first contest between magic spirit film and ancient costume film, and more importantly, it sowed the seed of antagonism between Xinhua and the future Guohua Company run by the Liu brothers and the director of *Red Lotus*, Zhang Shichuan.

The actual screening of *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* was postponed to July due to complicated reasons,<sup>43</sup> and the Xinhua Company immediately responded with a martial arts film *Heroic Sons and Daughters* (*Ernü Yingxiong Zhuan*, dir. Yue Feng). Three films with magic spirit elements followed in the rest of the year, a ghost film *Poetic Souls under Cold Moon* (*Lengyue Shihun*, dir. Maxu Weibang), a romantic comedy *Seeking Beauty in Hell* (*Diyu Tanyan Ji*, dir. Yang Xiaozhong), and a Peking opera film *Four Pan Jinlians* (*Si Pan Jinlian*, dir. Wu Yonggang). It did seem that magic spirit films was making a return to the screen. Intriguingly, in January 1939, *Shenbao* published a statement, claiming that film companies in Shanghai had agreed to abandon the magic spirit genre in their future production, and this was verified by the general outputs in the following years. The magic spirit novel *Journey to the West*, which was a hugely popular source of adaptation in the 1920s, was only picked upon twice. The *Iron Fan* episode was made into an animation film, and Yihua's *New Spider Cave* was not released until the fall of the Orphan Island, almost three years after its completion.<sup>44</sup> The typical magic spirit tale *White Snake* (dir. Yang Xiaozhong, 1939) was secularized into a family drama that

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<sup>42</sup> “Zhang Shankun Yinu Shouhui *Diao Chan* Shouyingquan” [Out of Anger, Zhang Shankun Retrieved the Right to Premiere *Sable* Cicada], *Diansheng* 7, no. 5 (1938): 85.

<sup>43</sup> It was said that a Westerner in the censorship committee was offended by the improper depiction of monks in the film. Zhang Shichuan therefore invited the head of Buddhist Association in Shanghai and other famous monks to watch the film and asked them to write an official letter to the censorship committee. See Liu Siping, *Zhang Shichuan Congying Ji*, 177-8.

<sup>44</sup> Zi Hong, “*Xin Pansidong*: Wangyang Sannian Tunhuo Chulong” [New Spider's Cave: Release after Three Year Waiting], *Pinbao*, April 18, 1942, 4.

condemned the suppression of women in traditional patriarchal society, and other film titles that seemed to suggest magic spirit elements, such as *Female Ghost*, *Female Zombie*, and *Magic of Invisibility* were in fact rationalizations of superstitious beliefs.

Such conscious self-censorship manifested film companies' efforts to maintain a subordinate relation with the national government by voluntarily extending prewar regulations to wartime Shanghai that was no longer under direct control of the government. The Orphan Island was not an orphan that lost all connections with the nation. Filmmakers in Shanghai were aware that their productions were closely attended to and constantly commented on by officials and intellectuals in Chongqing and elsewhere. Although they were not able to make, and probably not interested in, propagandist films like those made in Chongqing, pledging royalty to the nation was a prerequisite not only for their film productions, but also for their personal survival due to rampant assassinations and espionage activities by Nationalist agents.<sup>45</sup> By scapegoating magic spirit films as traitorous, Shanghai film companies formed a consensus with the Chongqing government and gained room for other entertainment films. When leftist filmmakers in Chongqing fiercely criticized massive production of ancient costume films in the Orphan Island, Chongqing officials defended Shanghai cinema with three criteria: the best ones were patriotic tales that inspire the national spirit; trivial personal and family issues remained harmless to the society and were therefore acceptable; and finally poisoning stories promoting adultery, crime and superstitious magic spirit were absolutely unforgivable. Based on such categorization, the officials concluded, Shanghai film industry had not sold its soul yet.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For more information on wartime terrorism in Shanghai, see: Frederic Wakeman, *The Shanghai Badlands: Wartime Terrorism and Urban Crime, 1937-1941* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 27-127.

<sup>46</sup> "Shanghai Dianyingjie Xianqi Minjian Gushi Chao" [The Mania of Folklore Film in Shanghai Film Industry], *Dianying Zhoukan*, 89, (1940): 2.

The scarcity of magic spirit films in wartime was not just the result of self-censorship. The audience also showed little enthusiasm for magical tricks achieved by special effects. Zhang Shichuan's *Little Female Knight* (Xiao Xiannv, 1939) attracted limited attention, and the failure of Yihua's remake of *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (dir. Wu Wenchao, 1941) held the company back from making sequels as it originally planned. Special effects from ten years ago lost their enchanting power and appeared banal and artificial. A reviewer of the new *Red Lotus* scorned that flying in the air was no more than backward moving clouds and the burning scene was just like smoke coming out of an incense burner.<sup>47</sup> Flying knights-errant defeating enemies with supreme martial arts and magic tricks seemed to be too easy a solution for people enduring difficult conditions of the war. In face of national crisis, magic spirit was exorcised by patriotic spirit on screen, and historical heroes and heroines often enjoyed the highest esteem among all.

## **b) Patriotic Heroes and Traitorous Villains**

The Chinese New Year of 1939 witnessed the first round of competition among the three major film companies of the Orphan Island, each released an ancient costume film for the new year celebration: Xinhua's *Mulan Joins the Army*<sup>48</sup> (dir. Bu Wancang), Yihua's *The Autocrat of Chu* (*Chu Bawang*, dir. Wang Cilong) and Guohua's *Lady Mengjiang* (*Mengjiang Nv*, dir. Wu Cun). *Mulan* was the biggest winner of its time, and is also a canonical tale in Chinese film history because of its patriotic implications, whereas the other two are often simply mentioned by their titles. A major problem in existing scholarship on wartime ancient costume films is the assumption of film content based on title. Since most of the films were based on well-known

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<sup>47</sup> A'Qiao, "Banbu *Huoshao Honglian Si Cuimian*" [Half *Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* Putting Audience into Sleep], *Zhongguo Shangbao*, January 19, 1941, 4.

<sup>48</sup> The film was released under Huacheng Film Company, which was a subsidiary of Zhang Shankun's Xinhua Company. In order to circumvent the contract with the Lyric Theater for the right to premiere Xinhua's productions, Zhang Shankun established two other companies, Huacheng and Huaxin in 1938.

stories, and most of these works no longer exist. Film scholars often take the source of adaption for granted in their judgment of these films. This mistake was also common among people during the war, who did not have the chance or interest to watch these films, especially filmmakers and intellectuals in Chongqing. By carefully comparing these three films, I will demonstrate the complexity of wartime cinematic adaptations and complicate the dichotomy between “patriotic films” and “entertainment films.”

Although the tale of Mulan had been adapted for the screen three times in the 1920s, including Mei Lanfang’s Peking Opera film, this version stands out for its huge popularity and progressive patriotic meanings. In this sense, it is similar to *Sable Cicada*, which was a third-time adaptation of Diao Chan’s story and the first time that reviewers unanimously extracted the key theme of “sacrificing oneself for the nation” from the convoluted narrative.<sup>49</sup> But unlike the seductress Diao Chan, whose behaviors need to be justified by the lofty purpose of saving the nation, the female warrior Mulan was by default a symbol of nationalism. The scriptwriter Ouyang Yuqian centered the story on the conflict between Mulan and a military counselor who is corrupted by Tartar spies, and supplemented it with a romantic subplot that runs throughout the film. He also made the already cross-dressed Mulan to dress up as a Tartar woman to collect military information from the enemy’s camp. Comic relief, romance and disguised identity nicely enhanced the sensorial pleasure of the film, and largely contributed to its popularity among the audience. Indeed, taken out of the context of the war, it could totally pass as an entertainment film.

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<sup>49</sup> *Sable Cicada* is the name of one of the Four Ancient Chinese Beauties who assists her master to get rid of the tyrannical minister Dong Zhuo in the hope of saving the Eastern Han Dynasty (A.D. 25 – 220). After making a wedding arrangement with Dong’s adoptive son, General Lv Bu, she becomes Dong’s concubine, driving a wedge between the two, and finally provokes Lv to kill his father out of jealousy. Also known as *Interlocked Ruse* (*Lianhuan Ji*) or *Phoenix Pavilion* (*Fengyi Ting*), this story is a famous episode from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and widely circulated in various representational forms. It was adapted into film twice in the 1920s, first by a Japanese filmmaker in 1925, and then by Gu Wuwei two years later.

Guohua's *Lady Mengjiang* was "Golden Throat" Zhou Xuan's first ancient costume film. It was based on a renowned folk tale about a love tragedy caused by the Qin emperor's conscription of male laborers for the construction of the Great Wall. The original tale could easily fall into the category of "trivial personal affairs" as classified by the government official, but the filmmaker was clearly not satisfied with such an implication and reset the story against the conflicts between the Chu and Qin states. Like in *Mulan*, a traitor of Chu was added as the villain of the film. The protagonist Mengjiang does not just mourn her husband's death with tears but revenges him by killing the traitor before committing suicide. To further illustrate its contemporary relevance, director Wu Cun added a detail of Mengjiang bowing to soldiers at the city gate as a reference to the newly imposed rule in Japanese occupied cities.<sup>50</sup> This new image of Mengjiang was well received by its contemporary audience, although its popularity was not comparable to *Mulan*.

In comparison, Wang Cilong's unconventional depiction of Xiang Yu was a failure, despite its huge production cost. Wang wrote the script four years earlier, combing official historiography with popular tales of Xiang Yu. By depicting Xiang Yu as a merciless warlord and Liu Bang as a righteous leader, he hoped to convey an antiwar message that those who did not value people's lives were doomed to fail.<sup>51</sup> But such a theme became inappropriate during the War of Resistance and was difficult for the audience to grasp. People who tried to discover contemporary relevance in the film found the depiction of a civil war between Chu and Han unsatisfactory.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Xiang Yu as a beloved tragic hero had been ingrained in people's perception of this historical figure through literature and opera plays. The film's inclusion of the

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<sup>50</sup> Xi Tong, "Lishi Yingpian Sanzhong Guanhougan" [Thoughts after Watching Three Historical Films] in *Shenbao*, March, 8, 1939, 16.

<sup>51</sup> Wang Cilong, "Xianwen Jiju" [Some Unimportant Words], *Yihua Huabao*, 1 (1939): 7.

<sup>52</sup> Li Jie, "*Chu Bawang* Guanhou Gan" [After Watching *The Autocrat of Chu*], *Meiri Zibao Chunji Zengkan*, 4, (1939): 2.

famous plot of *Farewell My Concubine*, which typically aroused sympathy towards Xiang Yu, further confused audiences' emotional identification. Many ascribed the disorienting effect of the film to the bad performance of the Xiang Yu actor, who rendered a warrior into an alcoholic bandit.<sup>53</sup> The anti-heroic image of Xiang Yu lacked any patriotic justification, and contradicted the people's demand for heroes during the war. While *Mulan* defeated the invaders and *Mengjiang* got rid of the traitor, a tyrannical Xiang Yu that destabilized the dichotomy between hero and villain seemed to be out of place.

In wartime cinema, little moral ambiguity was allowed in the confrontation between patriotic hero/heroine and enemy/traitor, which constituted the key lesson from stories of the past. This theme could be easily teased out from or attached to traditional tales, as in *Mulan* and *Mengjiang*, and many others to come. The paradox between hiding meaning behind allusions and the quest for absolute clarity made it necessary for filmmakers to simplify the messages they wanted to convey. The core issue was often reduced to the dichotomy of love your country or betray your country. It also reflected the anxiety of filmmakers remaining in Shanghai, who were always suspected of being traitors. Not every film could gain a patriotic label, but even the most entertaining film did not lack references to national crisis. The division between the so-called "progressive films" and "escapist entertainment" was not always as self-evident as it seemed to be. The easily graspable messages and monotonous teaching were not the reason behind the prevalence of ancient costume films, nor were they the only reflections that the past could offer. Lots remained unsaid and unsayable, and can only be elucidated through close analysis of film texts, as we will see in the next two chapters.

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<sup>53</sup> "Wang Yuanlong de Chu Bawang" [Wang Yuanlong's *The Autocrat of Chu*], *Xibao*, March, 7, 1939, 3; Jiangdong Fulao, "Chu Bawang Pingyi" [Comments on *The Autocrat of Chu*], *Xianshi Bao*, 47 (1939): 5.

### c) The Appeal of the Past

Cinematic depictions of the past were often based on popular stories that frequently appeared in contemporary *pingtan* performances, local operas and civilized plays. Also known as folklore films, they constituted the major part of ancient costume films. Historical spoken dramas and new scripts by famous playwrights were also important sources for the genre. Often featuring patriotic heroes, this group of films was generally better regarded, as exemplified by Ouyang Yuqian's *Mulan*. However, the fact that many of these plays were also inspired by traditional tales made it rather tricky to distinguish them from folklore films. Sometimes the same historical character was featured in both a film and a spoken drama, which had little to do with each other, as in the cases of *Chen Yuanyuan* and *Dong Xiaowan*. Occasionally, the filmmaker would make his film into a stage play, such as Wu Yonggang's *Lin Chong*. Orphan Island cinema was therefore in strange synchronicity with both popular stages and spoken drama theaters. Such intensive cross-media circulation of tales from the past created an encompassing environment of traditional culture in the foreign concessions, which used to be the cosmopolitan center of Shanghai. Although Hollywood cinema still took a prominent market share, when the sphere of popular culture is taken as a whole, the return of tradition becomes an unmistakable phenomenon, as scholars have already argued.<sup>54</sup>

The War of Resistance greatly changed the demographics of Shanghai's foreign concessions. The population of Orphan Island increased from 1.5 million to about 4 million, and even reached 5.5 million at its peak.<sup>55</sup> Many of the refugees were from the nearby Jiangnan regions that were deeply entrenched in traditional culture. According to filmmakers' accounts,

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<sup>54</sup> Hung Chang-Tai, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Edward Gunn, *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peking 1937-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

<sup>55</sup> *Shenbao*, March 28, 1940, 7.

these people's "conservative" taste limited their interests to *tanci* stories and local operas. In order to make them enjoy the modern medium of cinema, it was necessary to make use of those old stories while instilling new meanings to gradually "enlighten" them.<sup>56</sup> Residents of the Orphan Island and Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, who also preferred traditional subject matters, were the targeted audience of wartime Shanghai cinema. Although films that "suit the air of the hinterland" got occasionally picked to show in government-controlled southwestern China,<sup>57</sup> it was not until the hugely controversial collaboration with a Japanese distribution company, Zhonghua Film Company, in July 1939 that Shanghai cinema expanded to Japanese-occupied areas, which were also "conservative" in taste.

Like filmmakers, intellectual playwrights also explained their choice of historical subject was a compromised solution, not for concerns of the market but due to censorship. As a matter of fact, they only turned to the past after the Nationalist Government tightened its censorship in order to appease the "friendly neighbor" Japan. Not being able to shout out anti-Japanese slogans as they wished, they had to go back to history to seek proper metaphors for the contemporary situation. Indulgence in the past, even in artistic creation, was deemed problematic. The value of the past could only be redeemed through its relevance to the present. This is cogently expressed in Hong Shen's critique of S. I. Hsiung's English translation of a Peking Opera play *Lady Precious Stream* (*Wang Baochuan*, 1934), which tells the story of a virtuous woman waiting for her husband's return in a cave-house for eighteen years.

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<sup>56</sup> "Chongqing Yulunqie yu Dangju Duiyu Shanghai Dianyingye Jingshe Minjian Gushi zhi Taidu" [Chongqing's Attitudes towards the Folklore Film Competition in the Shanghai Film Industry], *Dianying Shenghuo*, 13 (1940): 2.

<sup>57</sup> "Shanghai Dianyingjie Xianqi Minjian Gushi Chao," *Dianying Zhoukan*, 89 (1940): 2.

Hsiung's play received rave reviews in London, running for 733 performances in the first season, and soon crossed the Atlantic to Broadway.<sup>58</sup> Its popularity was further boosted by the Chinese Exhibition, which put on display over 3000 Chinese artworks and about 900 items from the Imperial Palace collection. Following the opening of the exhibition in November 1935, the play was compared to "a priceless jade carving from Celestial China," and "a painting on silk," "a lacquered treasure jack-in-the-box of Chinese charm and Chinese humor."<sup>59</sup> Not only did British critics appreciate the play as a classical artwork, Hsiung himself also stressed his work as "a typical play exactly as produced on a Chinese stage," and "every inch a Chinese play except the language."<sup>60</sup>

Responding to the huge success of *Precious Stream* and the exhibition, Hong wrote:

"Precious Chinese artworks from Beiping (Beijing) have been transported to London. If three million visitors passionately praise these works, but not even three thousand of them pay any attention to Chinese people's determination to defeat invaders at the present moment, what's the use of these treasures to China? In this sense, *Romance of the West Chamber*, or even antiques better than *Romance of the West Chamber*, is not worth introducing to foreigners, not to mention *Lady Precious Stream* that disgraces the nation."<sup>61</sup>

For Hong Shen, neither the play nor the exhibition was worth celebrating since they only demonstrated foreigners' interests in China's past while remaining blind and apathetic to its present crisis. In face of the war, the desire to introduce Chinese culture to foreigners, which motivated the production of ancient costume films in the 1920s, lost its appeal to progressive figures, like Hong Shen. Promotion of treasures from the past appeared futile when the nation

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<sup>58</sup> For detailed discussion of S. I. Hsiung's play, see Ashley Thorpe, *Performing China on the London Stage: Chinese Opera and Global Power, 1759-2008* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), chapter 6.

<sup>59</sup> Diana Yeh, *Reimagining "(British)-Chineseness": The Politics and Poetics of Art and Migration in Diaspora Space* (Ph.D Diss, University of East London, 2009), 152.

<sup>60</sup> S. I. Hsiung, "Introduction" to *Lady Precious Stream: An Old Chinese Play Done into English According to Its Traditional Style*, 1934. Reprinted in *Wang Baochuan* (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 2006), 11-2.

<sup>61</sup> Hong Shen, "Ruguo de *Wang Baochuan*" [Treacherous *Lady Precious Stream*], *Guangming*, 1, no. 3 (1936). Hong accused the play of treachery for a plot where the protagonist pleads for foreign military reinforcement. He was also dissatisfied by Hsiung's preservation of the old tradition of property men, which had been abandoned in Mei Lanfang's foreign performances.

was struggling to defend itself. But Hong's own participation in directing Xia Yan's historical play *Sai Jinhua* in the following year demonstrated his belief that past could still be somehow useful when serving the purpose of the present.<sup>62</sup> Such understanding of the relation between past and present was common among playwrights and filmmakers in their effort to imbue new meaning in old stories, but it largely concealed the complexity of the issue behind the seemingly self-evident criterion of "contemporary relevance" or "purpose of the present."

It is rather clear from our discussion so far that in the rhetoric of filmmakers and playwrights, contemporary relevance refers exclusively to national crisis, which brings forth the quest for patriotic spirit. Such understanding is also well reflected in Yihua Company's adaptation of *Lady Precious Stream* (dir. Wu Cun, 1940), which turned the female protagonist into a patriot who encouraged her husband to "defend the nation" during foreign invasion. Her husband's marriage with a foreign princess was also replaced by eighteen years of prison life. The ambiguous elements that potentially "disgraced" the nation and concerned Hong Shen were cleansed out, presenting the audience with a loyal couple sacrificing the best time of their life for the nation. For this reason, the film received rather positive reviews in its contemporary time.

Interestingly, when Yihua was preparing for *Precious Stream*, Xinhua and Guohua were also working on traditional tales of virtuous women enduring tremendous sufferings before finally uniting with their husband. While *Precious Stream* and her husband's suffering acquired national significance, the stories of Zhao Wuniang in *The Tale of the Pipa* (*Pipa Ji*, dir. Yang Xiaozhong) and Li Sanniang in *The Tale of the White Rabbit* (dir. Zhang Shichuan) remained trivial, personal, and lacking in "contemporary relevance."<sup>63</sup> However, waiting while suffering

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<sup>62</sup> The stage play of *Sai Jinhua* was directed by a committee consisting of eight playwrights and directors, including Ouyang Yuqian, Yu Ling, Shi Dongshan, Hong Shen, Sun Shiyi, Ling He, Situ Huimin, and Ying Yunwei.

<sup>63</sup> *The Tale of Pipa* and *The Tale of White Rabbit* were both typical *chuanqi* plays from the Ming dynasty. Guohua's adaptation of *The Tale of White Rabbit* was titled *Li Sanniang*.

was a common situation for people enduring the war. In this sense, although without direct evocation of the nation, Wuniang and Sanniang's personal misfortune resonated with the audience, and the happy ending of these stories enchanted them with a hint of hope. The appearance of a large number of similar adaptations in the following year attested to the popularity of these "trivial" tales. Instead of depicting personal sufferings as heroic sacrifice for the nation, these traditional tales allowed the audience to engage sufferings as an emotional experience they could share. They responded to people's personal needs and desires, which were precisely "selfish concerns" disregarded by national heroes.

The overarching concerns for the nation largely prohibited the possibility of connecting the past and present on a more personal and emotional level. "Contemporary relevance," which was deemed as the highest principle for ancient costume films and historical plays, was treated less as a matter of past reflecting present, but more concerned with prioritizing the national over the personal. However, once we go beyond direct address of national crisis, past's relevance to the present will be hugely diversified, and prevalence of the historical genre becomes more natural than just a tactical solution to censorship. Herbert Lindenberger observed that historical plays in Europe were mostly written in moments of heightened national consciousness.<sup>64</sup> Sue Harper also noticed a growing number of historical films and costume dramas in Britain around the Second World War.<sup>65</sup> The quest for shared cultural tradition and sense of belonging during the war may be universal. Unlike the self-conscious and affective patriotic sentiments, the latent emotional tie with tradition was not directly expressed, but it largely underpinned the appeal of ancient subject matters, not just to audience with "conservative" tastes, but also to filmmakers

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<sup>64</sup> Herbert Lindenberger, *Historical Drama: The Relation of Literature and Reality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 7.

<sup>65</sup> Sue Harper, *Picturing The Past: The Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 9-10.

and playwrights. As a matter of fact, the War of Resistance was not just to defend the integrity of national territory but also the continuity of national culture and history.

Besides common metaphors of national heroes and traitors that were shared among the audience, each individual looked for contemporary relevance in relation to their own experience. The world of the past represented on screen was occupied by a plethora of characters. Tales of martial heroes alternated with beauty-scholar romance. Virtuous wives and courtesans were counterbalanced with rebellious women sacrificing for true love, often transformed from licentious figures like Pan Jinlian, Pan Qiaoyun and Yan Xijiao. Cross-dressing and disguised identity were popular themes featured in *Meng Lijun*, *Three Smiles*, *Lost Golden Fan* and many stories. Compared to the uniformity of ideological implication in historical spoken dramas in the period, the diversity of folklore films defies simple generalization or classification. They remind us that complexity, or chaos as many see it, was the underlying condition of the Shanghai film industry, and the social-political situation of the Orphan Island.

#### **d) Battles over Folklore**

Wartime Shanghai cinema, as Poshek Fu nicely puts it, “constantly negotiated the conflicting demands of economic survival and nationalist interests, and of the various political constrictions imposed by the war and the incessant business drive to expand and dominate.”<sup>66</sup> National consciousness and social responsibility are never absent from films of this time, but they do not provide the most productive perspective to understand this group of works or the industry as a whole. For film companies crammed in the Orphan Island, the business war was more pertinent than remote battlefields that were completely out of their control. Filmmakers had to make a living amongst huge wartime inflation, just like other residents of the Orphan Island.

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<sup>66</sup> Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong*, 2.

More attention, if not justification, is needed to understand ancient costume films and the competition around them as the outcome of a commercial industry conditioned by the war.

Folklore became the focus of the battles not just for their popularity, but also for their long circulation history that helped film companies circumvent adaptation rights. In the competition for *Liang Zhu* between the Guohua Company and director Chen Kengran, Chen dismissed Guohua's earlier announcement of the production by claiming that anyone had the right to adapt a well-known story from the past. Ironically, neither of them got the chance to make *Liang Zhu*. A latecomer, the Lianmei Company, first finished the film, excusing itself with Chen's own rhetoric.<sup>67</sup> The belief that folklore was a shared cultural property led to fierce competition for such adaptations and the tension soon culminated in a so-called "folklore mania" in the mid 1940s.

The folklore mania was notorious for the mass production of entertainment ancient costume films, most of which were cheaply made within 7 to 10 days. It was said that in order to save time, film companies sometimes used illustrated storybooks as their film scripts, or simply started shooting with a brief synopsis.<sup>68</sup> Simultaneous screenings of two films with the same title repeatedly occurred despite the Film Union's mediation efforts. Guohua Company's *Three Smiles (San Xiao)*, *Jade Hairpin (Biyu Zan)* and *Meng Lijun* all encountered their "twin production" during their first theatrical run. Zhang Shankun mobilized all the resources of the Xinhua Company to complete 9 folklore films within 45 days, many of which were already on other companies' production lists.<sup>69</sup> Such a phenomenon soon drew wide attention in and beyond

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<sup>67</sup> "Wei Zhengpai Minjian Gushipian, Lianmei Gongsi de Neimu" [Competition for Folklore Films: Insiders' View on the Lianmei Company], *Dianying Zhoukan* 67 (1940): 35.

<sup>68</sup> "Lanpai Minjian Dianying, Yi Lianhuan Tushu wei Fanben" [Overproduction of Folklore Films: Illustrated Storybook as Film Script], *Dianying* 93 (1940): 18.

<sup>69</sup> "Wei Zhengshe Minjian Gushi Yingpian: Xinhua yu Guohua Naocheng Jiangju" [Competition for Folklore Films: Xinhua and Guohua Came to a Deadlock], *Diansheng Zhoukan* 9, no.19 (1940): 377.

the Orphan Island, eliciting discussions and debates from Chongqing officials, filmmakers, famous critics and also ordinary audiences. The focus was mainly on the value of folklores and whether it was possible to “fill the old bottles with new wine.” But even the defenders of folklore films admitted that these were just temporary solutions to cope with the vicious environment of “here and now” (*ci shi ci di*). Direct representations and criticisms of social reality were strictly forbidden, especially for theatrical release in Japanese-occupied areas. On the practical level, the price of film negatives had been increased seven-fold since the war has started, and the cost of materials for set constructions also skyrocketed. Concentrating on productions of ancient costume films reduced the budget by recycling costumes and sets.<sup>70</sup>

Film critics and historians often blamed the commercial nature of Orphan Island cinema that drove each company to maximize their profit at any cost, and the absence of effective regulation resulted in total disorder. Business profit was undoubtedly a fundamental force behind this phenomenon, but the effect of the war far exceeded censorship of anti-Japanese expressions and the lack of government control. To a large extent, the so-called “mania for folklore films” was an exhibitionist “business battles” that derived from the mentality of the war. In the competition for the most popular stories, production information became increasingly confidential. In order to know what others were doing, companies bought business secrets through “silver spies.” One journalist compared the spy team of the Chinese film industry to the “Fifth Column” in Germany, claiming that any one in the company, from film directors to actors to set builders, could be a spy for other companies.<sup>71</sup> The author also gave a detailed account of how espionage activities had led to three pairs of “twin productions,” and possibly were leading

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<sup>70</sup> “Zhonglian Yingye Gongsi Jinyao Qishi” [Important Announcement from Zhonglian Film Company], *Qingqing Dianying* 5, no. 25 (1940): 12.

<sup>71</sup> Nai Ke, “Deguo You Diwu Zongdui, Zhongguo Dianyingjie yiyou Diwu Zongdui” [Germany has the Fifth Column, Chinese Film Industry also has the Fifth Column], *Dianying Ribao*, September 1, 1940, 4.

to a fourth case of *Liang Hongyu*, as Guohua and Yihua had already started a battle for it. Following this serialized report, another article in *Film Life (Dianying Shenghuo)* also drew a parallel between the spy networks in film companies and military intelligence, describing how companies hired agents, organized special meetings to analyze the reliability of the information they got, and even created false clues to mislead the spies.<sup>72</sup>

Whether or not the “silver spies” actually existed as these authors described, it was true that film productions in the period often proceeded in secrecy, to the extent that actors might not know what film they were stepping into until they arrived at the studio.<sup>73</sup> During the Lianmei Company’s production of *Lost Golden Fan (Luo Jinshan)*, dir. Wen Yimin, (1940), actors were informed that they were going to shoot *The Cowboy and Fairy*, and so did it say on the clapperboard.<sup>74</sup> It was often the case that the entire film crew would be locked in the studio until the completion of the work. During Guohua and Yihua’s fierce competition for an earlier release of *Three Smiles*, Zhang Shichuan finished the film in seven days at the price of missing his mother’s last words on her deathbed. But Yue Feng from the Yihua Company still won the “battle” by half a day.<sup>75</sup> While Guohua slowed down its production of *Meng Lijun* for quality concerns, the Chunming Company’s sudden release of the same title shocked Guohua, as well as the public.<sup>76</sup> Most popular stories were claimed by more than one company, and news and reports often served as smokescreens to deceive business rivals and the public. Almost the entire film industry in Shanghai was involved in “production battles,” “advertisement battles,” and

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<sup>72</sup> “Jing She Minjian Gushi Dianying Sheng Zhong, Ge Yingpian Gongsì Yinse Jiandie Da Huoyue” [Competition for Folklore Films: Active Silver Spies in Film Companies], *Dianying Shengguo* 16 (1940): 2.

<sup>73</sup> “Qiangpai Minjian Dianying Youyi Quwen” [An Anecdote in the Competition for Folklore Films], *Dianying Zhoukan* 93 (1940): 4.

<sup>74</sup> “Xinyi Gongsì Mishe *Luo Jinshan*, *Yuanlai Jishi Lianmei Gongsì de Huashen*” [The Xinyi Company’s Secret Filming of *The Lost Golden Fan*: Xinyi is the Pseudonym of Lianmei], *Qingqing Dianying*, 5, no. 34, 1940, 6.

<sup>75</sup> This was recollected by Zhang Shichuan’s wife He Xiujun, cited in Ai Yi, *Shanghai Tan Dianying Dawang Zhang Shankun*. Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 2007, 107.

<sup>76</sup> In order to release the film before Guohua, Chunming divided *Meng Lijun* into two parts, and released the first part on July 23. But the second part was never finished. Guohua’s version premiered on August 1.

“exhibition battles.” Often it only became clear which company had made what at the last minute.

It is probably not too surprising that such chaotic situation in fact boosted ticket sales. The twin productions often ended with good box-office revenues for both companies, and the majority of folklore adaptations made money in spite of their poor quality. This is not to imply a conspiracy behind the curtain, but film companies were certainly not unaware of the promotional effects of these battles. As the War of Resistance came to a stalemate in 1940, the business war between film companies seized people’s attention with intriguing espionage plots and exciting competitions. Even the “conservative” refugees who did not know much about the film industry could find a sense of involvement since their cherished stories become the objects of these fights. This business war was free of the brutality and desperation of the real war, and enchanted the residents of the Orphan Island with dramatic and somehow hilarious rivalry that could be even more entertaining than the actual films produced.<sup>77</sup> To some extent, it was collectively staged by the film industry to attract audiences who still harbored their habitual interest in traditional *pingtan* and opera performances.

### **Conclusion:**

With the end of folklore mania, the wave of ancient costume films also receded, and contemporary costume films started to dominate the film market in 1941. But both folklore film and spoken drama adaptation were still produced until the end of the Orphan Island era. Total Japanese occupation of Shanghai in December 1941 forced many filmmakers and actors to shift their focus to the spoken drama stage in order to avoid collaboration with the Japanese. A large

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<sup>77</sup> Commenting on the fake news of Zhou Xuan’s mysterious disappearance, a journalist reminds the readers that looking for “truth” behind the scenes is more interesting than watching the films.

number of new historical spoken drama plays spread from Chongqing to occupied Shanghai, continuing the tales of patriotic heroes and vicious traitors. Filmmakers and company owners who worked with the Japanese started a real career as spies, or so they retrospectively claimed.

By elaborating the complexity of the text and context of ancient costume films, this chapter aims to point out the inadequacy of previous understandings of this genre and prepare for the more detailed textual analysis of individual films in the next two chapters. Despite wartime emphasis on the clarity of message, the experience of each film was much richer than could be directly expressed in the narrative, and the effects of the war also far exceed standard accounts of censorship and inflation. Another largely ignored but crucial feature of Orphan Island cinema was lack of location shooting in film productions. The next chapter will focus on this new condition and its influence on the cinematic experience of the past.

## Chapter 5. Working Against Wartime Confinement: The Magic of Set Design and Camera Lens

One salient but previously neglected feature of Orphan Island cinema is its heavy reliance on studio sets, a startling contrast to the extensive use of location shooting in prewar cinema, as well as films made by state-owned studios in the hinterland during the War.<sup>1</sup> While filmmakers in Chongqing explored the vast landscapes of southwestern and northwestern China, Shanghai film companies largely retreated to their enclosed studio space. The Jiangnan region that used to serve as the location-shooting base was then under Japanese occupation, and filming on street in the foreign concessions usually required special permissions from the police, a difficult procedure that many companies avoided.<sup>2</sup> Except for a handful of Xinhua Company's productions in Hong Kong, thanks to its cooperation with the Nanyue Film Company, natural landscapes almost disappeared completely in domestic films released in Shanghai.<sup>3</sup> The expansion of the Second World War eventually led to the prohibition of location shooting in Hong Kong around mid 1940 for the protection of information on its military infrastructure.<sup>4</sup> Starting from 1941, filmmakers increasingly borrowed private gardens in Shanghai for the

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<sup>1</sup> In mid 1938, people already noticed the lack of outdoor scenes in new domestic productions. One writer pointed out that in prewar cinema, the restriction was always on interior scenes, and it was normal to have only two or three scenes shot in studio. But in wartime cinema, location shooting was extremely rare. See: Qi Hua, "Waijing Jueshao" [Scarcity of Location Shooting], *Xibao*, July 13, 1938, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Jacob and Luise Fleck took some shots on the bund for *Children of the World* (*Shijie Ernü*, 1941) with the help of French Concession police. See *Shenbao*, October 3, 1940, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Xinhua's *Female Master* (*Nü Shaoye*, 1939) was promoted for its incorporation of Hong Kong landscapes, and *The Adventure of Chinese Tarzan* (*Zhongguo Taishan Lixian Ji*, 1940) also took advantage of natural sceneries in Hong Kong. Among Xinhua's Hong Kong productions of ancient costume films, *Chen Yuanyuan* (aka. *Juedai Jiaren*, 1940) and *Pan Qiaoyun* (1940) were both filmed in the mountains in Kowloon Tong. See "Pan Qiaoyun zhong Zuihou Yimu Waijing" [The Last Outdoor Scene in *Pan Qiaoyun*], *Qingqing Dianying* 5, no. 10 (1940): 8. The Tai Lake in *A Fisherman's Revenge* (*Dayu Shajia*, 1940) is represented by a small bay near the Hong Kong Island. See "Lu Ming Yiju Yucun: Wei Xinpian *Dayu Shajia* Tiyan Yuren Shuishang Shenghuo" [Lu Ming Moves to a Fishing Village: Experiencing Fishermen's Life for New Film *A Fisherman's Revenge*], *Dianying Shenghuo* 6 (1940): 3. For detailed discussions on Shanghai-Hong Kong connection during the war, see Poshek Fu *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong*, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> "Xianggang Jinshe Waijin" [Hong Kong Bans Location Shooting], *Qingqing Dianying* 5, no. 21 (1940): 5.

production of contemporary costume films, but most of these gardens were no more spacious than studio backlots.<sup>5</sup>

Natural landscapes shot on location in prewar films therefore were promoted as a new attraction. The advertisement for the rescreening of *Song of the Fishermen* (*Yu Guang Qu*, dir. Cai Chusheng, 1934) emphasized in bold characters that all the exterior sceneries were shot at the Shenjia Gate in Ningbo, followed by a sentimental comment that “this mountain and this water are hard to see again in this time this place.”<sup>6</sup> “This mountain this water” was a common expression referring to the lost land during the war, and “this time this place” was repeatedly used to stress the specific situations of the Orphan Island at the present moment. The landscape that was taken for granted as a natural given before the war was barely accessible even in screen representations “here and now.” Ironically, it was through the collaboration with the Japanese after total occupation of Shanghai that filmmakers regained permission to film in occupied regions from 1942.<sup>7</sup> But within the Orphan Island, familiar Jiangnan landscapes became an object of nostalgia, especially to the huge number of refugees from those areas.

For the production of ancient costume films, directors could no longer appropriate historical sites to authenticate a connection with the past, nor were they able to stage large-scale spectacular fighting scenes against natural landscapes (chapter 3). From small decorative objects to the overall interior and exterior environment, the world of the past had to be assembled in the finite space of film studios. This new condition sparked the creativity of set designers and

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<sup>5</sup> Li Pingqian shot several scenes of *Parting in Life or Death* (*Shengli Sibie*, a.k.a. *Hungui Hechu*) in the garden of Switzerland Embassy through Bu Wancang’s personal connection. “*Hungui Hechu zai Ruishi Dashiguan Pai Waijing*” [*Parting in Life or Death* Film Crew Shoots on Location at the Swiss Embassy] in *Dianying Xinwen* 89 (1941): 354. Some of the exterior scenes in *Children of the World* were filmed in Fei Mu’s friend’s private garden on Haige Road. See “*Shijie Ernü Jie Huayuan Pai Waijing*” [*Children of the World* borrows Private Garden for Location Shooting], in *Dianying Ribao*, April 27, 1941, 3. Newly built gardens by nouveau riche who made a fortune through speculation during the war also served as shooting locations. *Dianying Ribao*, August 28, 1941, 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Shenbao*, August 29, 1941, 9.

<sup>7</sup> “*Liunian lai de Chuangju: Zhonglian Waijingdui Jijiang Manyou Suhang*” [First Time in Six Years: Zhonglian’s Location Shooting Crew will Visit Suzhou and Hangzhou], *Zhongguo Yitan* 5 (1942): 3.

filmmakers, pushing them to be more imaginative and resourceful to compensate the lack of natural landscapes. Set designers were constantly compared to magicians, creating wonders with limited resources to enchant people during the most depressing time. Nevertheless, a sense of confinement and artificiality often overshadowed ancient costume films of this period. To some extent, wartime ancient costume films was partly a result of the repression of “veracious representation of the external world” that Kracauer believes the cinematic medium gravitates towards.<sup>8</sup> The only possibility to address reality is in an overtly stagy ancient setting.

This chapter studies set designs in wartime ancient costume films, analyzing how limited spaces of the studios were magically expanded to suggest an infinite world of the past and how these constructed sets influenced audiences’ experience of cinema. It opens with the 1938 West Lake Expo held at Xinhua’s Clove Garden (dingxiang huayuan), the most famous studio location in wartime Shanghai. Built as a gigantic film set, the Expo featured renowned sites of Hangzhou while the actual city was under Japanese occupation. Simultaneously serving as an entertaining theme park and a reminder of the fall of Hangzhou, the Expo epitomizes the tension between fantasy and reality that underlined ancient costume films of the period. This tension will be further analyzed in three distinctive spatial patterns of the genre: deep engaging space, symbolic distancing space, and displayed self-effacing space. This is not meant to be an exhaustive taxonomy of spatial constructions, but a selection of diversified strategies to represent the past while reflecting on its relation to the present. Although it is common to mix different strategies in a single film, most films tend to have a dominant pattern of spatial arrangement. In this chapter, I select Fang Peilin’s *Empress Wu* (1939), Fei Mu’s *Confucius* (1940), and Zhang Shankun’s *Sorrow for the Fall of Ming* (aka. *Ge Nengniang*, 1939) as exemplary cases for each

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<sup>8</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 77-79.

pattern to demonstrate how filmmakers and set designers “build” their present concerns into the space of the ancient.

The three films are not only distinctive in their spatial configuration, but also share an important feature in narrative structure: they cover a long period of time span, while dissolving psychological causality in the loose and fragmented plot development. In other words, narrative intrigue and conflicts are no longer the dominant mode to hold the diegetic world together and engage the audience. This is a rather common trait among ancient costume filmed based on newly written scripts, especially those adapted from spoken drama plays, as compared to “folklore adaptations,” which tends to tell a coherent and familiar story. The space in the selected films, therefore, provides a useful new perspective to examine the issue of involvement and reflection beyond narrative engagement.

### **The West Lake Exhibition**

“Visit Hangzhou without leaving Shanghai!” This familiar expression that used to appear in advertisements for films shot in Hangzhou reemerged in the Orphan Island in the autumn of 1938. But instead of watching West Lake sceneries on screen, this time people could actually step into the physical space of “Hangzhou,” tasting famous local snacks and praying to the Buddha in the “Lingyin Temple”. This was made possible by Zhang Shankun and his set designers. In order to expand Xinhua’s production, Zhang rented the Clove Garden (Dingxiang Huayuan), which was legendarily associated with Li Hongzhang’s seventh concubine Ding Xiang.<sup>9</sup> Before converting it into a studio space, Zhang took advantage of the picturesque garden

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<sup>9</sup> A better translation for Dingxiang Huayuan should be Lilac Garden. But “Clove Garden” was used as the official English name for the Studio in its contemporary time. Although the garden has been proved to be the property of Li Hongzhang’s third son Li Jingmai and the Li family claimed that Dingxiang was a fictional figure, the alleged association between garden and Dingxiang remains popular in Shanghai even today.

to host a West Lake Exposition. Cinematographers could no longer bring back beautiful footages of Hangzhou, but the versatile set designers were capable of “rebuilding” the essence of the city in the Orphan Island.

The West Lake Exposition opened on the Mid-Autumn Festival in 1938. Its ticket office was named after Hangzhou train station, “Genshan Gate,” the first stop for visitors to this historical city. A small hill lay in front of the city gate, upon which stood the “Baoshu Pagoda.” After traversing the “Purple Cloud Cave”, one arrived at a miniature West Lake, centered by the “Moon-Reflection Pond.” Hangzhou’s bustling commercial district “Qinghe Fang” was located on the other side of the “lake,” crowded by food stands, teahouses, and candle and incense stores, leading visitors to the highlight of the exposition, the “Lingyin Temple.” With a little extra cost, people could fulfill their wish to go boating on the “West Lake,” wandering through the Broken Bridge, Liuhe Pagoda, Feilai Peak, and Su Xiaoxiao’s Tomb with the boat girls’ singing in local dialect ...<sup>10</sup> Colorful lanterns and electric lights extended people’s happy time into the depth of night.

Despite the fact that the West Lake Expo was supposed to represent contemporary Hangzhou, it could easily pass as an ancient set. The sceneries selected were mostly sites with historical significance, many of which were featured in ancient costume films in the 1920s. Even Hangzhou’s most trendy district Qinghe Fang was modeled after its old look before the building of modern pavement.<sup>11</sup> Such design not only enhanced a fantastic atmosphere of the Clove Garden through a strong contrast between the traditional flavor of “Hangzhou” and the westernized foreign concessions of Shanghai, but also turned Hangzhou into a symbolic space of

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<sup>10</sup> I try to map out the floor plan of the exhibition based on two reports that described their visiting experiences in details: Zhang Changgeng, “Xihu Bolanhui Canguan Ji” [Visting the West Lake Exhibition], *Shanghai Dianhua Gongsi Zazhi* 7, no. 4 (1938): 7; “Xihu Bolanhui Huilai” [Returning from the West Lake Exhibition], *Shehui Ribao*, October 11, 1938, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Fang Fei, “Xihu Bolanhui Xunli” [Reports on the West Lake Expo], *Jingbao*, October 21, 1938, 3.

traditional culture and history. The spatial layout of the exposition did not resemble the physical space of Hangzhou city either, but mapped its best sceneries onto the geography of the garden. Instead of striving to replicate the authentic Hangzhou, the whole Expo was build upon the premise of artificiality. Like any festive theme park, the strongest impact is not from how closely the copy resembles the original, but from a compressed temporal-spatial experience of encountering one recognizable site after another.

Besides showcasing the highlights of Hangzhou, Zhang Shankun also openly promoted the Expo as a grand exhibition of set construction, calling attention to the artificiality of sceneries. Indeed, the West Lake Exposition was largely realized through set designers' deceptive tricks: substituting expensive materials (stones, bricks, and metals) with cheaper ones (mud, wood, and cardboards), playing with scales, and constructing temporary buildings that relied on scaffolds and other supporting structures for load bearing (fig 5.1). The result was an incredibly low-cost ambitious project: four thousand foreign dollars in total (was compared to the price of an entrance ticket that cost 50 cents), not to mention that most building materials, and even whole sites, could be recycled in the company's future production.<sup>12</sup> The revelation of these tricks successfully diverted visitors' attention from the shabby construction quality of the sites to the wondrous magic of set designers.

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<sup>12</sup> "Xihu Bolanhui de jige Jingtou" [Several shots of the West Lake Expo], *Dianying Zhoukan*, no.12 (1938): 142.



Fig. 5.1 A Magazine Article showing the sides and backs of the sets  
*(Xuanmiao Guan, 7, 1939)*

As one journalist noticed, some visitors would stop by the city wall, touching it with their fingers. When they realized that the “bricks” were actually made of cardboards, they raised their eyebrows in awe.<sup>13</sup> For them, the opportunity to walk into the space of film sets and have physical contact with them was probably as exciting as visiting “Hangzhou” in Shanghai. Stone statues made of clay, vivid paper flowers, and a restaurant with only one wall were all recorded in visitor’s enthusiastic reports.<sup>14</sup> Some even re-imagined the space through the lens of the camera, seeing the miniature “West Lake” that was converted from a swimming pool as a long shot in contrast to the close-up of the grand Lingyin Temple nearby.<sup>15</sup> Spatial confinement that limited the construction scale was cleverly aestheticized through cinematic techniques. Revealing sites of the West Lake as constructed sets dissolved people’s illusion of being in Hangzhou, but it absorbed the visitors into another fantasy: that of getting behind the scene of a cinematic world. In such imbricated settings, one kind of disenchantment was but the beginning of another form of enchantment. Visitors’ joy was doubly secured, if not necessarily doubled.<sup>16</sup>

The real disenchantment came from reality. The fall of Hangzhou, which motivated the very conception of this exhibition, inevitably loomed over all visitors. The Clove Garden was not simply a simulacrum but an ironic reminder of a humiliating loss. Moreover, the name “West Lake Exposition” further highlighted the irony as it deliberately evoked the 1929 West Lake Exposition, which proudly displayed national products and achievements to demonstrate a bright future of the nation. With paradise turning into hell,<sup>17</sup> and national pride becoming humiliation,

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<sup>13</sup> “Xihu Bolanhui Huilai” in *Shehui Ribao*, October 11, 1938: 4.

<sup>14</sup> Zhang Changgeng, “Xihu Bolanhui Cangan Ji” [Visiting the West Lake Expo] in *Shanghai Dianhua Gongsi Dianhua Zazhi* 7, no. 4 (1938): 7; Fang Fei, “Xihu Bolanhui Xunli” [Reports on the West Lake Expo], *Jingbao*, October 21, 1938, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Bai Yan, “Xihu Bolanhui qi li shenbo” [Thin Profit Margin of the West Lake Expo], *Xibao*, October 12, 1938, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Zhang Shankun further turned the Expo into an advertising space for his company by putting up movie posters of his production. He also made a newsreel of the Expo, and showed it with film in theater.

<sup>17</sup> Hangzhou and Suzhou are known as “paradise on earth” in China. “Paradise turning into hell” was a common expression that referred to the fall of the two cities.

this mock West Lake Exposition could barely sustain the fantasy of pure joy and enchantment. Seeing the two characters of “Hang Zhou” hanging above the “city gate” could make sensitive visitors burst into tears.<sup>18</sup> Even the dedicated Buddhists who simply wanted to pray at the “Lingyin Temple” would at least be reminded that a trip to real Hangzhou involved endless investigations and bowing to Japanese soldiers. Neither the fake city wall nor set designers’ magic could completely fend off wartime reality. Despite the vastly varied visiting experiences of the exposition, the daunting tension between personal pleasure and national crisis concerned most people, and it soon found proper expression and relief through one particular site.

Not long after the opening of the exposition, visitors started to complain about the absence of the tomb of Yue Fei, a patriotic general from the Song Dynasty who was wrongly prosecuted by traitor Qin Hui.<sup>19</sup> Sitting on the bank of the West Lake, Yue Fei’s tomb was the most conspicuous exhibition of the confrontation between loyalty and treachery, with the statues of Qin Hui and his wife kneeling in front of General Yue’s graveyard. Why this site was missing from the exposition was never explained, but the Xinhua Company quickly added it in response to people’s demands, and strongly promoted it as a major attraction from the fifth day of the exposition.<sup>20</sup> Later reports all explicitly stressed their visiting experience of this site, as if its educational power helped to ease hints of guilt that haunted their pleasurable indulgence in a fantasy world. If the irony of rebuilding Hangzhou in the Orphan Island contained ambiguous and slippery messages that resisted fixed interpretation, the site of Yue Fei conveyed an easily communicable lesson that everyone in “this time and this place” would pick up. But precisely

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<sup>18</sup> Hui Min, “Jianzai Diyu de Tiantang” [The Heaven built in the Hell], *Wufeng* no. 12 (1938): 11-12; “Xihu Bolanhui Zhaoji Jizhe Dahui Suxie” [Quick sketch of the West Lake Expo Reception with Journalists], *Xunbao*, October 9, 1938, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Visitors’ expressed their dissatisfaction in their poems on the exhibition, with sentences like “The only thing I cannot find after thorough search is the Tomb of Yue Fei,” “At such critical moment of national defense, why cannot I find the Tomb of Yue Fei.” (*Xibao*, October 14, 1938, 3). Some even suggested the company should put Qin Hui and his wife’s statues in public toilet (*Xibao*, October 6, 1938, 3).

<sup>20</sup> “Xihu Bolanhui” [West Lake Expo Advertisement], *Shenbao*, October 15, 1938, 13.

because of the effortless in getting such manifest symbolic meaning and its overt familiarity, the served as a near perfunctory acknowledgement of patriotism. Once getting the message, the visitors were able to move on with their further enjoyment properly justified.

### **Shedding Light on the Sets**

Even though it is important to acknowledge the great heterogeneity of wartime entertainment, we should also go beyond pluralism to reflect more theoretically on the interaction between the fantasy world and social reality in audience's reception. Compared to other times, people's heightened awareness of the war and censorship prepared them to acutely discern subtle allusions to contemporary situations, some of which were not necessarily intended by the authors. Such experience is like looking into a two-way mirror. Whether one sees a vivid image of the fantasy world on the other side of the mirror or a reflection of their own world depends on the contrast of light intensity on the two sides. In most cases, the participant voluntarily dims the light of reality to be drawn into a brightly lit fantasy world, as reinforced by the light contrast in cinema and modern theater. But the author may deliberately darken the world of his creation to enable reflections on the audience's part at certain point, and the audience also has the freedom to brighten his/her light at any moment to allow personal experiences and social realities reflect on fantasy. The author and the audience are not always in accordance in their effort to make reflections, and the experience of each individual is unique. But it is possible to establish consensus through mutual learning and also by using popular and self-evident historical references, like Yue Fei and Qin Hui.

Despite a clear visual metaphor, the two-way mirror is not intended to articulate the viewing positions of the spectators, but a model to complicate the "contemporary relevance" of a

constructed past world, emphasizing the interaction between the film texts and the audience in the process of making reflections on reality. Therefore the emphasis is placed on the adjustment of “light” rather than the mirror as a physical division between the two worlds. Film scholars have departed from disembodied gaze to explore more bodily orientated experiences of cinema through phenomenology and affect theory. Audience’s reflection on the present through the past should not simply be seen as a form of conscious thinking provoked by what one sees and hears. It also traverses the body/mind dualism, and is partially conditioned by the audience’s embodied experiences of the diegesis. In other words, the light intensity on the audience’s side is not solely determined by the level of concerns for reality or how well-prepared one is to tease out historical metaphors, but also corresponded to the world experienced. As in the example of the West Lake Expo, the characters of “Hang Zhou” only moved people into tears when they appear on the “city gate.” It was the overall scenario rather than the recognition of the characters per se that resonated with the visitors. The diversified concerns and the specific reflections of each spectator might be impossible to track, but the two-way mirror model brings forth a more nuanced understanding of the relation between text and reality.

While the audience actively adjusts their light throughout the viewing process, the light in the cinematic world has been pre-programmed. Briefly speaking, the light intensity of the diegesis refers to the degree of immersion intended by the filmmaker. Clear historical allusions and visual metaphors often mark the moments when the light on the diegesis was dimmed, but the light contrast is also more subtly affected by carefully designed audio-visual elements that tend to shape the audience’s perceptual experience. This chapter and the following one will focus on spatial structures and historical characters respectively to analyze filmmakers’ programming of “light” in their creation of an ancient world. The emphasis on the intention of the filmmakers

is not to deny the agency of the audience, but to elaborate on how filmmakers have already taken into account the experience of the audience in their creation of the cinematic world. It is conventionally believed that characters take precedence over space, which “will signify chiefly in relation to psychological causality” as David Bordwell cogently argues.<sup>21</sup> Separating spatial construction from character-driven plot development, I emphasize the experiential aspect of cinematic space and rethink its enchanting and disenchanting effects beyond narrative function.

In their influential work on set design, Charles Affron and Mirella Affron classify film sets into five analytical categories in terms of levels of design intensity and their relation to narrative.<sup>22</sup> From the emphasis on transparency in set as denotation, “a conventional signpost of genre, ambience, and character,” and as punctuation of narrative function, to an increased opacity in set as embellishment, as artifice and as another narrative, their taxonomy delineates a full spectrum of the function of sets in complementing narrative and conveying meaning. However, this comprehensive analysis precludes the opportunity to disentangle sets, and also film in general, from the priority of storytelling. Set designers not only give their work a specific look or imbue it with certain mood, but also influence the way the cinematic world addresses its audience.

I approach set design in ancient costume films through the light metaphor, examining the extent to which the set invites the audience to immerse in the cinematic world or compels them to reflect. The deep engaging space in *Empress Wu Zetian* and symbolic distancing space in *Confucius* mark the two ends of the spectrum, but the displayed self-effacing space in *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming* does not stand somewhere in the middle. Rather, it provides an alternative

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<sup>21</sup> David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 51.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

perspective to understand the relation between immersion and reflection through the mediation of theater. By identifying these distinctive spatial patterns, I aim to show a variety of concerns and ways to address the contemporary situation beyond the monotonous didactic story of hero vs. traitor, to understand reflection on reality as a result of structured experience beyond a cognitive process.

### **Deep Engaging Space**

The overall design of the West Lake Expo primarily aimed to engage the visitors in a fantasy world of beautiful sceneries, interesting activities, and cinematic tricks. Visitors might actively resist a total immersion, but the space per se embodied its creators' aspiration for maximum engagement and enchantment. Not long after the West Lake Expo, the Hollywood Land on Yuyuan Road hosted a Suzhou Exhibition with similar goals.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the effort to bring film sets to public space occurred even before the West Lake Expo. In February 1938, the Xindu Dancing Hall renovated its space into a Fishermen's Village (Yuguang Cun) inspired by Cai Chusheng's record-breaking film *Song of the Fishermen*. This innovation immediately started a new trend of constructing landscapes and sceneries in Shanghai Dancing Halls, leading to Xindu's collaboration with the Xinhua Company to recreate sets from *Sable Cicada*.<sup>24</sup> Not only that the platform for the music band was remolded after the Phoenix Pavilion (Fengyi ting), props and costumes from the film were also put on display.<sup>25</sup> Amid the isolation of the Orphan Island, artificially constructed sceneries became an important way to expand the everyday spatial experiences of its residents.

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<sup>23</sup> "Suzhou Mingsheng Zhan" [Exhibition on Famous Sites in Suzhou], *Shenbao*, February 17, 1939, 15. The Hollywood Land was an amusement park opened in the Orphan Island in October 1939.

<sup>24</sup> Pei, "Xindu Buzhi *Diaochan Zhenjing*" [Xingdu Dance Hall Constructs Sets from *Sable Cicada*], *Libao*, April, 8, 1938, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Hong Kai, "Ducheng Wuting Yi Pie" [A Glance at Dance Halls in Shanghai], *Gudao Shenghuo*, 11, 1938, 17.

As film sets took on a separate life of its own, cinematic space on screen, especially in big productions of ancient costume films, also received extra attention. Photographs of lavish sets and drawings of set designs, often occupied several pages in film magazines. Construction photos were frequently accompanied with explanations on cinematic tricks, such as adding the roof of a building by filming through a painted glass. Attentions on the magic of cinema was no longer about the fantastic special effects that vividly showcased impossible situations in reality, but shifted to the efforts to achieve a seemingly realistic effect through artificial means. To be more precise, the challenge is to create a sense of infinitely extending world in the limited space of the studio through ingenious set design and the magical lens of the camera. The enchantment of magic lies in the paradox that everyone is aware of the deception but at the same time experiences the perceptual real – an astounded “I know, but yet I see” response that Tom Gunning concisely puts it.<sup>26</sup> Ancient film sets, too, functions on such dialectics.

Compared to the relatively simple spatial arrangement in ancient costume films from the 1920s, set design in this period reveal a general tendency to invite the audience into a more immersive and complex spatial experience, partly to compensate for the dearth of exterior scenes. With increasing use of camera movements, spatial continuity was no longer simply suggested by editing, but more desirably embedded in the physical construction of the sets. Depth and verticality were also fully mobilized to expand the space, stressing the three dimensionality of the cinematic world. The endeavor to deliver a sense of infinity echoes Siegfried Kracauer’s criticism of history films as “an artificial creation shut off from the time-space continuum of the living,” which therefore “precluded the notion of endlessness.”<sup>27</sup> If

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<sup>26</sup> Tom Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator,” in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 117.

<sup>27</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1997), 78.

Chinese filmmakers in the 1920s responded to this predicament by rediscovering the ancient in the physical reality of the living through location shooting, the wartime condition forced them to focus on the construction, embedding visual cues to suggest that the space captured on screen was only a portion of a larger world. Although even the most verisimilar sets of this period reveal an “irrevocable stageness” that makes the audience conscious of the efforts went into its construction, as Kracauer would have criticized, the recognition of the constructedness of the set does not necessarily mark the end of a believing perceptual experience of a constructed space. The interplay between the two is part of the enchanting magic of cinema.

A deep engaging space is not necessarily a realistic space, but often gestures towards it. The intention is to make the audience feel as if being in a full-fledged cinematic space, eliciting their close engagement with the diegesis. The sense of depth and extensiveness of space is crucial to a realistic perception, and therefore is often the focus of set construction that aims to provide an immersive experience. Ornate material details, intricate spatial design, and proper atmosphere of the space all help to enhance audience’s perceptual, intellectual and emotional engagement, thus keeping the light intensity of the cinematic world high. The inevitable realization of the artificiality of the set from time to time does not necessarily prevent the audience from further engagement or exploration of the space, which is in itself appealing and enticing.

### **Deep Engaging Space in *Empress Wu Zetian***

One of the most versatile designers for lavish set in wartime Shanghai was Fang Peilin, who also served as the chief designer for the West Lake Expo. His reputation can be traced to the prewar era for building sets for renowned films, including *Two Stars at the Milky Way* (*Yinhan*

*Shuangxing*, dir. Shi Dongshan, 1931), *Revenge before the Volcano* (*Huoshan Qingxue*, dir. Sun Yu, 1932), *Little Toys* (*Xiao Wanyi*, dir. Sun Yu, 1933), *Song of the Fishermen* (1934), and *Children of the Storm* (*Fengyun Ernv*, dir. Xu Xingzhi, 1935). Besides taking charge of set constructions for many Xinhua's big productions, he was also an accomplished filmmaker specialized in musicals. Right after the West Lake Expo, Fang directed *Empress Wu Zetian*, which was promoted as another masterpiece that carried the spirit of *Sable Cicada* with even higher production value.<sup>28</sup> Given the leftist status of its scriptwriter Ke Ling, the film was expected by the public to be a patriotic piece that addresses contemporary concerns.<sup>29</sup> However, Ke Ling apologetically denied the "national defense" significance of his script, ascribing it to the strictly imposed censorship.<sup>30</sup> Primarily focusing on Wu Zetian's desire and struggle for power, the film reveals no direct reflection on the war (except possibly from a song that ironically eulogizes the great peace and harmony under Wu's rule). Although the central theme of the film is supposed to be a woman's rebellion against the patriarchal system – a major theme of the May Forth tradition, the oppressive nature of the patriarchy was never elucidated, as Ke Ling admits himself, leaving Wu's overbearing behaviors improperly justified.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, the film was still considered as a success, mainly due to its formal aspects, especially Fang Peilin's set design and the absorptive atmosphere of the imaged Tang palace. To some extent, the space of the palace obtains equally, if not more, distinctive characters as the protagonist Wu Zetian.

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<sup>28</sup> Wu Wo, "Zhanhou Dianying Jie yu Xinhua Gongsi" [The Film Industry after the War and the Xinhua Company], *Shenbao*, November 1, 1938, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Although Ke Ling never claimed his script as an adaptation, he admitted that he read Song Zhiwen's prewar spoken drama play of the same title as the starting point of his own creation. The audience tended to see the film as closely related to the spoken drama.

<sup>30</sup> Ke Ling noted that because of one sentence in the lyrics "annihilate the enemy and sweep the invaders," the whole script had to be completely revised. See "Guanyu *Wu Zetian*" (About *Empress Wu Zetian*) in *Ke Ling Dianying Wencun* (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 1992), 34.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

### a) The Corridor Shot: a call to the cinematic world

*Empress Wu Zetian* opens with a shot of a corridor, stretching diagonally across the screen. At the turning corner of the corridor is a doorway that opens up a new space with a pavilion and other architecture (Fig. 5.2). Two figures emerge from the depth of the field and run towards the audience. Answering to the call “coming, coming,” two more girls appear from the lower left corner of the screen, rushing towards the opposite direction to meet the previous two. The camera stays still, but the composition of the shot, the dynamic movement of the characters, and the ambiguous phrase “coming, coming” all tend to entice the audience into the cinematic world. It will become clear through the next few shots that “coming” here in fact refers to Wu’s return to the palace from the monastery, and should be translated as “here she comes.” But the omission of the subject of “coming” in the opening shot not only poses a puzzle immediately, but also allows multiple interpretations of the phrase, which could mean the coming of the film to the audience, or calling upon the audience to the film. This very first shot of the film presents an invitation for the audience to enter, and this gesture is carried rather consistently in the spatial design throughout the film.



Fig. 5.2 Opening Corridor Shot in *Empress Wu Zetian*



Fig. 5.3 Illusionist Mural in the Ever Spring Palace of the Forbidden City

The visual impact of the corridor shot resembles that of illusionist paintings and murals that first prevailed in China in the Forbidden City, and it is comparable to one of the mural paintings of the *Dream of the Red Chamber* at the Ever Spring Palace (Fig. 5.3). Like in the shot, the painting presents a receding space along a corridor, at the end of which is a garden space framed by a couplet on two pillars. A girl is walking towards the viewers and curiously looks aside. Further down the corridor, Jia Baoyu hides behind the wall and stares at her. The positions and gazes of the two figures, like the hailing and movement of the maids in the film, beckon the viewers into the illusory space. Painted on the wall of a real corridor, the mural opens up a new realm on a solid surface. If it were not because of the omission of colorful paints on the beams and ceilings for the depiction of a non-imperial space, the transition between the two is almost seamless. When this mural was completed in the late nineteenth century, perspective painting was no longer a novelty in the Forbidden City, probably not even new to people outside the palace who had been exposed to various peepshows and other West influenced painting

techniques.<sup>32</sup> But knowing the trick did not necessarily weaken the illusory impact, which remains compelling even today.

Cinema, too, projects a three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional surface, although the conviction of the existence of a three-dimensional profilmic world helps to disassociate the spatial experience of cinema from total illusion. Precisely because the sense of space is taken for granted in cinema, forced perspectives on screen is often less noticeable. In the opening shot of *Wu Zetian*, the vanishing line formed by the pillars and fences on the right is constructed with an artificial angle to increase a sense of depth. As Juan Antonio Ramírez notes, this optical trick is often used by filmmakers who have limited physical space at disposal, and therefore is much more widely employed in Europe than in Hollywood.<sup>33</sup> It is therefore a pragmatic solution to spatial confinement in wartime Shanghai. This specific perspective has already been fixed in Fang Peilin's drawing of the set (Fig. 5.4), and all the three scenes that take place in the corridor are filmed from the exactly same position, the only viewing point that can form the right perspective. But unlike viewing an illusionist mural painting that rejects access to the image, cinema effectively brings the audience "into" the world through editing, movement, and shifted viewpoints. The second shot of the opening sequence cuts to a medium-long shot of the four maids looking eagerly into the distance, followed by their point of view shot. Through this cut, the audience literally "enters" the space established at the beginning, and the path to the Tang palace thus opens up.

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<sup>32</sup> For detailed discussion on early peepshow culture in China and perspective paintings, see Shang Wei, "Bizhen de Huanxiang: Xiyang Jing, Xianfa Hua yu Daguanyuan de Menghuan Meiying" (Verisimilar Illusion: the phantom of peepshow, linear perspective painting and Daguanyuan) in *Wenxue Jingdian de Chuanbo yu Quanshi* (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan, 2013), 91-136.

<sup>33</sup> Juan Antonio Ramírez, *Architecture for the Screen: A Critical Study of Set Design in Hollywood's Golden Age* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004), 63.



Fig. 5.4 Fang Peilin's drawing of the opening scene (*Dianying Shijie* 1, 1939)

The corridor is not just a path, but also a carefully constructed object. The colorful decorative patterns on its beams and the ceiling bear clear imperial styles from the Qing dynasty, as in the real corridor of the Ever Spring Palace. Opened to the public in 1925, the Forbidden City served as the major source of inspiration for the design of an ancient palace, especially since architectural features from earlier dynasties were still largely unknown to the public. Meanwhile, the plantain leaves and Tai Lake rocks next to the corridor reveal another strong influence on the set: Jiangnan style gardens. The unlikely combination of the two formed the basis for imagining an idealized ancient palace. However, both the Qing palace and the Jiangnan gardens only provide models for designing specific objects or decorative details, the real innovation of the film lies in the way these elements are incorporated into a complex, largely imaginary spatial arrangement.

## b) Wu Zetian's Chamber: a spatial puzzle

The most intricate set in the film is Wu Zetian's chamber, which cannot be presented as a whole in one static shot. It first appears in consecutive shots that show the busy preparation for Wu's meeting with Emperor Gaozong after her return. Following a brief shot of three maids making the bed, a group of eunuchs carry crates in pairs, passing through a tunnel like entranceway formed by four aligned circles and draperies, another evident use of forced perspective (Fig. 5.5). It then cuts to a shot of two maids scenting a robe over an incense burner in the foreground, with the bed framed in the back. The eunuchs walk into the middle, putting down the crates, and the camera follows one of the maids who walks to the left and presents the robe to Wu. Although this short sequence primarily focuses on people's action, leaving the space in flickering candle light, it subtly indicates the spatial structure of the room through shot composition, character and camera movement. Audience might not be able to figure out the setting in their first viewing, but the elaborate décor of the bed area and the unique design of the entranceway in the first two shots could easily catch their attention.



Fig. 5.5 Forced Perspective of the Entranceway



Fig. 5.6 Plantain leaves in a courtyard

In the first scene that elaborately displays this lavish set, only two thirds of the space is shown, reserving the entranceway for later. The sequence starts with a maid rowing down a bamboo blind at a window that opens to a courtyard with plantain leaves and flower branches, a scene that immediately evokes a variety of imageries commonly employed in Tang poetry (Fig. 5.6).<sup>34</sup> As the camera tilts down and pans to the right, we see Wu Zetian making up in front of a mirror, and the shadow of the lowering blind passes her brightly lit face and body. Followed by a close-up shot of Wu's face, her position in the room, up to this point, is defined by her spatial relation to the window through camera movement and the interplay between light and shadow. The next shot shows Emperor Gaozong stretching himself with a yawn, while a eunuch is tiding up his robe. Behind him are three sets of steps decorated with dragon patterned fences and columns, by the end of which another eunuch is making the bed (Fig. 5.7). Passing a four-leaf

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<sup>34</sup> The imageries of plantain leaves, rolling up a curtain, and doing make up by a window were all commonly used in Tang poems.

screen, a flower stand, and a doorframe, he joins Wu by her dressing table. The camera movement here is similar to shot of the maid carrying the robe, but the decorative details that were obscured by the dim light in the earlier shot are now flashed out, rendering the same space a new look.

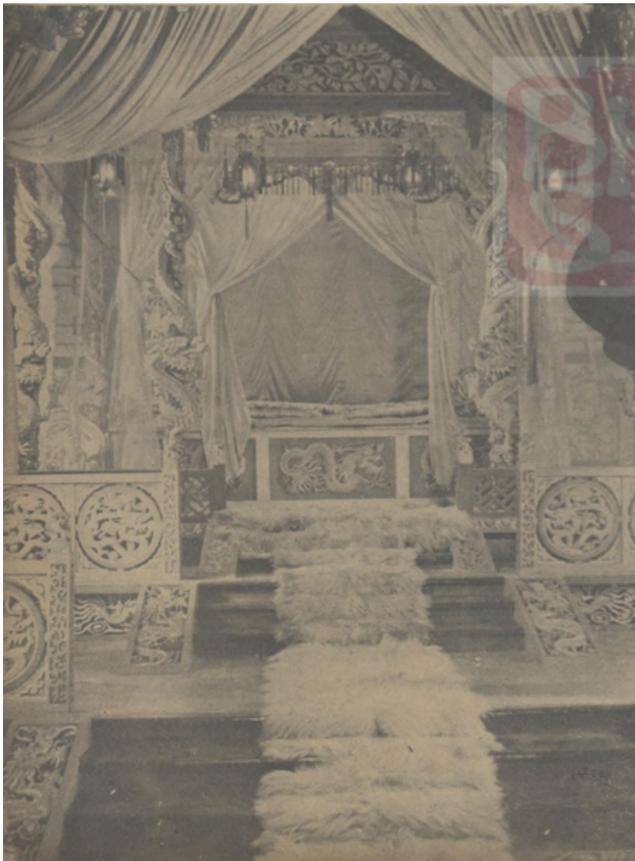


Fig. 5.7 Lavish bed set in Empress Wu's chamber

Although the spatial continuity of the window side and the bed area is convincingly demonstrated through two moving shots, the aesthetic styles of the two parts are significantly different. The “window” is in fact an opening to a courtyard framed by two doors and a row of low-rise railing known as the “beauty rest” (meiren kao). “Beauty rest” is mostly used in seating areas along corridors and pavilions in the garden for people to rest their backs or arms while

enjoying the scenery, and is therefore associated with a casual and poetic setting.<sup>35</sup> Lacking a protective function and a sense of privacy, its employment as a spatial divider in a palace room is largely imaginary. However, such use is in accordance with portrayals of residential space in Chinese pictorial tradition that often depicts doors and windows as a simple frame to maximize the visibility of the interior space from the exterior or the other way around. Lower than a regular windowsill, the railing enables a fluid spatial flow between the room and the courtyard, and its harmonious pairing with the plantain leaves brings forth the image of a Jiangnan garden.

The bed area, in contrast, is overcrowded with dragon motifs to emphasize royalty, even though it is overtly inappropriate for the bedroom of a newly arrived consort. The three flights of steps further reinforce the sense of authority, resembling the setting of a throne, or even a shrine. Indeed, in Fang Peilin's drawing of the Hall of Brightness (*ming tang*), he also envisioned three flights of steps to accentuate the throne. Although the number of flights was reduced to two in the physical set, the significant elevation exaggerates the throne set-up in the Forbidden City that the design is clearly modeled after (Fig. 5.8a,b). Besides conveying a majestic atmosphere of the royal palace, such design also generates additional depth by making use of multiple planes in the vertical space. Moreover, the steps leading to the bed are constructed with gradually reduced width to create the illusion of greater depth, as in the construction of the entranceway and the corridor.

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<sup>35</sup> Li Nan, *Zhongguo Gudai Zhuanwa* [Ancient Chinese Architecture] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shangye Chubanshe, 2005), 166.



Fig 5.8a Hall of Brightness in *Empress Wu Zetian*

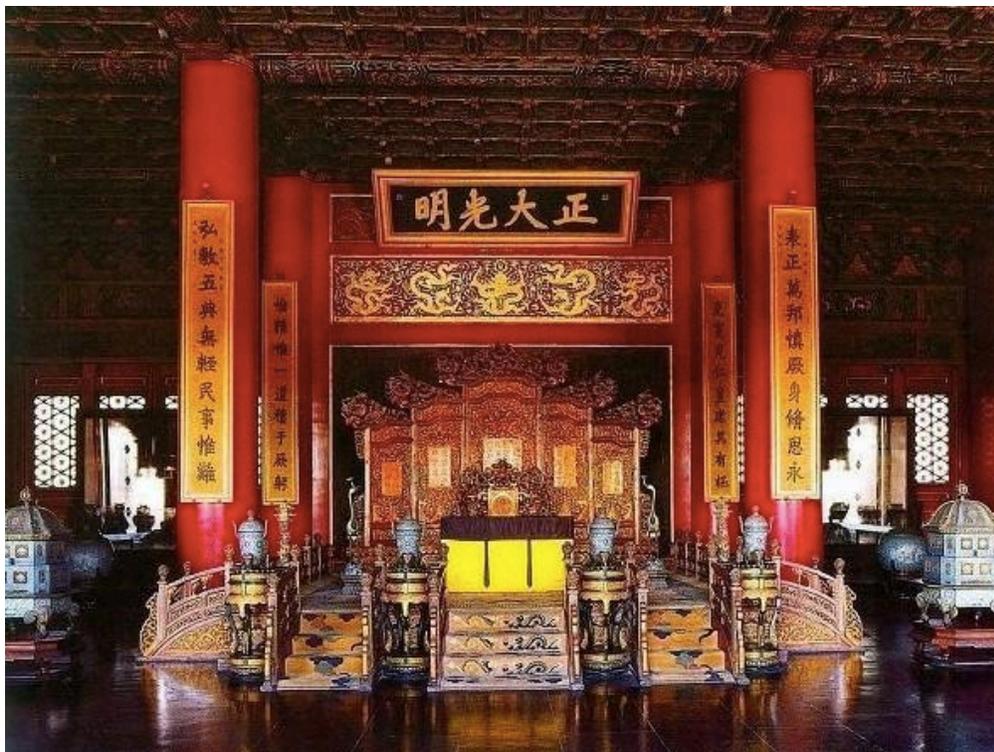


Fig. 5.8b The Dragon Throne at the Forbidden City

Another trick that helps to evidently enlarge the space is the use of painted scenery that pre-compressed a three-dimensional space onto a flat plane. The “courtyard” beyond the railing is in fact a pictorial backdrop, most likely an enlarged photograph since it is much more difficult to discern than other painted ones in the film, including portions of pavilions revealed through the doorway in the corridor shot. Besides the photographic quality of the backdrop, the outward leaning “beauty rest” also suggests the existence of a physical space beyond. Fang further stresses this “exterior space” later in the sequence in a long shot of the room that frames the “beauty rest” and bamboo curtain in the forefront, anchoring the audience’s viewpoint in the illusory “courtyard.” (Fig. 5.9) The shot also presents the room in relative entirety for the first time, although significant portions of it are still blocked. With the dragon bed concealed behind the screen, the room looks utterly different from what has been revealed before. No longer dominated by characters, its bright and open space and delicate details invite the eye, as well as the body, to linger. The stylistic variations and “mutability” of the room not only help to sustain audience’s curiosity, but also expands the space mentally. Like visiting an intricately designed Jiangnan garden, the wandering paths and various concealing devices that obstruct people’s vision and only reveals the space part by part always makes the garden feel more spacious than it actually is. Without an easy way to immediately grasp the whole, the space becomes a puzzle in itself that calls for engagement.



Fig. 5.9 Empress Wu's Chamber shown from the courtyard

### c) Internal Reference and Painted Backdrops

While striving for visual variety in presenting the palace, introducing new sets even near the end of the film, Fang Peilin also repeatedly uses the same shot composition of a given set to evoke an earlier scene in the film. Compensating the loose narrative structure, these visual repetitions draw comparisons between events that take place far apart in time, and serve as internal references that tie the structure of the film with a sense of visual coherence. The reoccurring corridor shot charts the growing power of Wu from her initial return to the palace to her nephews' insolent behaviors and finally to show her total control of information through omnipresent messengers. Similarly, the three gatherings at the meeting room are also shot from the exact same angle, punctuating the change of the regimes from Gaozong to Zhongzong, and quickly turns over to Empress Wu. Whether the audience could recognize these repetitions is not guaranteed, but the likely feeling of *déjà vu* might compel them to search back in their memory.

The audience does not only recall what they have seen in terms of narrative, but also as visual images.

The most prominent example is a low angle shot of a multi-storeyed pavilion at a full-moon night. Occupying the left half of the screen, the pavilion mostly appears as a dark silhouette standing against the moonlit sky. The figure on the top level is small but brightly lit, looking into the distance as indicated by the gesture. Two more double-roofed buildings are located beyond the pavilion. Appearing much smaller in size, they suggest the vastness of the palace area (Fig. 5.10). This composition occurs twice in the film: first after Empress Wang falls out of favor with Emperor Zhongzong, and near the end of the film after Empress Wu's male consort Xue Huayi burns down the Hall of Brightness. Both Empress Wang and Wu stand on the top level of the pavilion. Their belittled figures in contrast to the gigantic building and the open sky convey a feeling of disillusion and melancholy. If the first appearance of the image is a pure expression of emotion, a frozen moment that holds the narrative flow, without losing this set of function, its reoccurrence also serves as a pictorial reference that triggers a flashback of the film on the audience's part.



Fig. 5.10 Image of Melancholy

The perfect balance in these shots almost gives the impression that they are composed for static value. The camera stays still throughout, and even the movement of the characters hardly disrupt the shot composition. Taken out of the context of the film, they could stand alone as appealing pictures. But what really transforms such pictorial quality of a film shot into a framed picture in the viewing experience is their repeated appearance. A physical space is meant to be viewed from multiple points, but a painting, particularly a classical Western painting, presents a space from a fixed perspective. The reoccurrence of the exact same framing of the same space turns it into a pictorial reference, an image that refers to an entire scene happened before. It requires close attention and engagement from the audience to fully grasp such intricate design, a sign of the filmmaker's intention to tune up the light intensity of the cinematic world.

To some extent, such internal pictorial reference echoes C. S. Tashiro's concept of "self-referential space" that precludes the external world, and "[e]verywhere pointing back to itself." For him, "self-referential space" is benefited from closed frames that history films are usually organized around. I understand "closed frame" as a unique and momentary effect of deliberate repetition that turns the cinematic space into an image of reference, rather than a typical characteristic of history film as Tashiro sees it.<sup>36</sup> But "self-referential" is an important feature of deep engaging space, if not of history film in general. A crucial but somehow confusing part in Tashiro's theory is his simultaneous emphasis on the "closed form" of history film and the totality of space, which he defines as the "illusion that the world extends indefinitely beyond the field of view."<sup>37</sup> How would a self-contained, self-referential space entail a sense of spatial infinity? And if it indeed creates an illusion of endlessness, what kind of "external world" does it preclude?

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<sup>36</sup>C. S. Tashiro, *Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 71.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

At the first glance, Tashiro's stress of the closedness and the still quality of History Film resembles Kracauer's criticism of the genre. But his introduction of the concept of "totality of space," inspired by George Lukács's "totality of objects" in the historical novel and "totality of movement" in the drama, complicates Kracauer's understanding of the confinement of space in history film. The word "totality" indicates a sense of all-encompassing, of parts potentially extending into a whole, full-fledged world. What is presented might be limited, but its inner coherence allows the imagination of that world to go far beyond the screen space. In the history films of Tashiro's case, and ancient costume films in our context, the space in depiction belongs to a past temporality, therefore no matter how vastly it expands, it does not directly intersect with the contemporary reality of the audience. It might mirror or parallel the reality of the historical present, but it could never be the "present" itself. In this sense, what history film or ancient costume film precludes is not spatial expansion, but the possibility to merge with the audience's world through spatial expansion.

Self-referential and spatial extensiveness are both crucial to the creation of deep engaging space, keeping the audience immersed in a coherent and realistically full world.

In *Empress Wu*, besides building complex sets and evoking internal pictorial references, Fang Peilin also makes use of miniature models and painted exterior sceneries to further extend the space. While the former offers a bird's-eye view of a concrete part of the world that is more complete than any set in the film presents, the latter expands the sets, often anchoring an interior space in a larger exterior world. As discussed above, painted scenery is an economical and effective way to create an illusion of larger space. The problem is compatibility, whether the plasticity of the set is in congruence with the visual quality of the painted scenery embedded. A clash between the two can easily dispel the audience's belief in the world. It is probably part of

the reason why this method was not commonly used in pre-war Chinese cinema, but was more closely associated with photography and stage.<sup>38</sup> In Fang Peilin's writing on set design in 1934, he claims that the application of painted scenery in cinema is largely restricted to fill the windows and open doors, and sometimes needs constructed models to achieve a satisfactory effect.<sup>39</sup> Another set designer-turned-director, Wu Yonggang, also emphasizes film sets' primary affinity with architecture, defending set designers who cannot paint oil paintings.<sup>40</sup>

With the advent of the War, painted backdrops became much more popular in filmmaking. Interestingly, Hollywood in the mid-thirties also witnessed a vigorous revival of “backings.”<sup>41</sup> The correlation between the two is yet to be studied, but in China, the use of painted scenery primarily resulted from spatial confinement and financial concerns during the war. In *Empress Wu*, Fang largely followed his pre-war principle, framing painted scenery against windows and doors.<sup>42</sup> But with the doors of the court hall blowing up to the size of the city gate and the entranceway of the Emperor's room taking up almost the whole screen (fig. 5.11), these framed sceneries are much closer to backdrops than window fillers in prewar cinema. We do not know how exactly audience back in thirties and forties perceived these backdrops, what really mattered was the perception of them as opening to a new space, whether painted or constructed, rather than solid surfaces that closed the space. In other words, their primary function was to

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<sup>38</sup> Painted scenery had long been used in Chinese photo studios and stage designs, firstly with imported backdrops from England and Japan, and gradually switched to domestically produced ones in the 1920s. Imported backdrops were highly expensive when photography was first introduced in China. The cost of one backdrop painting could reach thirty silver taels (roughly about 1,134 gram of silver) at the turn of the twentieth century. When Shanghai's New Stage opened in 1917, most of its backdrop painters were Japanese. See: Zhang Lei, “Bujing Sheji yu Shanghai Chengshi Wenyi Xingtai de Zaoqi Goujian” [Set design and the early construction of the artistic state of Shanghai], *Dushi Wenhua Yanjiu*, 12, (2015): 310-322.

<sup>39</sup> Fang Peilin, “Cong Bu jingqi de Zhongguo Dianying Shuodao Bujing de Wenti” [From unprosperous Chinese Cinema to the issue of Set Design], *Shidai Dianying*, 2, (1934): 38-41.

<sup>40</sup> Wu Yonggang, “Lun Dianying Bujing” [On Film Set], *Yisheng*, 2, no. 4 (1936): 5-6.

<sup>41</sup> Juan Antonio Ramírez, *Architecture for the Screen*, 62.

<sup>42</sup> The only exception is the pavilion scene mentioned above, where the painting breaks any internal frame.

suggest to the audience that the world did not end here, but somewhere afar. Recognizing the backdrop as a painting undoubtedly exposed the constructedness of the world, but the intention of the filmmakers was nevertheless acknowledged, and the audience could still choose to believe, to allow their imagination go with and beyond a painted reality. Of course, the backdrop might remind them of the constraints of the war, and thus lead to further reflections on contemporary reality, but this was certainly not part of the design of the filmmaker.



Fig. 5.11 Painted backdrop in Emperor Gaozong's room

The sets of *Empress Wu* and the way they are presented in the film primarily aim to engage the audience in a full-fledged cinematic world. Besides inviting the audience into an intricately designed, sumptuous ancient palace, the filmmaker also presents various visual puzzles to keep the audience interested in world and elicit their active participation. Although not all the techniques could work effectively as the filmmaker hoped, and moments of disbelief might occur from time to time, generally speaking, the film captured its audience in a vivid

world with full details. The Tang dynasty palace is consistently lit with bright light, leaving the wartime reality on the other side of the two-way mirror in relative darkness. With a strong sense of one space opening up to another rather than ending with a solid surface, little light is bounced back at the world of the audience.

### ***Confucius* and Symbolic Distancing Space**

In Fang Peilin's portrayal of the Tang palace, walls are barely visible.<sup>43</sup> They are either supplemented by screens and doorframes or concealed in the shots. But in Fei Mu's *Confucius* walls are featured significantly in set design. Not only are the characters constantly filmed against an empty wall, the frequent use of near-blank backdrops often makes it difficult to discern whether the characters are in front of a vast open field or a solid white wall. The set design is symbolic and simple, and it often depends on a few pieces of objects and furniture to indicate rather than depict a place. In contrast to Fang Peilin's endeavor to recreate a past world in fullest details, even suggesting how it expands beyond the screen space, Fei Mu's sets seem to imply that the space we see is but a mirage in the vast unknown desert of history. As he clearly states before the opening credits, the film barely presents one ten-thousandth of Confucius' life. If the audience senses the real, it is but a reflection of their own emotion and impression. The spatial design of *Confucius* also suggests that the real is not in what they see immediately, but in the feelings that the space generates.

Fei Mu's brother Fei Kang delved into the material details of the Spring and Autumn Period for the enhancement of historical accuracy, but the result is not much more satisfactory

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<sup>43</sup> The scene of a military coup is filmed entirely in front the city wall. But what I refer to here is walls in palace rooms.

than other similar endeavors.<sup>44</sup> The Fei brothers were keenly aware, and somehow reflected in the set design, that whatever they were able to discover and recreate were but fragmented details from the past. It was largely impossible to represent an ancient world in its entirety. Fei Kang's original sketches are lost, but his basic conceptions were encapsulated in Dong Tianye's woodblock prints of twenty-four scenes from *Confucius*, which incorporated Fei Kang's design.<sup>45</sup> The prints were completed in the fashion of narrative illustrations that prioritize characters' actions, while the minimalist portrayal of the surroundings and the emptiness of the space closely resemble the actual sets in the film.<sup>46</sup> The omission of background details was common to Chinese pictorial tradition, but as the two-dimensional space on paper transforms into a three-dimensional set, such style becomes unsettling, at least unconventional, due to cinema's close association with realism.

In fact, *Confucius* was not Fei Mu's first experiment with symbolic sets. The making of the opera film *Murder in the Oratory* (*Zhan Jingtang*, 1937) had already brought his attention to the issue of cinematic space as too "realistic" for the expressive (*xie yi*) aesthetics of traditional Chinese opera. In his last pre-war film, an eleven-minute short, *Nightmares in the Spring Chamber* (*Chungui Duanmeng*, 1937), Fei borrowed techniques from German Expressionism to create a horrific atmosphere in a near-empty room, forcefully breaking the taken-for-granted

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<sup>44</sup> According to Fei Mu's daughter, Fei Mu's second brother Fei Kang volunteered to do historical search for the film, and sketched drawings of decorative patterns, chariot styles and costume designs. See Barbara Fei "Zhuiyi Guangying Gumeng" [Recollecting the old dreams of shadow and light], *Fei Mu Dianying Kong Fuzi* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Dianying Ziliao Guan, 2010), 12.

<sup>45</sup> These prints are titled "*Kong Fuzi huayi*" (Pictorial Expression of *Confucius*), published in Minhua Company's *Special Issue on Confucius*. Barbara Fei claims that Fei Kang invited Dong to make his sketches into woodblock prints, but to what extent the prints preserve Fei Kang's original design is not clear. It is also possible that these prints were actually completely after or during the shooting of the film.

<sup>46</sup> In the film credits, Fei Kang is listed under "archeology," and Zhang Hanchen as the person in charge of "settings." Given the highly unconventional style of the sets, I tend to understand "settings" here as set construction rather than set design, and give the credit of "design" to Fei Kang and Fei Mu. Zhang Hanchen was a disciple of Fang Peilin in the 1920s, and worked with Fei Mu on *Song of China* (*Tian Lun*, 1935).

connection between film and realistic space.<sup>47</sup> Set design in *Confucius* is, to some extent, a continuation of such attempts, but the overarching concern changed from portraying the appalling threat of the approaching war to the representation of the ancient in the midst of the war. If in *Nightmares*, the circumstance of dreams allowed Fei to explore the possibility of unrealistic space in cinema, the inability to realistically recreate an ancient world in *Confucius*, both because of the huge historical distance and wartime conditions, compelled Fei to depart from realism, or at least from the kind of realistic set construction as in Fang's *Empress Wu*. Instead of deceiving the audience into a "real world," Fei's sets reflect on the very constraints of their construction and convey the sense of loss and predicament he shares with Confucius in the time of turmoil. Through such reflections, Fei places the audience in an uneasy spectatorial position, distancing them from the diegetic space to look introspectively into their own feelings.

#### a) Recycled Objects, Under-defined Space

*Confucius* announces a budget of 16,000 yuan, almost twenty times as much as an average film of its time, and took about ten months to finish.<sup>48</sup> But even with such generous financial support from the newly founded Minhua Company, Fei Mu still had to make artistic compromises for budget concerns. Fei's perfectionist insistence on the quality of the film during the production has often been mentioned in terms of eight hours of character make-up before shooting, spending 30,000 yuan on the making of the music alone, meticulous composition and repeated takes of the same shot, and waiting for weeks for the real snow.<sup>49</sup> However, the sets

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<sup>47</sup> *Nightmares in the Spring Chamber* is part of *Lianhua Symphony*, which consists of eight shorts by directors from the Lianhua Film Company. It was also Fei Mu's last film before the making of *Confucius*.

<sup>48</sup> Jin Shenghua, "Fuqin yu Kong Fuzi" [My father and *Confucius*], *Fei Mu Dianying Kong Fuzi* (Hong Kong: Xianggang Dianying Ziliaoguan, 2010), 14 -19.

<sup>49</sup> "Kong Fuzi Jinxun" [Latest News on *Confucius*], *Shenbao*, February 3, 1940, 14. Wei Nuo, "Kong fuzi yu Tang Huaiqiu" [*Confucius* and Tang Huaiqiu], *Liyuan Huakan* 87, (1940): 21.

seem to tell us a different story. If we pay close attention to the sets and props of the palaces in *Confucius*, it is surprising that the majority of these objects, from door panels to candle holders, are actually from *Empress Wu*. Why would Fei Mu agree to reuse these objects designed for a Tang palace in his depiction of the Spring and Autumn Period (771-476 BC) about a millennium earlier? How did he get hold of them from the Xinhua Company? These questions could not be easily answered with existing materials, but they nonetheless demonstrate the circulation of props among different studios in the wartime. With the exception of a few traceable material details, the ancient was, and had to be, treated as a monolithic concept in set design.

Fei not only recycled existing objects, but also circulated them among different sets in his own film. The throne and its matching screen in the meeting room of *Empress* are featured in three palaces in *Confucius*.<sup>50</sup> In the palace of Lu, they are framed behind a set of draperies and further accentuated by dragon panel fences that are also borrowed from *Empress*. In a brief scene of the conversation between Confucius and the Duke Ling of Wei, the same throne is placed diagonally against a wall in a tightly framed shot, whereas the screen appears in the palace of Qi behind the duke's fur-coved chair. Similarly, an elaborately carved table from *Empress* is also featured in palaces of Wei, Lu and Jin. Since the transitions between different palaces are mostly explained by inter- titles, a readily recognizable visual character of each place becomes less crucial. The palace halls are generically presented as an empty interior space supported by columns, with small variations in steps, pavements, and throne setups. The repeated use of the same objects further reinforces the feeling of similarity. One could probably push for an ideological interpretation of such indifferenciation (as Fei Mu was certainly critical of all the dukes featured in the film), but for the purpose of this chapter, such lack of clear traits of each

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<sup>50</sup> Fang also recycled certain objects in different sets. The screen is used in Empress Wu's chamber as well, and a delicately carved table appears in several scenes throughout the film. But given the plethora of objects appeared in the film, such circulation seems rather minor.

palace hall contributes to a sense of under-defined space – under-defined both in terms of visual details and spatial boundaries.

In the palace scenes, one rarely gets a complete sense of an interior space. Even in an establishing shot of a palace hall, it often feels that what we see on screen is only a small portion of a much larger space. (Fig. 5.12) This is mainly because Fei only built compartments of sets, or more precisely, he only made use of a segment of a larger but unfinished set that bore the most basic features of a hall. A typical interior set requires at least three intersecting surfaces, two walls and a floor, to delineate a three-dimensional space, whereas Fei Mu's sets often reveals just one wall in the back, or parallel rather than intersecting walls, unbounding the space from the two sides. His sets are built for carefully designed shots rather than as a fully defined space where actions take place.



Fig. 5.12 The Court of Qi in *Confucius*

Fei develops two techniques to film such space: one is to create a symmetrical deep space with the wall at the end, and the other is to stage actions along the wall. In a long or extreme long shot of a hall, he uses columns and lined-up extras to form a focusing zone and create a sense of depth. The perfect symmetrical framing imbues the otherwise austere space a majestic feeling. But such composition per se also becomes a generic feature of all the palace halls. The result is a somehow vague impression of *a* hall, or even *a part of* a hall, rather than *the* hall of a particular palace. If in these establishing shots, Fei still makes certain efforts to distinguish the spaces, the tendency to abstract or extract space from a well-defined place becomes more evident in his second technique. Minor scenes are often staged right against a wall, with very few if any visual cues to help the viewers imagine the rest of the palace.

#### **b) Multiplied Spatial Experiences**

Fei Mu did not settle with a minimalist representation of space. The sets in *Confucius* retain the impressive quality even today not just because of its unusual austerity, but due to the rich and unique spatial experiences generated out of very simple set designs. The scene of the Duke Jing of Qi and his official Li Chu plotting to drive a wedge between the Duke Ding of Lu and Confucius is staged along an extended wall. It starts with the Duke Jing of Qi expressing his worry for Confucius' rising influence in the State of Lu. Behind him are two soldiers guarding an arched doorway, and another servant stands in front of him with his back facing the camera. As the duke walks to the left after his speech and gradually exits the screen space, Li enters the frame from the right and occupies the duke's previous position, announcing his scheme of inviting the Duke Ding of Lu to meet at Jia Valley. Li pauses before revealing the real purpose of the meeting, and the camera follows him to the left until he is blocked by a newly revealed

folding screen in the foreground. After staying with the screen over a brief moment of silence, the camera keeps panning to the left with the Duke Jing of Qi pacing out from the left end of the screen. It then cuts to a medium-long shot of the duke against the wall, turning around to the camera with a concerned look. The firm voice of Li comes from off-screen, claiming that he is willing to receive punishment if the plan fails. Separated by an elaborate sequence of how Confucius defeats Li's scheme and strengthens the State of Lu, Fei Mu brings the audience back to the exactly same setting and reverses the camera movement from the enraged duke on the left to show Li being carried out from the right end of the screen and pushed to the ground. Similar to the earlier sequence, it is followed by a low-angle shot of Li struggling to redeem himself with a second scheme, and ended with the off-screen inquiry of the duke.

These paired two-shot sequences that bracket the pinnacle of Confucius' political achievement obtain a rhythmic quality through the reverse camera movements, the revealing and concealing of the characters, and their mirroring structures. Followed by the success of Li's second scheme that leads to Confucius' resignation, it also charts the rise and fall of Confucius' official career with the camera's swinging trajectory in space. Such sophisticated design is realized in a very basic setting: a wall, a screen, a throne that is almost entirely blocked by the screen, and several extras. The black screen that looks unfamiliar at the first sight is in fact the backside of the reappeared dragon screen borrowed from *Empress*. Fei's ingenious use of its reverse side not only defamiliarizes the audience but also better suits the plotting atmosphere with its darkened color tone. The unrealistic spatial placement of the screen and the throne becomes less noticeable as spectators' sense of space in these two scenes gravitates towards the folding screen that hides and releases dramatic tensions.

The wall in the back is in fact made of two different compartments as their unmatched patterns suggest, with the seam line concealed behind a column. The part of the arched doorway on the right is used in two more scenes later in the film. One shows Confucius' disciple, Zilu, sharpening his sword in front of the sealed gate. With strong and focused light shedding on his body, Zilu casts a dramatic shadow on the wall behind him (Fig. 5.13). In the other scene that shows the son of Duke Ling of Wei in exile, the sealed gate is turned into a real doorway opening to a walled courtyard. Bathing in the bright daylight, the set is hardly recognizable as the same one in the night scene of Zilu (Fig. 5.14).<sup>51</sup> Strictly speaking, the wall with the arched doorway is not a set but a compartment that Fei Mu uses to assemble different sets, although he occasionally makes one compartment an entire set. The method of rearranging compartments to make multiple sets significantly reduces production costs, and more importantly the amorphous quality of the sets further reinforces the sense of under-defined space while providing a diversity of spatial experiences.



Fig. 5.13 Zilu sharpening his sword in front of the arched doorway

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<sup>51</sup> The two scenes are only loosely related by the fact that the rebellion plotted under the doorway is going to cause the death of Zilu. It is possible that Fei intentionally uses the same set to indicate this underlining narrative connection, but such hint would be too subtle for anyone to get in the first viewing.



Fig. 5.14 The same doorway in a different set

Fei Mu's assembled compartments are also capable of producing more complicated sets. In contrast to the simplicity of the overall design style, two sets stand out for their sumptuousness: the lounge of Duke Ding of Lu and the chamber of Nanzi, the wife of Duke Ling of Wei. Even so, they are still primarily defined by parallel walls and/or curtains, and are mostly made of the same set of compartments. Three layers of draperies intimately frame the inner part of the duke's lounge, where he is entertained by two dancing girls (Fig 5.15a). An official waits for him in the outer lounge, which also features three layers of curtains. But framed on the edges of the screen, the curtains lose their visual dominance as in the inner part, while the wooden frame and two rows of dragon panels that occupy the center imbue the space a feeling of solemnity (Fig 5.15b). However, the sound design and editing of the sequence suggests that the inner and outer are merely separated by the thin curtain closed behind the wooden frame, which can hardly restrain the lust of the licentious duke as the film later reveals.



Fig. 5.15a The inner part of Duke Ding of Lu's lounge



Fig. 5.15b The outer part of Duke Ding of Lu's lounge

In the chamber of Nanzi, layered draperies are replaced by four parallel doorframes that lead to the bed at the end of the space. The layout is reminiscent of Fang's design in *Empress*, whereas Fei blows the bed area into a full size room (Fig. 5.16).<sup>52</sup> The scene also provides the only instance in the film where Fei uses panning shots to manifest the perpendicular positioning of two parts of a set - the courtyard and the inner chamber, a technique that Fang frequently employs to showcase his elaborately built sets. But for Fei Mu, this exceptionally complex set serves more than a demonstration of the luxurious palace.



Fig. 5.16 the Chamber of Nanzi

Introduced by Song Zhao's visit of his former lover, Nanzi, the space of the chamber is revealed through Zhao, although not from his perspective since the camera often anticipates his movement and gaze. In other words, the audience sees with him not through him. His hesitant movements and constant looking around suggest he is trying to orient himself and locate his

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<sup>52</sup> Whether or not Fei Mu was inspired by Fang's design is not the concern here. But the comparison is especially striking since the dragon pattern fences are literally borrowed from *Empress Wu*.

lover in this labyrinthine space. Fei Mu's portrayal of the repressed joy and refrained behaviors during the two lovers' reunion will be further developed in his future masterpiece *Spring in a Small Town* (1948). Without condemning the historically notorious Nanzi for her debauchery, Fei uses the layered depth of the chamber to imply her entrapment, as well as Zhao's sense of loss in the unfamiliar space. Although it would be an oversimplification to claim that complex deep space always contains negative connotations in *Confucius*, it is clearly not the dominant spatial experience that Fei aims at. He emphasizes horizontal expansion over depth, and even a sense of dissolved space.

### c) Confucius and Dissolved Space

Confucius in Fei Mu's depiction is also entrapped and lost in the unknown, but never gives up fighting. Citing Carl Crow's *Master Kung*, Fei differentiates "Confucius the man" (Kong fuzi) from "Confucius the sage" (Kong shengren).<sup>53</sup> The Chinese title of the film *Kong Fuzi* manifests Fei's endeavors to show the former, "a sincere gentleman in flesh and blood ... who had experienced the pain of shattered dreams and helplessness like no one else, and called his life a failure on deathbed."<sup>54</sup> For Fei Mu, this humanized Confucius is far from being ordinary, and his failure is not a personal matter but doomed by his times. Living in an equally violent and troubled time, maybe even worse, Fei had no intention to invite the audience into Confucius' world, but to push them to reflect on their own times through it, to rethink their situations through Confucius' suffering and persistence.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Fei Mu, "Da Fu" [Reply to Fang Dian and Ying Weimin's 'What we hope for *Confucius*'], *Kong Fuzi Yingpian Tekan* (1940): 20.

<sup>54</sup> Fei Mu's summary of Carl Crow's explanation of Confucius the men. This can also be seen as Fei's own understanding of Confucius that he hopes to bring forth through his film.

<sup>55</sup> In Fei Mu's article "Confucius and His Times," Fei makes a clear comparison between Confucius' times and his own, noting "Confucius would never have expected that two thousand years after his times, the world is still in a total mess." See Fei Mu, "Kong Fuzi jiqi Shidai" in *Kong Fuzi Tekan*, (1940): 9-10.

Windows are featured significantly in Confucius living space. Often represented by a bare rectangular opening with no window panel or frame, they are strikingly unrealistic to the extent that they tend to call attention to themselves. This effect is most evident in the scene of Confucius pondering over his capability to change his world. The set includes a zither on a stand, a cushion on the floor, and above them, a large window. Instead of revealing a world beyond, the window appears more like a picture frame that shows several branches and shadowy hills on a blank canvas (Fig. 5.17). It almost becomes a decorative image on the wall that creates no sense of depth. Confucius slowly steps to the left and turns to the window, presumably looking into the distance. But the flatness of the window view seems to reject an outward projection of gaze. The shot presents an image of contemplation, of Confucius introspective inquiry into his role in his times.



Fig. 5.17 Confucius with a flattened window view

A similar effect of flattened window scene appears after the death of Confucius' favorite student Yan Hui, but this time with the camera looking from the exterior into the window. A

leafless branch casts abstract shadows on a wall, in the middle of which is a small window that opens to a doorway with a tied-up curtain. (Fig. 5.18) Confucius slowly passes the doorway and approaches the window. Zilu follows him and steps to the right, revealing Zigong on the left behind the doorway. The doorway within the window tends to flatten rather than deepen the space since there is no distinctive difference in the space it separates, and it is, like the window, made of a thin cardboard that lacks three-dimensionality in itself. It serves as a frame-within-the-window frame that accentuates the position of Confucius, as a threshold of life and death as we know from the earlier part of the sequence that Yan Hui's body lies right beyond it. Death and disillusion are not just haunting behind Confucius, but also looms over his future, as indicated by the shadow of the bare tree that envelops his belittled figure. The shot symbolical encapsulates Confucius' sorrow and vulnerability, and it addresses the audience not only through Confucius' helpless gaze, but also with the screen-like frame on a flat surface that reminds the audience of their spectatorship.



Fig. 5.18 Confucius in a flattened window view

As walls in *Confucius* are often made of white cardboards, the open air is usually represented by a blank backdrop, making the two difficult to differentiate. The courtyard of Nanzi's chamber feels like a narrow space closed with a blank wall behind the pine tree and the statue of Immortal Receiving Heavenly Dew.<sup>56</sup> However, the moon shining right above the pine tree suggests that there is no solid wall but a void (Fig. 5.19). Similarly, Confucius' lecture on the Doctrine of the Mean takes place against a plain background, only the bamboos next to him indicate it is in an exterior space (Fig. 5.20). Sometimes, the audience has to depend on the shadows to tell if what is behind is a wall or empty space, like in the scene of Confucius announcing his decision to end his fourteen-year expedition. To some extent, such treatment can be seen as a compromise to the lack of access to location shooting that Fei failed to secure despite his eager attempts.<sup>57</sup> Although he filled an entire canal in the old Lianhua Studio that he rented and turned it into hills for some of the outdoor settings, he still had to set up many exterior scenes in interior space.<sup>58</sup> Backdrops become indispensable in such circumstance. But the choice not to paint the backdrop, or only paint minimally with shadowy hills and tiny architectures, requires further explanation.

Like empty interior sets, blank or near-blank backdrops also contribute to a sense of under-defined space, a large field, an overarching sky or a void. Fei Mu sometimes constructs small mounds and plant trees to create a relatively realistic, at least concrete, foreground. But without much effort to indicate how the space extends beyond, the background dissolves into the vast unknown. Such effect works well in the depiction of Confucius' expedition, which is by and

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<sup>56</sup> The statue of a figure holding a flat plate above the head is known *Chenglu Xianren*. It is based on a legend about Emperor Wu of Han. One of such statues made in the Qing Dynasty can still be found at Beihai Park in Beijing. I want to thank Prof. Wu Hung for identifying this statue for me.

<sup>57</sup> Fei Mu made plans to film outside the studio in Xujiahui, but eventually gave up for safety reasons. See *Zhongguo Yingxun*, 1, 23 (1940): 179.

<sup>58</sup> Liu Shui, "Kong Fuzi Jiajin Gongzuo" [Intensified Production of Confucius], *Qingqing Dianying* 5, no.4 (1940): 5.

large a journey into the unknown future, and his feeling of stagnation and loss resonate nicely with the unfathomable depth of the space. However, his consistent employment of such method throughout the film, especially in palace scenes where the plasticity of the built sets contrast alarmingly with the disappeared background, demonstrates that Fei does not simply use it to serve narrative purposes. Known for his style of “eliminating the unnecessary while stressing the essential,” Fei’s penchant for simple set design is pushed to such an extreme in *Confucius* that it exceeds a pure aesthetic choice.<sup>59</sup> As his first history film, and also the first film he made during the war, *Confucius* resulted from Fei’s careful reflection on his role as a filmmaker in the Orphan Island and manifested his determination to differentiate his work from the popular trend of ancient costume films in 1940.



Fig. 5.19 Blank background of the courtyard

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<sup>59</sup> Fei Mu’s principle of “eliminating the unnecessary while stressing the essential” is put forth in his famous article “Luetan Kongqi” [Minor reflections on “air”], *Shidai Dianying* 6, (1934).



Fig. 5.20 Empty background in Confucius' lecture on the Doctrine of Mean

Instead of calling the audience to witness the past as happening, Fei is more interested in showing historical distance, compelling the audience to ponder their relation to the world they see on screen. His sets therefore contribute to an overall low light intensity of the screen world that helps to generate reflections on the two-way mirror. The minimalist and stylized sets in *Confucius* is comparable to the abstract space in Carl Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). But in contrast to Dreyer's obsessive use of closeups of faces, or the substantiation of history with camera realism as Kracauer puts it,<sup>60</sup> Fei Mu favors long shots and rarely isolates his characters from the spatial context not matter how under-defined or unrealistic that space is. Space is under-defined because it is indefinable, and it is precisely through the emptiness of the sets and the void beyond that Fei reveals his position of representing history from afar.

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<sup>60</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, 80.

Besides set design, Fei Mu uses a set of distancing devices, such as slow character movement, fragmented editing, dissolved causal relation, and intertitles and maps, to anchor the audience in a historical vantage point. The result is a “slide-show like lecture” as some viewers complained.<sup>61</sup> Many intertitles are direct quotations from the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) historiography *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*), which serve as another layer of historical mediation that further distance the audience from the diegetic world of Confucius. The map, however, can be seen as an important piece of set used throughout the film even though it functions at a different scale from other sets. On the narrative level, it is extra-diegetic since no character in the film sees or uses it. As Tom Conley articulates, “when a map in a film locates the geography of its narrative, it also tells us that we are not where it says it is taking place.”<sup>62</sup> But the significance of the map in *Confucius* is not simply in the elaboration of where the narrative takes place, but to suggest, from the very beginning of the film, the viewing perspective of the audience.

The first shot of *Confucius* after the opening credits presents a relief map of the Spring and Autumn period (771-476 BC). Made of clay with carefully created elevations and depressions, the map not only assumes an imagined aerial view of the geography of China, but also literally embodies the land of China through its very materiality (Fig. 5.21). In his previous film *Nightmares of the Spring Chamber*, Fei Mu uses a leaf to symbolize the map of China, stressing the nationalist implication of the film.<sup>63</sup> And the clay map that opens *Confucius* is a more unmistakable manifestation. Although marked with names of ancient Chinese states, the familiar contour of the coastline and the shape of major rivers and mountains manifest the continuity between ancient and contemporary China, prompting the audience to reflect on their

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<sup>61</sup> Liu Yizhuan, “Wuzi Tianshu Kong Fuzi” [*Confucius*, an unreadable book], *Yingju Congkan* 1, (1948): 21-23.

<sup>62</sup> Tom Conley, *Cartographic Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2007), 3-4.

<sup>63</sup> The map of Republican China included what is now the Mongolia, and assumed the shape of a leaf.

own relation to the film, and hence why they should care. Throughout the film, Fei Mu frequently superimposes actions onto the map, blurring the boundary between the diegetic and non-diegetic.



Fig. 5.21 Clay map in *Confucius*

There was probably no clearly defined, coherent diegetic world for Fei Mu to begin with, as he purposefully revealed his struggles in recreating a historical world from distance. He saw such attempts as “bold and audacious” but necessary, as if answering to an irresistible call.<sup>64</sup> Fei was aware that his film would dissatisfy many people, but he firmly rejected the reduction of his work into an easily comprehensible metaphor of the past. Providing no easy access to a historical

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<sup>64</sup> *Zhongguo Shangbao*, June 4, 1940, 6. Fei Mu is not simply being modest in referring to his filmmaking effort as bold and audacious (*danda wangwei*). It is not difficult to tell from his cautious treatment of the film that he indeed had huge respect for Confucius.

world, Fei Mu invites the audience to reflect with him on the significance and relevance of Confucius to their contemporary lives.

### **Exhibited Self-effacing Space in *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming***

While *Wu Zetian* entices the audience into a spectacular world of the past and *Confucius* distances the audience to allow room for reflection, the sets in both films are conspicuous in their unique appearance. Our third example *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming* differs from them in the self-effacing quality of its sets.<sup>65</sup> Adapted from a record-breaking spoken drama of the same title, the film primarily aims to preserve the essence of the stage performance with the sets quietly receding to the background. Like *Confucius*, *Sorrow* also strives to heighten the audience's awareness of present situation, but instead of constructing a reflexive space, the conversation of the characters functions as the major means to convey a straightforward didactic message. However, if we pay close attention to the easily neglectable sets behind the characters, the tension between keeping the sense of urgency and intense reflexivity of the stage performance and the desire to create an immersive cinema world of the late Ming becomes palpable.

A Ying's spoken drama play *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming* achieved phenomenal success not only for its record of running nearly 70 performances over 35 days, but more importantly for its reputation as a patriotic play that most expressively promoted the spirit of resistance in the Orphan Island up to its time. Centering on a courtesan-turned-warrior Ge Nenniang and her patron Sun Kexian, the play depicts the anti-Manchu efforts by people from varied backgrounds after the fall of the Ming dynasty – an unmistakable metaphor of the

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<sup>65</sup> The concept of “self-effacing set” is inspired by Tom Gunning's talk at the Conference of Bazin@100 at the University of Chicago on October 12, 2018.

contemporary war of resistance against Japan.<sup>66</sup> Compared to earlier ancient costume films and spoken dramas that always carefully hint at the wartime situation, this play galvanizes the public for its open call for resistance, providing people a channel to release their repressed desire for direct expression of nationalist sentiment. The unprecedented sensation it caused attracted Zhang Shankun to put *Sorrow* on the silver screen, which was released within three months of the stage premiere. Instead of hiring the stage director Wu Yonggang, who was also a veteran film director and was working for Zhang's film company at the time, Zhang Shankun appointed himself as the director of the film.<sup>67</sup>

Given the political significance and the popularity of the stage version, it is not hard to understand why the film is closely modeled after the spoken drama. The sets, which are also created by Fang Peilin, bear clear resemblances with the stage design, which was highly received and considered as one of the key factors that contributed to the success of the play.<sup>68</sup> Except for the third act that is moved from the open air to a deserted temple, the space in the other three major scenes are all reminiscent of the stage set.<sup>69</sup> In the first stage act, the pairing of “beauty rest” with plantain leaves and a live parrot delineates a delicate courtesan house in Jiangnan. (Fig. 5.22). In act two, shadows of plantain trees are projected on the background wall, indicating a garden space beyond the stage. A foldable screen and an armchair occupy one end of the stage and a set of table and chair stands on the other side. It is interesting to note that the screen, chair and candleholder used in the palaces in both *Empress Wu* and *Confucius* appear again here,

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<sup>66</sup> For more detailed discussion of the play, see Edward Gunn, *Unwelcome Muse: Chinese Literature in Shanghai and Peiking 1937- 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 119-127; Chang-tai Hung, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937 – 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 70-72.

<sup>67</sup> *Sorrow* is the second film Zhang Shankun directed himself. The first one is also an ancient costume film, *Queen for One Night* (*Yiye Huanghou*, 1939), starring the rising female actress Chen Yunshang.

<sup>68</sup> *Qingqing Diaying* 4, no. 34 (1939): 15.

<sup>69</sup> The stage set of the third act also makes a brief appearance in the film when Nenniangu introduces the female peasant warrior Ma Jinzi to Sun Kexian.

probably to signify the opulence of traitor Zheng Zhilong's home, as suggested in the script of the play (Fig. 5.23).<sup>70</sup> In the Manchu official's lounge in the last act, all the pieces of furniture are arranged along the walls, preserving the middle of the stage for the climax scene. These basic layouts are all inherited by the sets of the film.



Fig. 5.22 The courtesan House in *Sorrow of the Fall of the Ming* (*Liangyou*, no. 149, 1939)



Fig. 5.23 Act Two: Zheng Zhilong's mansion. (*Liangyou*, no. 149, 1939)

<sup>70</sup> The photos of this act show two different sets of the furniture. Besides the dragon panel and throne that are used in *Empress Wu* and *Confucius*, a freestanding screen with a round pattern that symbolizes fortune in the middle and bats at the four corners is also used. This screen appears in the film version, but instead of occupying a central position in the room, it is set against a wall and becomes less noticeable.

Unlike in theater where the seat arrangement fixes the viewers' perspectives, the movement and changing positions of the camera in films require the construction of fuller sets. In the scene of the pleasure quarter, for example, the courtesan house represented by a row of beauty rest, a curtained doorway and a table on stage is transformed into an entire apartment. Nenniāng's boudoir, which was only indicated by the curtain on stage, is fully constructed and hosts a lengthy conversation in the film. Potted plants, hanging scrolls, decorative spatial dividers and patterned windows all contribute to an exquisite environment of a refined courtesan house. The plantain leaves outside the beauty rest are replaced by the Qinhuai River, with boats occasionally passing by. Opposite to the beauty rest is an entrance door to a bamboo courtyard, enclosing the room with a sense of completeness. Typical to Fang's design, the sets in *Sorrow* are sophisticated in its spatial structure and rich in visual details, but they obtain a self-effacing quality rather than inviting the audience into the space as in *Empress Wu*.

Self-effacing sets evade audience's attention when the dramatic tension between the characters starts to evolve. They are somehow similar to Affron & Affron's definition of "set as denotation" in their relative transparency through conventional application of generic and cultural codes. But instead of seeing self-effacing as an intrinsic nature of the "low-budget, often stock, forgettable, rhetorically and stylistically undistinguished" sets,<sup>71</sup> it should be understood here as a combined result of naturalistic set design, adaptation strategy, and framing. Moreover, the purpose to emphasize the self-effacing quality here is not to stress the low level of narrative weight that the set carries, but to demonstrate how the light on sets is dimmed to foreground the characters as the mediator between past and present. And in contrast to the literal omission of background details in *Confucius*, the set in *Sorrow* "effaces" itself precisely because of its

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<sup>71</sup> Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron, *Sets in Motion*, 37.

realistic and familiar appearance. It implies the audience's comfort with the unobtrusive background that the sets create, the approval that "this is the way the place should be."

The self-effacing quality of the set in *Sorrow* is partially inherited from its stage precursor. Spoken drama in the 1930s often preferred realistic and unobtrusive design in order to differentiate itself from the lack of sets in traditional opera performance and the excessive use of special effects and marvelous trick settings (*jiguan bujing*) in new drama or civilized play. Sets in spoken dramas often remain unchanged throughout an act. After making an initial impression, they no longer call attention to themselves unless deliberately activated by the actors. In *Sorrow*, characters' lack of interaction with and awareness of the environment around them further pushes the set to the periphery of audience's attention. The whole focus is placed on the expressive speeches of the characters, which draw clear parallels between the situations of the South Ming and the historical present, as we will see in chapter 6. The subordination of sets to characters' performance is further reinforced by the framing of the shots. With only a few exceptions, characters always occupy the middle of the screen, an unmistakable sign of their dominating position. While the shot scales alternate between long shots that show characters interactions with each other and close-ups or medium close-ups that accentuate individual emotions, the characters remain the center of the frame. These shots not only tend to assume the best possible view of characters' performance, but also notify the audience what they should pay attention to, which is typical to the documentation of stage performance. It seems evident that cinematic mediation emphasizes the centrality of characters in conveying the historical metaphor of the present.

However, as we shift the focus from the center to the peripheral, the self-effacing sets start to reveal more complicated concerns: instead of simply filling the background, the sets in

fact often determines the position of the characters and the camera. Despite the fact that character's performance indisputably dominates the attention of the audience in each individual shot, the background often betrays the continuity of their edited movement. That is to say, the characters sometimes shift their positions from one shot to the next in order to stay at the center of a pre-fixed frame - the very opposite of stage documentation where the camera follows the natural movements of the characters in space. Over the course of a conversation, the camera would change positions not just to give the best view of the characters, but to showcase different sections of the sets, framing the characters against different backgrounds, sometimes even with a 180 degree turn. In this sense, the sets are not completely subordinated to the characters, at least not during the production process.

The simultaneously displayed and effaced sets in *Sorrow* should be understood in term of the dual aims in the cinematic adaption of the play – to maximally preserve the immediate power of the stage performance and to orient the characters in a convincing and appealing space. Although self-effacing space is by no means a unique feature of spoken drama, in fact many filmmakers claim that the best film sets are those go by under detected,<sup>72</sup> it is not typical to ancient costume films which are often featured by sumptuous sets and costumes. Clearly, Zhang Shankun was not ready to completely let go the attraction of the sets or settle with filmed theatre. Since the performance had to stay faithful to the stage, the cinematization of the play mostly relied on the transformation of the stage space into a cinematic world. Besides expanding the stage sets, Zhang also frequently made use of shot compositions to “conceal” traces of the space stage, converting the width of the stage into the depth of a shot. The characters were therefore placed between a foreground, usually a table or window frame, and a background (Fig. 5.24).

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<sup>72</sup> Affron and Affron, *Sets in Motion*, 44.

Although they still stayed at the center of a frame, the deep space help to erase traces of the wide stage.



Fig. 5.24 Zheng Zhilong's mansion shot from the window frame

The intention to fulfill the genre expectation is most evident at the beginning of the film where two exterior scenes immediately bring the audience to the historical past. The film opens with a montage of an ancient army attacking a city gate, with superimposed text explaining the historical background of the late Ming. It is followed, and contrasted, by a peaceful and poetic scene of the Qinhuai River, the famous pleasure quarter of the Ming dynasty. Figures in ancient costumes gather in a pavilion on the riverbank, or sit on the rolling boats. A high-arched stone bridge stands in distance, half blocked by a leaning willow tree next to a row of beauty rest. As the singing voice of a girl permeates the space, it cuts to the interior of a painted boat (*hua fang*) where Nenniang is singing next to a group of male patrons. Without access to location, these two elaborate outdoor sets were built entirely in the Clove Garden, not to serve any specific narrative function, but for the delineation of the world of the characters. The endeavor to create these

opening scenes manifests Zhang Shankun's ambition to situate the characters in an immersive cinematic world that was unrepresentable on stage.<sup>73</sup> However, as the film proceeds, this promise delivered at the beginning gradually fades away, and the attention that the set initially attracts shifts to the characters as soon as the diegetic sound comes in. The dominating role of sound in *Sorrow* will be discussed in the next chapter, but the tension between displaying and "effacing" the sets already well demonstrates Zhang Shankun's ambivalence in making of the adaptation.

Zhang's struggle between preserving and cinematizing the stage might seem to be aesthetic choices, a tension between the media specificities of theater and cinema, but the deeper motivation was political, and it also reflected the different political status of the two art forms. In his study of the relation between theater and cinema, André Bazin identifies cinema's "inferiority complex" in face of the older and more literary art of theater, and therefore "proceeds to overcompensate by the 'superiority' of its technique – which in turn is mistaken for an aesthetic superiority."<sup>74</sup> In wartime Shanghai, cinema's "inferiority complex" had less to do with the artistic maturity since the history of spoken drama was not much longer than cinema,<sup>75</sup> but more in terms of the degree of political "progressiveness." Spoken drama enjoyed clear political superiority over cinema in wartime Shanghai. Even before the outbreak of the war, cinema was a late participant in the joint national defense effort after literature and theater.<sup>76</sup> Filmmakers who fled with the government to the hinterland tended to perceive the commercial-based film industry in the Orphan Island as "a polluted Other."<sup>77</sup> In fact, it was not just the "other" of the partially

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<sup>73</sup> "Ji Yinmu shang Yanchu de Ge Nengniang" [Ge Nanniang on Screen], *Qingqing Dianying* 5, no. 2, (1940): 18.

<sup>74</sup> André Bazin, *What is Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 86.

<sup>75</sup> The history of Chinese spoken drama is typically traced back to Chunliu Society's performance in Tokyo in 1907, which is two years after the first alleged Chinese film *Dingjun Mountain*. The term of "spoken drama" was not commonly used until the late 1920s.

<sup>76</sup> Ke Ling, "Guofang Dianying Mantan" [Thoughts on National Defense Cinema], in *Ke Ling Dianying Wencun* (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 1992), 18.

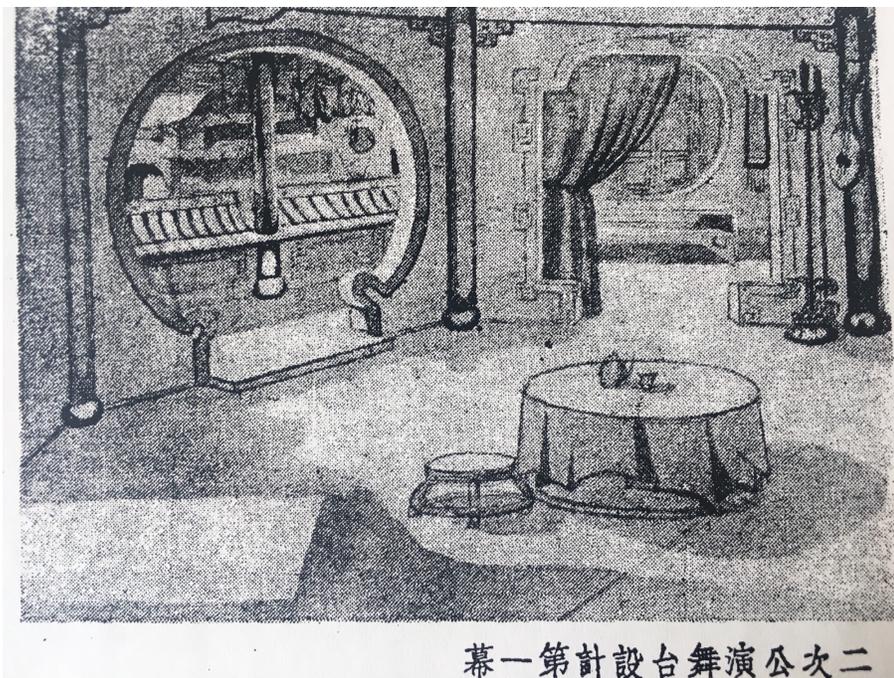
<sup>77</sup> Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.

state-run film studios in Chongqing, but also the “other” in relation to spoken drama in Shanghai, which was more progressively engaged with the national salvation movement.

This might seem deeply paradoxical given the dynamic exchange between cinema and spoken drama in the Orphan Island, but exchange does not necessarily imply equal status. Many filmmakers and actors joined spoken drama societies precisely because they were unsatisfied with the business-oriented film industry, and almost all the films that were considered as somehow “progressive” involved the participation of leftist dramatists, such as Ouyang Yuqian, A’Ying and Zhou Yibai. Such clear-cut ideological division could barely hold in reality, but was hugely influential under the dichotomized wartime mentality of loyalty and betrayal. Before the making of *Sorrow*, Zhang Shankun was on the verge of being accused as a traitor. In late 1939, Zhang Shankun and other film company owners’ in the Orphan Island “cooperated” with the Japanese in order to distribute their films in occupied regions. This collaboration shocked intellectuals in Chongqing as a sellout of Shanghai film industry and later led to the burning of *Mulan Joins the Army* produced by Zhang Shankun. Under these circumstances, Zhang was certainly eager to demonstrate his patriotism through the adaption of *Sorrow*. Above aesthetic and technological pursuits from the perspective of a filmmaker, Zhang was obliged to keep up with the politically advanced spoken drama by highlighting the film’s affinity with the stage. Too much investment in creating immersive sets with deep engaging space could be easily condemned as spoiling the seriousness of the spoken drama play. In this sense, the very production of the film well reflected the situation of Shanghai film industry during the war.

Despite the political “advancement” of spoken drama over cinema, the interaction between the two media was not one-directional, as we will see in the next chapter. But we can already have a peek at cinema’s influence on stage through the perspective of set design. When

compared to stage photographs of the first run of *Sorrow*, the drawings of its stage design for the second run are clear hybrids of stage and film sets. The plantain leaves behind the beauty rest in the first act is replaced by a backdrop of pavilions and bridge over the Qinhuai River, and the closed curtain is now tied up to reveal Nennaing's room behind it, creating a sense of depth on the stage space (fig. 5.25). In act two, a lying couch similar to that in the film set took place of the armchair during the first run, and the round window designs in both act two and four are also borrowed from the film. Although no extant photograph can prove that these designs were actually realized on stage, the fact that these drawings were published with the film script nevertheless indicates their function as visual aids to help the readers imagine the environment of the play. Just like the sets on stage and in films, they are deliberately displayed at the beginning to visually please the audience, and recede to the background or effaced entirely as the story unfolds.



幕一第計設台舞演公次二

Fig. 5.25 Stage design for the second round of performance, act 1 (*Bixue Hua*, Shanghai Guomin Shudian, 1940).

**Conclusion:**

Working exclusively with constructed sets in studios, filmmakers and set designers not only had to deal with the spatial constraints in building a world of the past, but had also take into consideration the complicated political situation that conditioned their production. Unlike ancient costume films in the late 1920s that aimed at making-believe an ancient world, the motivations to evoke the past in this period are complicated and diversified. No uniform attitudes towards set construction could be observed, as demonstrated in the three exemplary cases of spatial arrangement, but these varied treatments of the sets reflected filmmakers' various contemporary concerns under wartime situation, whether to enchant the audience through a vivid world of the past, or to compel them to think about the conditions of the war, or to manifest their own patriotic stance. How these constructed worlds of the past actually affected the audience always depends on the latter's own willingness to forget or reflect contemporary reality, but the film sets, and more importantly the way they are mediated through the camera, helped to preset the light intensity of one side of the two-way mirror.

## Chapter 6: Sounding the Ancient: Characters' Voice and the Echo of the Past

In order to gain her parents' permission to join the army, Mulan puts on her father's old armor and showcases her martial arts skills in front of them. The affirmative expression on her father's face suggests approval. Mulan asks in a sweet and affectionate voice, "What do you think, papa?" The latter replies, "Your look somehow a man, but your voice..." Mulan's smile freezes. Stunned by the comment, she opens her eyes widely and rests her hand on her throat. After a long silence, she makes three "awh" sounds, marking the transformation from a high-pitch female voice to a hoarse voice of a man. It is followed by a long shot of Mulan holding a sword by the window. As the camera slowly tracks in, she speaks in a firm and husky male voice "I swear to devote my life to the nation. Let me cut short my sorrow at departure." Interrupted by the crow of a rooster, she resumes the tone and shouts, "Attack ..."

This sequence in Bu Wancang's *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939) well demonstrates the importance and multiple functions of sound in Chinese cinema in the late 1930s. Verbal expression has become a crucial part in characters' performance, not just to deliver semantic meanings, but also for the convincing portrayal of identity. The voice of an actor/actress acquires training just like his/her bodily movements and facial expressions. The poem that Mulan utters not only demonstrates the result of her vocal practice, but also marks her profound transformation from a beloved daughter of the family to a patriotic warrior who is ready to sacrifice for the nation. This highly private moment of self-training and self-expression also functions as a moment of reflection, inviting wartime audience to resonate with Mulan's patriotism, until the sound of the

rooster reorients her in the diegetic world temporally and spatially. After a night of practice, she is now well prepared for the new role.

From the production of the first sound-on-disc Chinese film *Songstress Red Peony* in 1930, the transition from silent to sound cinema took about six years,<sup>1</sup> throughout which ancient costume films were largely absent.<sup>2</sup> When the genre reemerged in Orphan Island Shanghai, sound significantly changed the performance of ancient characters. Talking and singing take the majority of their screen time. It is always through words that didactic lessons and allusions to the present were articulated, while at the same time, comic relief and sensorial pleasure also became increasingly aural. However, the question how the ancient sounded like did not receive the same intensity of debate as the material culture of the ancient was discussed over a decade earlier.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the use of ancient costumes, no norm was established to distinguish ancient talking from modern practice. It was well accepted that ancient people spoke in films just like their contemporary counterparts. If there was a principle to follow, that was the use of *guoyu*, or “standard national language,” just like any other films produced in Shanghai besides opera films.

To some extent, Mulan’s endeavor to adopt a male voice well mirrored her impersonator Chen Yunshang’s effort to practice *guoyu* for the role. As a Cantonese film star in Hong Kong, mastering *guoyu* was the first necessary step for Chen to enter the

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<sup>1</sup> By 1936 synchronized total sound music had become the norm, and major exhibition venues had equipped to show sound films. But sporadic production of silent films continued until the end of 1930s, especially among filmmakers who fled to the hinterland. Shi Dongshan’s 1939 film *Good Husband* was a silent film, and criticized by film critics as “losing one limb” of cinema. See Xu Chi, “Dianying zhong de Yuyan Wenti” [On the Issue of Language in Cinema], *Zhongguo Dianying* 2 (1941): 33-37.

<sup>2</sup> As discussed in chapter 4, *Legend of Hong and Yang* (1934) was a rare except and marked the first sound ancient costume film in China.

<sup>3</sup> Serious discussions on how to write history plays took place in Chongqing in 1943 by leading dramatists, but by that time the second wave of ancient costume films had already died out.

Shanghai film industry.<sup>4</sup> In fact, even for actors and actresses from Shanghai or nearby areas, speaking standard and fluent *guoyu* was also an additional and difficult skill to acquire. The exclusive use of *guoyu* in Shanghai cinema was far from a natural reflection of social reality, but projected the imagination of a unified spoken language across various dialect areas of the nation. The employment of the newly standardized “national language” in ancient costume films further supplemented this horizontally-stretching imagination of a unified language with a vertical dimension, incorporating the past into a coherent sphere of verbal communication. Ancient characters used modern expressions to address contemporary concerns, speaking with standard pronunciations that many people among the audience were yet to master. How would all these changes affect audience’s experience of an ancient world?

This chapter studies the role of sound in shaping the performance of ancient characters and reorganizing the sensorial experience of the past, as well as its relation to the historical present of the war. In her groundbreaking study of early Chinese cinema, Zhang Zhen argues for the acoustic dominant in Chinese cinema with the advent of sound. Borrowing from Roman Jakobson’s definition of the term, Zhang emphasizes the structural changes that sound engendered through dynamic interaction with other cinematic elements.<sup>5</sup> Although her analysis mainly focuses on the transitional period of sound cinema between 1930 and 1936, acoustic dominant had long lasting effects on Chinese cinema in later periods. This concept compels us to treat sound not just as an extra formal element added to the motion pictures, but to probe into the fundamental

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<sup>4</sup> Although Chen Yunshang had studied Mandarin from her opera tutor Yi Jianquan prior to her venture in Shanghai, she still worked hard on her pronunciation for the role. Zhang Shankun also hired Mandarin tutors for her on site in many film productions.

<sup>5</sup> Zhen Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896 – 1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 302.

changes sound brought to the hierarchical order of senses in cinema. My discussion starts from the influence of *guoyu* movement on the vocal style of ancient costume films, emphasizing the ambiguity between modern and ancient spoken languages. I will then analyze different roles of dialogues in adjusting the light contrast of the two-way mirror in two female warrior films, the comic *Mulan Joins the Army* and the tragic *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming*. The third part of the chapter analyzes the growing importance of singing in ancient costume films, which eventually resulted a new genre cycle of musicals that ended the dominance of ancient costume films. Finally, I will end the chapter with a brief discussion on the imagination and creation of ancient sound in cinema.

Generally speaking, in ancient costume films of this period, the distinctiveness of the ancient was mostly expressed visually through costumes and sets, whereas sound, verbal or non-verbal, played a relatively minor role in evoking the feeling of a bygone past. Mainly used as a means to convey meaning and emotion, sound in most of these films tended to close the gap between past and present, stressing their commonality and communicability rather than distance and divergence. Fei Mu's *Confucius* again provides a rare exception with its distinctive use of classical language and music. Even so comprehensibility and contemporary relevance remained his concern. As visual depiction of ancient styles has been more or less normalized through the first wave of ancient costume films, sound carved a new space for imagining and presenting more dynamic interaction between ancient and contemporary times.

## **National Language and Chinese Cinema**

With the full incorporation of sound in cinema, vocal expression, both dialogue and singing, soon became the dominant use of sound technology.<sup>6</sup> Chinese film scholars Zhong Dafeng and Shu Xiaoming attribute this feature to the “shadowplay” (yingxi) tradition, stressing the influence of theater on the centrality of vocal sound in Chinese cinema.<sup>7</sup> But vocal-centrism or verbal-centrism, as Michel Chion points out, is a universal feature in commercial cinema, and therefore not unique to the Chinese case.<sup>8</sup> Dialogue’s affinity with theater, however, makes it one of the least analyzed elements in film studies.<sup>9</sup> Even as the visual-centric understanding of cinema is seriously challenged by the growing significance of sound studies, it is always the formal and technical aspects of sound that grab the attention of scholars. The fact that theater employed dialogue before cinema does not make it less cinematic, even though it is probably less specifically cinematic. But the “specificity thesis” should not be a shackle for film studies.<sup>10</sup> In the historical context of Orphan Island cinema, the emphasis on the specificity of the cinematic medium has given way to production efficiency and/or propagation for national defense, both of which welcomed, even relied on, lengthy dialogues.

Unlike the first wave of the genre in the silent era that aimed to visualize popular tales with minimal intervention of texts, wartime ancient costume films resorted to words to render new meanings to old stories. Even without significantly changing the

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<sup>6</sup> During the transitional period, “peiyin pian” or “matching- sound film” marked a rather unique use of sound. The visuals largely followed the principles of silent cinema, and the sound matched onto the images is mostly music and sound effects with no conversation.

<sup>7</sup> Zhong Dafeng and Shu Xiaoming, *Zhongguo Dianying Shi* [History of Chinese Cinema] (Beijing: Zhongguo Guangbo Dianshi Chubanshe, 1995), 53.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> For detailed discussion on the anti-dialogue bias, see Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), introduction. I am less convinced by her argument that the bias against talking in cinema (and theater) is due to the association between speech and femininity.

<sup>10</sup> As Noël Carroll reminds us, the “specificity thesis” misconstrues the relationship between arts. An artistic medium has not been designed to perform just one specific task. See: Noël Carroll, “The Specificity Thesis,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 282.

implications of the tales, the sheer use of *guoyu* imbued the voice of the characters certain modern quality that significantly altered the acoustic imagination of the ancient. The use of *guoyu* in ancient costume films inherited from the standardized practices of sound film production in Shanghai, and it remains the norm even today. But the choice of *guoyu* in cinema was less self-evident back in 1930s Shanghai. Despite the top-down promotion of a unified spoken national language since 1910, what this language should be like was heatedly debated among linguistics, and the standards were repeatedly revised.<sup>11</sup> By the end of 1920s, *guoyu* was not yet commonly used in everyday communication.<sup>12</sup> Even political officials and respected scholars were rarely capable of speaking decent *guoyu* in public speeches.<sup>13</sup> When sound was brought to cinema, some intellectuals speculated that this new invention could potentially become a powerful tool to catalyze the unification of spoken language in China, “As fiction is always easier to remember than historiography, it must be more effective to teach *guoyu* in theater and cinema than in classrooms.<sup>14</sup> The popular expectation, however, was to continue the conventions of civilized plays (*wenming xi*) where old male roles spoke old-fashioned official language (*guanhua*)<sup>15</sup> and female roles talked in Suzhou dialect (*subai*).<sup>16</sup> Filmmakers’ choice of *guoyu* manifested

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<sup>11</sup> The debate was mostly focused on to what extent *guoyu* should be based on the official language (*guanhua*) of Beijing. From 1920 to 1930, the standard was altered three times. See Yue Sibing, “Shinian lai de Guoyu Yundong” [National Language Movement in the Past Ten Years], *Shijie Zazhi zengkan*, (1931): 1-15.

<sup>12</sup> Chen Dabei, “Yousheng Dianying yu Guoyu” [Sound Cinema and National Language], *Shijie Chenbao*, July 10, 1931.

<sup>13</sup> Chen Dabei, “Yousheng Dianying Mahoupao” [Afterthoughts on Sound Cinema], *Dianying Yuekan*, 9 (1929): 1- 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Guanhua*, or the official language, refers to the language used by government officials in the Ming and Qing dynasties. The speaking part in Chinese operas often makes use of this language, but the pronunciation could also differ from region to region.

<sup>16</sup> Jin Dapu, “Guoyu Yousheng Dianying de Shangque” [Negotiations over National Language Sound Cinema], *Dianying Ribao*, June 27, 1932.

their endeavor to establish cinema as an up-to-date art form and cultivate a potential national audience that transcended local identities.

Speaking *guoyu* posed a big challenge to many silent stars. Complaints about the incomprehensibility of *guoyu* pronunciation in early Chinese “talkies” were pervasive.<sup>17</sup> Some audience even suggested that before film actors could speak proper *guoyu*, it was more practical to make dialect films so that “at least some people could understand what they are talking about.”<sup>18</sup> The intervention of the government soon ruled out all the different voices. In December 1932, the Film Censorship Bureau requested all the film conversations and intertitles to be spoken or written in *guoyu*, even the use of local slangs was considered as hindering the unification of the national language.<sup>19</sup> The same regulation was reinforced again three years later, mainly directing against the burgeoning Cantonese film industry in Guangdong and Hong Kong.<sup>20</sup> The Nanjing Government’s weak power in the far south could hardly counter the vibrant market force there.<sup>21</sup> But in Shanghai, *guoyu* film became the unarguable norm even after the government’s retreat to Wuhan and Chongqing. Although intellectuals in Chongqing speculated on the

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<sup>17</sup> San Yi, “Dui Woguo Zhi Yousheng Dianying Zhe Zhonggao” [Advices to Producers of Chinese Sound Films], *Yingxi Zazhi* 2, 2 (1931): 35; Huo Shan, “Duiyu Yousheng Dianying de Quexian” [On the Shortcomings of Sound Cinema], *Yingxi Shenghuo*, 1, 51 (1932): 8; Jin Dapu, “Guoyu Yousheng Dianying de Shangque,” *Dianying Ribao*, June 27, 1932.

<sup>18</sup> “Xiangdao jiu Shuo: Yousheng Dianying yu Fangyan” [Say What I Think: Sound Cinema and Local Dialect], *Dianying Shijie* 1 (1934): 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Dianying Jiancha Weiyuanhui Gonggao* [Public Announcements of the Film Censorship Bureau] 1, 16 (1933): 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Dianying Jiancha Weiyuanhui Gonggao* 3, 12 (1936): 17. In 1932, Tianyi Film Company dubbed two sound films *Two Orphan Girls from the Battlefield* (*Zhandi Liang Gunü*) and *Little Songstress* (*Xiao Nüling*) in Cantonese and sold the copies to Guangdong, and the company soon opened its Hong Kong branch for the production of Cantonese films. Tianyi Company’s *Bai Jinlong* (1934) was the first Cantonese film released in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Guangzhou.

<sup>21</sup> The Guangdong Province remained relatively autonomous from the Nanjing Government under the control of Hu Hanmin, and the *guoyu* policy was not effectively implemented there. In 1936, the Guangdong Provincial Government legitimized the production of Cantonese films. See “Guanyu Weihu Guonei Dianying Shiye, Guizhi Yuepian Zhizuo” [On the Protection of Domestic Film Industry and Regulation of Cantonese Film Production], *Shengzheng Gongbao* [Documents of the Guangdong Provincial Government] 329 (April, 1936): 49.

possibilities of using dialects and even Esperanto, these ideas had never been realized during the war.<sup>22</sup>

The exclusive use of *guoyu* in Shanghai cinema projected the government and intellectuals' vision of an ideal social situation that they were striving for, but such wishful depiction also weakened the representational function of sound to realistically portray how people from different regions and backgrounds actually talked. It became another form of vocal stylization not so much different from opera or vernacular storytelling. The characters speak *guoyu* not because that is the way they talk in reality but due to the requirement of the art form of cinema. It is therefore not difficult to understand why *guoyu* was so naturally inherited by ancient costume films regardless of the historical setting.

Besides the tension between a standardized national language and local dialects, the *guoyu* movement also targeted at another fundamental issue in Chinese language – the discrepancy between written language, or classical Chinese (*wenyan*), and vernacular language (*baihua*). It therefore intersected with the Vernacular Language Movement (*baihuawen yundong*), and the ambiguous boundary between the two caused many confusions in the imagination of ancient talking. One year after publishing his hugely influential article “Some Modest Proposals for the Reform of Literature,” which strongly advocated a “living literature” written in vernacular form, Hu Shi titled such literature “national language literature” (*guoyu de wenxue*) in another famous essay “A Constructive Theory on Literary Revolution.” Admitting that China had not yet established a standardized spoken language, Hu Shi maintained, “important as *guoyu*

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<sup>22</sup> For detailed analysis of wartime discussions on the alternative possibilities of film languages, see Weihong Bao *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915 – 1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 283-293.

textbooks and dictionaries are, they are by no means the most effective tools to create a national language ... Only with the prevalence of *guoyu* novel, poem, article, and theatre, could *guoyu* be truly established in China.”<sup>23</sup> Clearly, the *guoyu* Hu referred to was not simply a unified pronunciation system, but also a unified writing and speaking system. More importantly, it was the writing system, the “*guoyu* literature” that served as the foundation of the speaking system rather than the other way around, and the basic means to create this new *guoyu* literature, as Hu proposed, was to study ancient canons written in vernacular language.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, *guoyu* was allied with vernacular language as the antithesis of classical Chinese, and the distinction between ancient vernacular language and modern *guoyu* was rarely stressed.

The overt emphasis on the distinction between classical and vernacular Chinese tended to ignore the heterogeneity within these two concepts. Intellectuals strived to legitimize vernacular literature by tracing its genealogy to non-classical-language literature from ancient time, highlighting the connection rather than differences between ancient and modern spoken languages. When Hu Shi ridiculed the writers who make countrywomen and prostitutes speak in Tang Song style classical language or Qing revival of rhythmical prose, he probably never thought of how to write ancient characters’ speech in *guoyu* literature. Indeed, Hu did not consider ancient story as a proper subject matter for modern literature.<sup>25</sup> When modern dramatists started to experiment with historical plays in the 1920s, their use of modern spoken language in

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<sup>23</sup> Hu Shi, “Jianshe de Wenxue Geming Lun” (A Constructive Theory on Literary Revolution), *Xin Qingnian* 4, 4 (1918).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> In “A Constructive Literary Revolution Theory,” Hu could not help but criticize Mei Lanfang’s new style ancient costume opera *Goddess Scatters Flowers* and the new drama play *Qing Prince Dorgon* in the middle of his passionate praise for Western literature and theater.

conversations was properly justified under the name of Vernacular Movement and *guoyu* literature.<sup>26</sup> Before wartime production of ancient costume films, the two historical spoken dramas, *Sai Jinhua* (1936) and *Empress Wu Zetian* (1937), written and performed in modern *guoyu*, also set examples for the film industry to follow.

*Guoyu* speech was more than a vocal stylization in ancient costume films, but also brought with it modern vocabularies, expressions and ideologies into the characterization of ancient figures. Verbal anachronism seemed to be well accepted, sometimes even encouraged as a necessary method to make the past relevant to the present. Ancient characters had to look in a certain way – their costumes and hairstyles were more or less standardized by the late 1930s, but their speech enjoyed great freedom, even more so than contemporary characters since only ancient figures were able to speak out sensitive words, such as invasion and resistance, in a supposedly historical context. Flexibility necessarily entailed diversity. Ancient costume films that used utterly modern language coexisted with those that more closely followed ancient *baihua*, even occasionally classical language. But most commonly, traditional and modern vocabularies were blended in to a mixture of old and new syntactic structures, blurring the distinction between ancient and modern. For most filmmakers, the intention is not to make their characters sound distinctively modern or ancient, but familiar and relatable.

### **a) Pan Jinlian and Modern Language**

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<sup>26</sup> Guo Moruo wrote *Wang Zhaojun* and *Zhuo Wenjun* in 1923, and *Nie Ying* in 1925. These three stories were published as *Sange Panni de Nvxing* (*Three Rebellious Women*) in 1926. Ouyang Yuqian's *Pan Jinlian* was written in 1926 and first published as a drama play in *Xinyue* in 1928, but it was performed in Peking Opera style. Lin Yutang's *Zi Jian Nanzi* was published in *Benliu* 1, no. 6 (November 1928).

The most overt use of modern language appeared in adaptations from spoken dramas, especially those written in the 1920s during the peak of the New Culture Movement. Not long after the Xinhua Film Company resumed its production in 1938, director Wu Cun adapted Ouyang Yuqian's drama *Pan Jinlian*, a revisionist play typical to the 1920s. Originally a minor character in the *Water Margin*, Pan Jinlian is recast as a protagonist of the renowned Ming dynasty erotic novel *Plum in the Golden Vase*. Her stories of seducing Ximen Qing, poisoning her husband Wu Da, and eventually being killed by her brother-in-law Wu Song were widely spread through Shen Jing's *chuanqi* drama *The Righteous Hero (Yixia Ji)*, which was written around the same time as *Plum*.<sup>27</sup> While preserving the basic plot of *Righteous Hero*, Ouyang turns the most famous licentious woman in Chinese culture into a fearless pursuer of true love through passionate expressions of her admiration for Wu Song. After being rejected, Pan seeks out Ximen Qing to quench her unsatisfied desire and rebel against the patriarchal society.

Wu Cun's *Wu Song and Pan Jinlian* closely followed the "rebellion" theme of Ouyang's play, remodeling Pan with modern thoughts and voices. She claims that women should marry men of their own choices and valiantly tells Wu Song "I am truly in love with you." In the climactic scene of Wu Song's revenge, Pan declares, "Do you want my head or my heart? My heart has long belonged to you, but you refused to take it." She then tears up her clothes, exposing her chest and cries out, "inside this white chest is a red, flaming and sincere heart. You may take it!" These striking lines radically subvert the image of Pan Jinlian, redefining her behaviors through the manipulative power of words. To further intensify the dramatic effects of the film, director Wu Cun made

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<sup>27</sup> For more information about the operatic performance of Pan Jinlian, see Andrea S. Goldman *Opera and the The City: The Politics of Culture in Beijing, 1770 -1900* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012), chapter 5.

frequent use of shadows to project Pan's psychological struggles, and also employed a montage of knives pointing at different directions to express Wu Song's outrage and determination to revenge. The film is clearly a modernist piece in both its content and form.



Fig. 6.1 Pan Jinlian begging Wu Song to take her heart in *Wu Song and Pan Jinlian*

The responses to the film were mixed, but all the reviewers recognized Pan as a common trope of modern rebellious woman. “Such rewriting necessarily deviates from history. Thus, we cannot see it as a real historical play” one reviewer writes.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in the New Culture Movement tradition, the past is always engaged as a subject of criticism. The value of the ancient only resides in those who rebel against the status quo, mostly repressed female figures. Pan's ultra modern expression distinguished her from other “old-fashioned” characters in the film whose acting is still based on the operatic division of role types. For the playwright and filmmaker, the “newness” of Pan serves as the only

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<sup>28</sup> Ding Hua, “*Wu Song yu Pan Jinlian* Guanhou Gan” [Thoughts after Watching *Wu Song and Pan Jinlian*], *Xunbao*, October 14, 1938, 2.

meaningful connection between the ancient and the present. However, twelve years after the script was first published, the free love and individual freedom that she advocates was no longer a major concern of the intellectuals.

Although *Wu Song and Pan Jinlian* is a special case of being self-consciously modern, the use of modern vocabularies and expressions was a common practice in most ancient costume films at the time. If Pan's words remained somehow unsettling to certain audience, it was not ascribed to its contemporaneity, but to the strong "literary and artistic" (*wenyi*) quality of the language.<sup>29</sup> That is to say, they were not colloquial enough. The distinction between ancient and modern spoken language was less a concern than that between the literary and the colloquial. Just like contemporary costumes were commonly accepted in the representation of ancient figures before the normalization of "ancient costumes," few people questioned the employment of modern spoken language in ancient costume films. If modern Chinese language was based on the ancient vernacular, as intellectuals always emphasized, what was the point of distinguishing the two? Moreover, as verbal expression became an increasingly important means to convey meaning in Chinese cinema, its comprehensibility was prioritized over the signification of regional and temporal differences.

### **b) Distancing the Past through Language**

Fei Mu's *Confucius* provides an exceptional example in the "classical" quality of the language. Four-character phrases, classical expressions and direct quotations from *The Analects* and other Confucian classics create a defamiliarizing acoustic space of the ancient world in contrast to the majority of its contemporary counterparts. In accordance

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<sup>29</sup> Nai Yi, "Wu Song yu Pan Jinlian" [On *Wu Song and Pan Jinlian*], *Shenbao*, October 11, 1938, 15.

with the set design (chapter 5), the language in the film constantly reminds the audience of the distantness of the cinematic space. For Fei Mu, dialogue is one of the means to create the right atmosphere of the world of Confucius. Echoing Confucius' endeavor to reestablish the moral and political orders that were at the brink of collapsing, Fei's insistence on proper representation of historicity leads him to focus on ancient rituals and etiquettes, and more importantly the tension between the maintenance and defiance of orders.

In contrast to Emperor Gaozong's causal use of "wo" (I) in *Empress Wu Zetian*, the dukes in *Confucius* humbly call themselves "gua ren" (your unworthy ruler), a standard way for pre-Qin monarchies to address themselves. Using proper names or titles is no small matter but the precondition to right speech and right conducts, according to Confucius.<sup>30</sup> In theater and cinema, archaic titles often effectively signify a sense of historicity that helps to anchor the characters in the social relation of a given period. Contrarily, the common usage of "papa" "mama," and other popular modern titles and pronouns in wartime ancient costume films significantly diminishes the temporal distance from the past, bringing the characters closer to the world of the audience. Against the dominant trend of cinematic practice, Fei Mu embraces historical distance as the object of his portrayal.

Fei Mu's meticulous attention to the proper use of titles is most manifest in the scene of Nanzi's rendezvous with her former lover Song Zhao. The three-minute sequence contains only eight brief lines, five of which are simply names and titles. When

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<sup>30</sup> "If names are not right then speech does not accord with things; if speech is not in accord with things, then affairs cannot be successful." Translation from *The Analects of Confucius: An Online Teaching Translation* by Robert Eno, 2015, 66. Accessed 14 February 2019. [http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Analects\\_of\\_Confucius\\_\(Eno-2015\).pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Analects_of_Confucius_(Eno-2015).pdf).

the two of them first join in the same shot, Song Zhao stretches his body towards Nanzi and calls out her name “Nan” intuitively. Nanzi, standing on a flight of stairs, turns away her head to signal her rejection of Song’s indecorous manner. Realizing his misbehavior, Song readjusts his posture and readdresses her as “Madam Duchess” (*jun furen*) with a slight bow. In response, Nanzi replies “Young master” (*gongzi*) with an expressionless face. It then dissolves to a long shot of them in the courtyard, with Nanzi sitting in the front and Song standing at the fence in the back. After a brief look at each other, Nanzi turns around and the film cuts to a medium-long shot that follows Song Zhao approaching Nanzi. He first stops by her side. Without detecting any reaction from her, Song Zhao wanders to her back, takes a breath and calls out “Nan!” for the second time. Nanzi raises her head, after a moment of hesitation, she replies “Zhao!” with a smile.

Fei Mu ingeniously demonstrates the struggles and affections of the two lovers through these five lines. The first “Nan” expresses Song Zhong excitement for the reunion and suggests their intimate relation before Nanzi’s marriage. But Nanzi’s uneasiness makes her insist on the proper manner to cover the impropriety of their secret meeting. Their unequal status is also reinforced by their position in the shot with Nanzi occupying a higher plain, and a flight of stairs physically separating the two of them. In the more casual setting of the courtyard, Nanzi still manifests her higher status by taking the sitting position, but the space around her becomes more open, allowing Song Zhao to get physically closer to her. When Song Zhao calls “Nan” from the back, Nanzi is solely addressed by the sound without seeing him. It is not hard to imagine that the familiar voice of Song Zhao brings back sweet memory from the past that suspend Nanzi’s worries and struggles at the present moment, uncovering her innermost feelings and

eliciting her passionate call of the lovers' name. Before hearing their conversations, the complexity of their relationship has already been well delineated through the ways they address each other.<sup>31</sup>

The last part of their conversation takes place in Nanzi's boudoir - an intimate setting that allows them to leave behind all the formalities and exchange their deeper thoughts and feelings. Both stand by the window. This time, Nanzi approaches Song Zhao from the back and leans towards him, subverting the power relations established in the previous sequences. She turns into a vulnerable woman, revealing her anxiety in front of her love.

NAN: Zhao, You'd better go back to the State of Song!  
(*Zhao, ni haishi huidao songguo qu ba!*)

ZHAO: (We've sworn to be together) as long as the universe endures. How can  
(I) leave you alone and return?  
(*Tianchang dijiu, yanneng she ni er qu?*)

NAN: If we keep (seeing each other) like this, I'm afraid that unforeseeable  
calamities may occur.  
(*Zheyang xiaqu, wo pa huiyou buce zhi huo.*)

This conversation spells out the misfortune of the loving couple, alluding to the palace coup in the future.<sup>32</sup> Nanzi's bad reputation in Chinese history often associates her with the destruction of proper order and rites in late the Spring and Autumn era. Clearly, Fei Mu refuses to lay the blame on a poor woman who had no control of her own fate. His depiction of Nanzi is mostly neutral, maybe slightly sympathetic. In contrast to Ouyang Yuqian's daring rewriting of Pan Jinlian, Fei Mu's opinion is only subtly implied

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<sup>31</sup> It is worth noting that in the scene of Confucius meeting Nanzi, no word is uttered at all, probably to suggest that the whole meeting is just a matter of formality.

<sup>32</sup> The Duke Ling of Song's son Kuaikui is ashamed by Nanzi and his attempts to assassinate her results in his flee to the State of Jin. After the Duke's death, Kuaikui returns and seizes the throne from his son with the help of Jin. This coup also costs the life of Zilu. See "*Kong Fuzi Yingpian Shuomingshu*" (Synopsis of *Confucius*), *Kong Fuzi Yingpian Tekan*, December 1940. In the extant version, Kuaikui's assassination of Nanzi and the Duke's passing of the title to his grandson are not included.

through the scene. He has no intention to advocate her defiance of the Codes of Propriety as modern women's courageous rebellion, although he does not prevent people from thinking so either. If the mirror of history is capable of reflecting contemporary concerns and desires, Fei Mu's mission is to present the mirror rather than constructing the reflection in front of the audience. Of course, Fei Mu's mirror is not completely objective either. It is also a product of a specific social-historical context.

The three lines quoted above manifest a strange combination of modern and classical grammars and expressions. Nanzi's first line clearly follows the syntax of modern Chinese with the word "*ba*" serving as an interjection at the end of the sentence. Song's reply may sound "classical" at first for its typical omission of the subject and the use of the archaic expression "*yan*" as the interrogative word. However, "*ni*" as second person pronoun spoils the classical quality of the sentence.<sup>33</sup> It is almost impossible to know how pre-Qin people spoke if we believe that classical Chinese is exclusively a written form. Fei Mu combines classical language and *baihua* to create the ancient colloquial that is both comprehensible and somehow defamiliarizing. The blending of classical and modern languages was typical to ancient costume films back in the 1930s and 1940s, and even today, but the proportions of the ingredients varied significantly. While Fei Mu foregrounds the classical feeling of the language, most of his contemporaries prioritized the transparency of meaning over the necessity to signify antiquity through words. After all, under the overarching goal to promote *guoyu*, using classical language could be easily attacked. For the majority of filmmakers, language was

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<sup>33</sup> "*Ni*" as second person pronoun is commonly used in the speaking part of Ming Qing *chuanqi*, it is rarely mixed with the literary word "*yan*."

an effective means to engage and enchant the audience, and the precondition for its efficacy was the intelligibility of language.

### **Verbal Play and Affective Speech**

In wartime ancient costume films, words most effectively bring forth the connection between past and present, not just by creating a familiar verbal environment but also through the “teachings” of ancient characters. The image of a rebellious woman striving for free love became less relevant during the War of Resistance that requested the subordination of individual desires under national salvation. Although cinematic revision of licentious female characters continued throughout the period, these films were not considered as more “progressive” than other folklore adaptations.<sup>34</sup> Instead of taking the ancient as a target of criticism, intellectuals started to rediscover the virtue of ancient characters for wartime mobilization. Patriotic heroes, especially female warriors, were established as a symbol of national defense.<sup>35</sup> Drastically different from the martial arts films in the silent era that foregrounded fighting scenes, wartime martial heroes talk more than they fight. This is not because that martial skill has lost its attraction, but its significance needs to be properly anchored by words.

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<sup>34</sup> *Pan Qiaoyun* (1940) and *Yan Xijiao* (1940) and *Madam Diao Lou* (1940) are no longer extant. From existing synopsis and reviews, Xinhua Company's *Pan Qiaoyun* and *Madam Diao Lou* followed the example of *Pan Jinlian* in depicting the female protagonist as pursuer of true love. Yihua Company's *Yan Xijiao* is more ambiguous, but it rationalized the famous episode of the ghost's revenge (*huo zhuo*) by portraying it as a performance of living people.

<sup>35</sup> For more discussion on the image of female warrior in wartime spoken drama, see: Chang-tai Hung, *War and Popular Culture: Resistance in Modern China, 1937 – 1945* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994), chapter 2.

Bu Wancang's *Mulan Joins the Army* initiated the new trend of female warriors with an impressive record of running for eighty-six days,<sup>36</sup> and Ge Nennieng in *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming* marks the quintessential example of a self-sacrificing heroine in wartime ancient costume films. Mulan, who joins the army in place of her father, defeats the invaders and brings her family great honor, as well as a son-in-law, whereas Nennieng devotes her love and life to the nation. Divergent in mood and narrative trajectory, both films enchanted the audience with ideal conditions and spirits that they desired for but were hard to achieve. While *Mulan* allows the audience to re-contextualize the urgency of the war in a utopian world where the interest of individual, family and the nation harmoniously conflates, *Sorrow* deeply moved those who were overburdened by personal concerns under wartime condition with the opposite image of themselves – the utterly selfless heroes. In both cases, language plays a crucial role in bridging the distance between the audience and the diegesis, and the divergence in the interaction between words and images mark the key differences between the ways the two films address the audience.

#### **a) Verbal Play in *Mulan Joins the Army***

Written by Ouyang Yuqian in Hong Kong, *Mulan Joins the Army* is his third script adapted by the Xinhua Film Studio. The theme of joining the army required little revision to be “contemporarily relevant,” but Ouyang clearly did not aim for a serious didactic story like Zhou Yibai's play *Hua Mulan* three years later.<sup>37</sup> Although according

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<sup>36</sup> “Yishi Zhengque de *Mulan Congjun Yingpian*” [An Ideologically Correct Film, *Mulan Joins the Army*], *Yingmi Huabao*, 2 (1940): 20.

<sup>37</sup> In Louise Edwards's *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China* and Edward Gunn's *Unwelcome Muse*, both authors refer to a movie version of the play. Louise Edwards, *Women Warriors and Wartime*

to Ouyang, his initial intention was to write a tragedy of Mulan fighting against feudalism,<sup>38</sup> the actual outcome is a romantic comedy that engages the timely theme of national resistance. The phenomenal popularity of the film is largely due to the successful transformation of a renowned historical tale into a relatable and enjoyable audio-visual experience – relatable not only in terms of the depiction of the war, but also through a newly added plot of romantic love between Mulan and his assistant Yuandu.<sup>39</sup> The formula of “revolution plus romance” already prevailed in literature from the late 1920s and has a noticeable influence on leftist films in the 1930s.<sup>40</sup> What is special about *Mulan* is its playfulness with multiple layers of disguise, which not only lends the film a popular appeal, but also ensures its patriotic status. It is almost impossible to differentiate if the film is a tale of resistance disguised under an entertaining surface or a lighthearted comedy pretending to be patriotic – a heated debate that followed the burning of the film in Chongqing.

Compared to Minxin’s *Mulan* back in 1928, which involves thousands of miles of travel to set the scenes in desert, the Great Wall, and the alleged hometown of Mulan (chapter 3), this studio-based production appears lackluster in terms of visual spectacles.

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*Spies of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). But based on my research, Zhou’s play has not been adapted into films.

<sup>38</sup> Ouyang Yuqian, *Dianying Banlu Chujia Ji* [Turning to the Film Career] (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 1962), 36. Given the fact that the Ouyang’s memoirs was published in midst of heightened political tensions, it is not totally reliable if his account truly reflects his initial intention back in 1938.

<sup>39</sup> Poshek Fu also emphasizes the star power of Chen Yunshang and gives detailed account on how Zhang Shankun’s publicity campaign promoted the stardom of Chen Yunshang prior to the release of the film. There is no doubt that stardom and promotion had significant effect on the reception of the film, but the discussion here mainly focus on the film text and its relation with social context. See Poshek Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13-15.

<sup>40</sup> For detailed discussion on revolution and love in fiction, see Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), chapter 7. Laikwan Pang observes that in leftist Chinese cinema, despite of the antagonism towards romance and sex, romantic relations remained omnipresent. See: Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China In Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932- 1937* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), chapter 4.

The camel caravan in the silent version now is replaced by one lonely camel to symbolize the desert, and the most elaborate set in the film, the Tang palace, is in fact borrowed from *Empress Wu Zetian*. The focus was primarily placed on humorous visual gags and witty verbal plays that evolve around the two major disguises of the film: the disguise of Mulan's gender identity and the disguise of contemporary situation under an ancient story. The former entails various comic reliefs and a romantic plot, and the latter endows political significance to the otherwise frivolous narrative.



Fig. 6.2 Mulan and Yuandu in foreign costume in *Mulan Joins the Army* (1938)

Three types of verbal plays are employed in the disguising and revealing game of the film. First of all, performative talk enhances the comic effects of Mulan's cross-dressing. Besides Mulan's own vocal performance of male voice, it mainly refers to the hilarious "harassment" from her peers. Picking upon Mulan's feminine look, they exaggeratedly act out their "manhood," which always ends up exposing their

incompetence in contrast to Mulan. Secondly, the romantic plot is often motivated by the conversations that play around the tension between knowing the disguise and disguising the knowing. Carefully probing each other with words rich in subtext, Mulan and Yuandu engage the audience in meaning guessing through their verbal exchange. Finally, references to contemporary situations are well embedded in characters' conversations, inviting audiences' active participation to identify them. This was a common tactic by scriptwriters and filmmakers during the war and also in earlier leftist films to involve the audience in the hide-and-seek against the censors.

The opening sequence of the film depicts Mulan's encounter with a group of bullies during her hunting, demonstrating her excellence in archery and her cleverness in outwitting the intimidators – two important qualities that ensure her later success. However, the most lively and lengthiest portrayal is neither Mulan's archery skill nor her clever trickery, but the harassment of the bullies. Louise Edwards reads the scene as drawing attention to “eroticized parts of Mulan's sexualized form” with the harassers' male gaze moving threateningly around her body.”<sup>41</sup> It is true that the harassment episode foregrounds Mulan's gender identity, precluding her sexual disadvantage in a male-dominating field. But on the experiential level, a manifest comic tone severely undercuts the sense of serious threat and danger, suggesting to the audience that the harassers are not the real villains of the film, but comedians comparable to the “clowns role” in traditional opera, aiming for entertaining effects.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Louise Edwards, *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China*, 28.

<sup>42</sup> As mentioned in the analysis of *Wu Song and Pan Jinlian*, a significant number of ancient costume films still base the characterization on traditional role types in operas. In Yuan dynasty *zaju* and Ming Qing *chuanqi*, characters are divided into five roletypes: *Sheng* (male role), *dan* (female role), *Jing* (painted face male role), *Mo* (old male role and male narrator), and *chou* (clown role). In modern Peking opera, the *Mo* role is merged into the *sheng* role.

After Mulan successfully shoots a wild goose, which is mainly illustrated by a short animation, her hunting venture continues. Sensing some movement in grass, Mulan pulls out an arrow from her back, places it on the bow and shoots. Nicely framed in a low-angle medium shot, it is the first time Mulan confidently displays her archery skill in front of the camera. But a distressful groan from off-screen space holds off audience's praise for her talent. She hits a man! The tension is immediately released in the next shot by the man's laughter, "it's you, naughty girl!" He is not badly hurt as he sounded and he recognizes Mulan as an acquaintance. The incident further lends to a comic relief with the man's pathetic confession to his fellows that he did not catch any prey but was caught like a prey – a clear contrast to Mulan's accomplishment. In order to redeem their male honor – "we cannot let her look down upon men" – they collectively perform a scene of harassment to show off their masculinity.

The group of six circles around Mulan in funny postures, a comic trope that reoccurs twice when Mulan's fellow draftees make fun of her femininity. In all these cases, the biological men fail to properly perform their masculinity and become the laughingstock of the audience. Like the choreographed circling, the rhythmic and rhymed talking of the men also reinforces the sense of performativity and irony of their harassment. Each of the five men speak two rhymed lines, the first of which consists a pair of three-syllable phrases, often starting with "little Mulan" (*xiao-mu-lan*), and the sixth person boasts about his archery skill in a doggerel, using an arrow to point at different parts of Mulan's body as if she was a easy prey for him – although in reality the group has caught nothing so far. Their talk almost functions as a quasi music number with its rhythmic quality and the suspension of narrative flow, temporarily seize the

audience in a comic mini-play that is more ridiculous than threatening. The fact that these characters appear again in the finale that celebrates Mulan's return, bragging about their "friendship" with Mulan further emphasizes their comic rather than evil nature. In the utopian world of the film, only the invaders and traitors are the true enemies.

After Mulan proves her military talent and establishes herself in the army, her gender issue becomes less a public topic and is increasingly associated with the romance plot. When Mulan and Yuandu plan to dress up as foreigners to collect military information, Yuandu suggests that Mulan play a woman, implying his awareness of Mulan's gender identity. During their mission, their comments on each other's role play parallel the audience's curious gaze on their new appearance, especially Mulan's performance of a man performing a woman in front of Yuandu.<sup>43</sup> Although dressed in female costume, Mulan still talks in male voice to accentuate the awkwardness of "his" cross-dressing. (It is not until the end of the film that Mulan fully reveals her femininity in front of Yuandu.) As Mulan's performance continues, Yuandu reveals his romantic desire through the perception of imagined observers, "others must think we were husband and wife." Pretending to be offended, Mulan compares Yuandu to other harassers and orders him to depart, but her satisfied smile in the next shot discloses her real feeling.

The scene focuses solely on Mulan and Yuandu's performances and verbal exchanges that disguise or reveal their identity and emotion. The surface meaning of words often function as a comic cover, and the subtext is formed synthetically through the tone of speech, facial expressions and the context of the conversation. Such talking with subtext to test each other's feeling is fully played out towards the end of the film

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<sup>43</sup> The invader is never specified, but is only referred to as a foreign country (fan bang). Some critics take it as Mongolia, and one of the reasons for the burning of the film is that it sabotages the unity between Han Chinese and Mongols.

when the restoration of peace allows Mulan to look after her personal concerns. After two rounds of probing, the two lovers finally reveal their affection through a duet, which borrows the metaphor of the moon to express yearns and deliver promises. The play of words with implied meaning is commonly used in classical romance. Poshek Fu points out the similarity between Mulan and Yuandu's interaction and that of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*.<sup>44</sup> In *Romance of the West Chamber*, Oriole's real intention is coded in the poem she writes to Student Zhang. Chinese audience was more accustomed to such verbal play than to the direct expression of love in *Wu Song and Pan Jinlian*. The participation in the game of meaning-detection requires the audience's focused attention on both the visual and aural aspects of the film.

The third type of verbal play also demands audience's active uncovering of hidden meaning, but this time the subtext is not contained within the diegesis, but referring to the outside world. Allegorical dialogue, according to Sarah Kozloff, depends on the viewers to "bring to the dialogue a level of knowledge and interpretation superior to that of the characters; the broader, thematic significance of their words is unavailable to the characters."<sup>45</sup> These are moments of high light intensity on the audience part, generating reflections of their own world on the two-way mirror. But the brightening of light on one side does not necessarily mean the diming of light on the other side. The more naturally embedded the allegorical texts are in the diegesis, the less effect they have on reducing the light intensity of the cinematic world. *Mulan*'s military theme provides a convenient camouflage to hide the discourse of national defense. The scriptwriter and

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<sup>44</sup> Fu, *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong*, 19. The duet between Mulan and Yuandu after the military victory is especially comparable to the excerpt of Seeing-off in the Yue Opera performance of *Liang Zhu*, where Zhu Yingtai repeatedly alludes to her truth gender identity through singing. The difference is that Liang Shanbo fails to comprehend the subtext whereas Yuandu is keenly aware of Mulan's identity.

<sup>45</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, 59.

filmmaker never let the diegetic side go notably dark, even at apparent moments of political allegories. Therefore, the didactic elements in *Mulan* lack a compulsory quality that urge the audience to seriously engage their reality. The reflections the audience make are blurred superimpositions rather than sharp, forceful images.

The sequence of Mulan persuading her parents to allow her join the army is densely packed with contemporary references and patriotic expressions, all of which are well motivated by the narrative of “persuasion.” The overall tone of the sequence is significantly less comic than the rest of the film, but its didactic quality is well balanced by the pleasure of witnessing Mulan’s transformation visually and acoustically. The conversation between Mulan’s parents after receiving the conscription notice intercuts between the two of them discussing the family situation and Mulan eavesdropping on them in the room next door. The father’s claim that every citizen has the responsibility to fight for the country and his condemnation of the invaders are not presented as direct speech, but as words overheard by Mulan. Although the sound perspective and volume remain consistent – mostly due to the technological limitations at the time, such mediation noticeably reduces the didactic effect of the words, subtly substituting the father’s patriotic concern for the country with Mulan’s filial care for her father. Moreover, the appearance of Mulan in female costume for the first time, which startlingly contrasts her tomboy look in the previous scenes, also distracts the audience from the serious discussion on the war (6.1 a, b). Straightforward as the references are, they coexist with other narrative interests that enable the audience to choose what they want to focus on.

References to the war as “inserts” in dialogues are omnipresent in ancient costume films of this period. To some extent, the game of discerning references allowed the audience to ally themselves with the struggles of the filmmakers, giving them a sense of agency in the resistance effort against the oppressive censors, and thus indirectly against the invaders. In *Romance of the West Chamber*, Oriole’s urge of Student Zhang to make contributions for the country at the latter’s departure replaces the typical depiction of her anguish and sorrow. In *Confucius*, Fei Mu makes the official of the Qi accuse Yang Huo for committing the “crime of treason” – an intended anachronistic use that referred to Wang Jingwei’s collaboration with the Japanese. It is reported that the audience applauded at this line in every screening.<sup>46</sup> These allegories were hard to miss, especially for wartime audience who were keenly aware of filmmakers’ tactics, but their affective power differed from case to case. Kozloff emphasizes the importance of “a systematized interpretation of the total text” in determining the viewers’ recognition of the doubled meaning.<sup>47</sup> Our two-way mirror model demonstrates that the total text does not only determine *whether* the allegory can be recognized, but more importantly *how* it is recognized.

In the case of *Mulan*, despite all the apparent “allegories” to the contemporary war, the overall playfulness of the film still made the hardcore leftists question the ideological correctness of the film. It is rather ironic that the film was criticized for its “pro-Japanese allegory” notwithstanding all the clear patriotic messages. The line “the sun rises and lights up the world” in one of the songs featured in *Mulan* was criticized as

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<sup>46</sup> Qin Pengzhang, “Fei Mu Yingju Zayi” [Miscellaneous Refelctions on Fe Mu’s Films and Plays], *Shiren Daoyan Fei Mu*, edited by Huang Ailing (Hong Kong: Xianggang Dianying Pinglunhui Chubanshe, 1998), 163.

<sup>47</sup> Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, 59.

an open endorsement of Japanese rule in China, based on the forced association between the “sun” and Japan.<sup>48</sup> Such interpretation was politically motivated to justify the burning of the film in Chongqing – the critics needed some textual evidence to prove the “traitorous” status of the film besides the “sellout” of its director and producer, as discussed in the previous chapter. Given the established reputation of the scriptwriter Ouyang Yuqian, director Bu Wancang was blamed for tampering with the lyrics. Even after the controversial line was proved to be Ouyang’s original writing, some audience still expressed their “discomfort” with it.<sup>49</sup> In response to audiences’ inquiry, one writer diagnosed this symptom as “over-sensitivity,” and compared it to the Japanese accusation of Chinese people using parasols in sunny days as a symbolic act of “resisting Japan” (*kang ri*).<sup>50</sup> Sensitivity or over-sensitivity was a response to the habitual practice of wordplay for meaning hiding in that period.

Taken out of the historical context of the war, *Mulan* could be a fairly entertaining romantic comedy with no strong didactic function. Its patriotism or treason only stands out for sensitive or over-sensitive audience since political messages are rather seamlessly integrated into a plethora of verbal plays centered on Mulan’s gender disguise and romance. The film does not compel the audience to go beyond mere recognition of references, nor does it strive for spiritual resonance between the protagonist and the audience. Mulan is a utopian hero who easily solves all the problems she encounters and

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<sup>48</sup> Japan in Chinese contains the character of the sun “ri.” The sun is also the symbol of Japanese national flag and military flag. This was listed as one of the reasons for the burning of the film in Chongqing. Others include the use of Fuji film, Japanese funding, and director Bu Wancang’s sellout. See “*Mulan Congjun zai Yu Chongqing*” [Rescreening of *Mulan Joins the Army in Chongqing*], *Qingqing Dianying* 5, 15 (1940): 4; *Dianying Zhoukan* 79 (1940): 3.

<sup>49</sup> The song was in fact based on a folk song that Ouyang Yuqian collected. See Luo Fu, “Da Kewen” [Answers to Readers Inquires], in *Dianying Shijie* 11 (1940): 25, 27.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. In 1936, two employees of a T-shirt company were arrested for using a girl with a parasol as the logo. Many people criticized the absurdity of such interpretation. But girl with a parasol was in fact promoted as a “kang ri” symbol back in 1934. See *Shehui Huabao* 20, 1934; 16, 1934.

enchants the audience with her impressive achievements. Nothing serious is ever at stake. All is presented at the level of sheer play.

### **b) Affective Speech in *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming***

After the burning of *Mulan*, new prints were sent to Chongqing dubbed with re-recorded song, substituting “the sun rises” with “the white sun in blue sky” (qingtian bairi) – an unmistakable reference to the Nationalist Government.<sup>51</sup> To further demonstrate Xinhua Studio’s patriotic attitude, prints of *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming* were shipped together.<sup>52</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, the film is closely based on A’Ying’s spoken drama, faithfully preserving the dialogues and performance on stage. In contrast to *Mulan* where national crisis brings the two lovers together and eventually gives way to the romantic plot, in *Sorrow* the romance between Nenniang and Kexian is subsumed under their resistance effort. Without any playful distraction or disguise, the film focuses solely on the heroic deeds of the self-sacrificing protagonists, not through their actions but through speech.

*Sorrow* alternates between speech scenes that are mostly based on stage performance and transitional action scenes of traveling and fighting that help to smooth out the ruptures between the four major acts. These action scenes are deprived of diegetic sound, almost serving as visual illustrations accompanied with non-diegetic music. This was partially resulted from the vocal-centrism and the lack of ambience sound in Chinese cinema of this period. Besides the sound recorded on site, filmmakers rarely used additional sound effects to create an immersive acoustic environment, unless for specific

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<sup>51</sup> “White sun and blue sky” (qingtian bairi) is the symbol of the KMT. It is used as the national flag and emblem of Republican China. The revised song is preserved in the extant version of the film.

<sup>52</sup> “*Mulan Congjun zai Yu Chongying*,” *Qingqing Dianying*, 5, 15 (1940): 4.

narrative purposes, such as the crow of the rooster mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. Dialogues are often recorded against pure silence for intelligibility, and when a scene contains no dialogue at all, non-diegetic music is commonly employed to unify the flow of shots and accentuate the mood.

Having said that, total elimination of diegetic sound in clamorous fighting scenes was not a convention of its time. In *Romance of the West Chamber*, the battle between General Baima and Bandit Sun almost relied solely on diegetic sound,<sup>53</sup> and the battle scenes in *Mulan*, *Confucius*, and *Empress Wu* mixed diegetic sound with non-diegetic music. The complete elimination of diegetic sound in the action scenes in *Sorrow* was certainly a conscious choice of director Zhang Shankun. While using these scenes to enhance the narrative coherence of the film, Zhang also tended to make a clear distinction, or even a hierarchical order, between the speech-centered stage mode and image-centered spectacle mode. As the cinematic world had been firmly established as an audio-visual synthesis, these deliberately muted scenes failed to fully integrate into the diegesis. They almost existed on a different diegetic level, illustrating what happened rather than presenting how events unfolded. Such “illustrative” quality also results from the visual forms of the scenes. The final battle that leads to the capture of Nenniang and Kexian is shot almost entirely in long and extreme-long shots that make the protagonists rather undistinguishable from their chaotic background. The distanced viewing position conditioned by shot scales and non-diegetic music significantly weakens the tragic-heroic feeling of resistance. This becomes especially startling when compared to the previous

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<sup>53</sup> In this scene, besides the noises recorded on spot, director Zhang Shichuan also adds an extra soundtrack that imitates the sound of drumbeats and trumpet on the battlefield, which is neither diegetic nor clearly extra-diegetic.

sequence where Nenniangu and her female troop vigorously declared their determination to fight until death, punctuated with waving fists and firm facial expressions.

To a certain extent, the insertion of these action scenes, like the film's realistic and detailed set design (chapter 5), serves to signify the "cinematization" of the stage performance, but ultimately their prominence has to be somehow "effaced" to foreground the speaking bodies. Throughout *Sorrow*, speech rather than action serves as the most powerful means to convey the heroic spirit and patriotic passion of the warriors. Even the climactic action of Nenniangu biting off her tongue is visually ambiguous. Instead of using a close-up shot of Nenniangu spitting out her tongue, Zhang films the scene in a long shot and relies on other character's words to clarify the action – a complete appropriation of the stage performance. As Nenniangu literally becomes speechless with her tongue bit off, Kexian's passionate manifestation of their loyalty underscores Nenniangu's suffering face in a medium close-up. She can no longer speak but still needs to be spoken for. Speech here does not simply refer to the words of the characters, but a speaking-centered performance integrated with facial expressions, bodily gestures, and movement. As Edward Gunn accurately describes, "for all that matters in the play are speeches and gestures of loyalty and defiance."<sup>54</sup> This is also true to the film version. Explicit verbal expressions and vigorous gestures constitute the major part of acting in *Sorrow* on screen.

The film's performance style is clearly modelled on spoken drama. Significant overlaps can be found between the stage cast and that in the film, although the two main characters Nenniangu and Kexian are performed by film stars Gu Lanjun and Mei Xi.<sup>55</sup> Gu

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<sup>54</sup> Edward Gunn, *Unwelcome Muse*, 124.

<sup>55</sup> According to newspaper reports, Zhang Shankun originally planned to keep Tang Ruoqing as the female lead, but it was not realized due to her schedule conflict. Spoken drama performance at that time mostly used AB system, which means that the performances alternated between two sets of casts, usually one for

Lan Jun had played the leading role in many major ancient costume films from Xinhua, including *Sable Cicada* (1938), *Wu Song and Pan Jinlian* (1938), *Four Pan Jinlian* (1938), *Wang Xifeng* (1939), and *Empress Wu Zetian* (1939), and her performance in *Sorrow* also won her a major role on stage in A Ying's next late Ming drama *Heroes from the Sea* (*Haiguo Yingxiong*, 1940).<sup>56</sup> Mei Xi became a household name through his impersonation of Liu Yuandu in *Mulan*, but his performances in the two films differ significantly. As filmmaker and playwright Zhang Junxiang observes, conversations in *Mulan* are frequently shot in close-up and medium-close-up. Actors and actresses only make use of their upper body when they talk, and rarely rely on movements, even gestures, to express their emotion during speech.<sup>57</sup> Yuandu's tone of speech is mostly natural and casual, like talking in everyday life. But in *Sorrow*, Kexian, as well as other characters, often speak in an expressive and forceful manner typical to spoken drama, and the straightforwardly conveyed didactic messages are reminiscent of public speech. In fact, the speech scenes in *Sorrow* bear many similarities with "costumed speech" (*huazhuang jiangyan*).

Costumed speech was a hugely popular and widely spread performance form in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>58</sup> It can be delivered by one single performer dressed up in a

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daytime performance and one for evening performance. Gu Yelun, for example, who played Zheng Chenggong in the film was a B role actor of Zheng in stage performance.

<sup>56</sup> *Heroes from the Sea* focuses on the resistance effort of Zheng Chenggong, who is featured in the second act of *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming*. Another of A Ying's historical plays *Hong Xuanjiao* was adapted into film by Fei Mu in 1941. Unfortunately, the film is no longer extant.

<sup>57</sup> Zhang Junxiang, "Ping *Mulan Congjun*" [Review of *Mulan Joins the Army*], *Xiju yu Wenxue* 1, 1 (1940): 160-164.

<sup>58</sup> Costumed speeches were reported in a wide range of provinces and military troops. They were widely performed in big cities as well as small counties. In *Mao's Cultural Army*, Brian DeMare also mentions *huazhuang yanjiang* as a common dramatic performance for Communist propaganda teams in the rural areas. See Brian DeMare, *Mao's Cultural Army: Drama Troupes in China's Rural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 50. According to Gu Jianchen, the term first appeared during end of the Guangxu era (1875-1908) with the opera reform movement. The reformers expanded traditional role types to include new "speech roles," such as old male speech role (*yanlun laosheng*), young male speech

particular role, or performed as a full-fledged drama with multiple roles. Gu Jianchen defines it as “a stage art of costume and language performed in front of an audience through the means of public speech, simply constructed stories and theatrical forms. It is always preoccupied with pedagogical concerns.”<sup>59</sup> After the commercialization of new drama in the mid 1910s, costumed speech was perceived as a more progressive form for artistic and didactic purposes.<sup>60</sup> Such expectation is rather similar to that for spoken drama, a term that appeared in late 1920s and gradually became the official name for speaking-based stage performance. Although the concept of “costumed speech” is no longer in use today, its peculiar position between drama and public speech/lecture brings our attention to the dynamics between the two forms, which is particularly evident in *Sorrow*. Not only does the performance of the heroes constantly borrow the technique of public speech, the play’s lack of narrative coherence and psychological depth are also manifest features of costumed speech.

In his thorough theorization of costumed speech, Gu Jianchen emphasizes its educational and propagandist purposes over artistic coherence, arguing that the simplified dichotomy between good and evil is often an effective means to get message crossed.<sup>61</sup> As a means of public education, moral ambiguities should be minimized, foregrounding the confrontation between the hero and the villain. *Sorrow* leaves no room for ambiguous characters like the comic harassers in *Mulan*. As one contemporary reviewer of *Sorrow*

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role (yanlun xiaosheng), tragic female speech role (yanlun bei dan). See Gu Jianchen, “Huazhuang Yanjiang zhi Xin de Lilun he qi Shijian” [New Theory and Practice of Dressed-up Speech], *Jiaoyu yu Minzhong* 6, 2 (1934): 316-333.

<sup>59</sup> Gu Jianchen, “Huazhuang Yanjiang zhi Xin de Lilun he qi Shijian,” 317.

<sup>60</sup> Fan Diming, “Huazhuang Jiangyan yu Xinju zhi Butong” [The Difference between Costumed Speech and New Drama], *Hangxian Xian Jiaoyuhui Fushe Huazhuang Jiangyantuan Tuankan*, 1919. The key argument of Fan’s article is summarized in Shen Yu’s “Lun Xinju he Huazhuang Jiangyan” (On New Drama and Costumed Speech), *Yaofeng Rikan* October 28, 1919, 2. The author concurred with Fan’s promotion of costumed speech, but disagrees with him on the value of new drama.

<sup>61</sup> Gu Jianchen, “Huazhuang Yanjiang zhi Xin de Lilun he qi Shijian,” 321.

argued, it was the antagonism between “loyalty” and “treachery” that formed the dramatic core of the play.<sup>62</sup> Unlike the playful and layered disguises in *Mulan*, the success of *Sorrow* is largely due to its open and direct call for national defense and the affective power forcefully conveyed through the expressive speech of heroic characters. Such strong expressivity was unprecedented in theatrical and cinematic performance in the Orphan Island.<sup>63</sup>



Fig. 6.3 Costumed Speech (*Beijing Huabao*, 77, 1940)

While disguising direct address to the audience as dialogues between characters, like in any costumed speech, *Sorrow* also employs the method of public speaking to enhance the emotional appeal of characters’ performance. In fact, public speech, known

<sup>62</sup> Hui Tang, “Lishi yu Xianshi: Luelun *Mingmo Yihen de Yanchu*” [Brief Comments on *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming*], *Shanghai Zhoubao* 1, no. 2, (1939): 56-7.

<sup>63</sup> Before the public performance of *Sorrow*, Yu Ling’s *Shanghai Night (Ye Shanghai)* vividly presented the social reality and everyday life of the Orphan Island. Commonly considered as the Yu Ling’s best work, the play barely made enough money to cover its production cost during its first run. The reason was of course multifold, but almost all the reviewers mentioned its “reserved” expression. The most poignant criticism was often concealed or remained unspoken due to censorship controls.

as *yanjiang*, *jiangyan*, or *yanshuo* in Chinese, is already intrinsically “performative” as the word *yan* (perform) indicates. In his study of Republican era manuals of public speaking, Kang Ling charts the process of systematization and standardization of speech skills and body techniques in the 1920s and 1930s, emphasizing the affective mobilization and hypnotic effects in the operation of speech.<sup>64</sup> The speech of heroes and heroines in *Sorrow* is frequently accompanied with hand gestures listed in oratory manuals, such as figure pointing, upward facing and downward facing palms, and most frequently clenched fists signifying anger and determination, and raised arm expressing patriotism. (Fig. 6.4) The purpose here is not to closely match each gesture in the film with the manuals or decode the semiotic system of speech, but to demonstrate that speaking in *Sorrow* is by and large used as an affective tool to motivate and mobilize the audience in semi-occupied Shanghai.



Fig. 6.4 Raised arms in *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming* (1939)

The language used in the play and film was strikingly anachronistic and full of

popular expressions that frequently appeared in wartime mobilizations, such as “We have

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<sup>64</sup> My thanks to Kang Ling for generously sharing his forthcoming dissertation, tentatively titled *Technologies of Speaking: Sound and Voice in Modern China*.

reached the last critical moment of life or death,” “We Chinese would never surrender.” These modern phrases betrayed the characters as historical figures from the Ming dynasty, but presented them as “someone among us,” or “we as someone among them.” Through the passionate speech of the characters, historical distance transforms into a strong emotional resonance between the heroes/heroines and the audience, heightening the concerns for the fate of the nation at the present moment. Numerous reviews meticulously depicted the strong and lingering affect that the play had on them. For some, it was like the roar of a lion that awakened people in dreams. “Anger and compassion that could no longer be held within burst out from everyone’s heart.”<sup>65</sup> For others, it was the cause of insomnia. “When Nenniāng spit out her blood, the blood in my body was also boiled and cannot be calmed down even until this moment.”<sup>66</sup> The strong affective tone of these reviews demonstrates that the impact of the play was so powerful that it urged the audience to further process their feelings through writing. Whether the affective power held up in the cinematic adaptation is uncertain due to the lack of reviews on the film, but the fact that the film entered the top-ten bestseller list of the first half of 1940 demonstrates the success of Zhang Shankun’s strategy to replicate stage speech.<sup>67</sup>

Speech in *Sorrow* was also the primary means to ground the diegetic world in the historical background of the Late Ming. Visual details signify a general sense of the ancient, but they were not yet capable of pinning down a particular historical period. The language of the characters may sound modern, but by stating clear references to the late

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<sup>65</sup> Qiu Hua, “Guan *Mingmo Yihen* hou Gan” [Feelings after Watching *Sorrow for the Fall of Ming*], *Wenguang* 1, no. 2 (1939): 27.

<sup>66</sup> Hu Tiwei, “Tuijian xin *Mingmo Yihen*” [Recommending the new *Sorrow for the Fall of Ming*], *Shenbao*, November 7, 1939, 11.

<sup>67</sup> “Shangban Niandu Shibu Maizuopian” [Ten Bestsellers of the First Half of 1940], *Zhongguo Yingxun* 1, 18 (1940): 140.

Ming, words can easily make the audience believe the historical setting of the diegesis. In contrast to the ambiguous setting in *Mulan*, which is only vaguely mentioned as the Tang dynasty, characters in *Sorrow* repeatedly bring in references of the late Ming to emphasize the historical background. Like the military theme of *Mulan*, the trauma of the late Ming is intrinsically allegorical to contemporary crisis. Starting from *Sorrow*, the late Ming became a reoccurring trope in wartime spoken dramas and ancient costume films.<sup>68</sup> History is by no means a sheer layer of camouflage, although it is certainly true that without such disguise these plays and films could not possibly be released. Historical allegory is constitutive to the affective power of *Sorrow* and also provides the audience a sense of reassurance. It is the combination of these two effects that turns *Sorrow* into a space of enchantment for its contemporary audience.

Historical tragedy “works to confirm our worst fears about the nature of events,” but often ends up “helping us to cope with an otherwise unbearable reality.”<sup>69</sup> The very fact that the trauma of the fall of the Ming remained the collective memory of Chinese people in the 1930s was the best proof that the history of China had always been and would still be continued, thanks to the patriotic spirit passing down from the ancestors. When viewed from a historical perspective, the Japanese occupation in the historical present would eventually become the historical past, another national trauma for the future generations to remember. In time of peril, historical stories, as Paul Cohen argues, “supply a floor of reassurance that individual fears and worries about what is happening -

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<sup>68</sup> The title *Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming* was borrowed from Zhou Xinfang’s famous Peking Opera play that depicts the suicide of Emperor Chongzhen at the fall of the Ming. Both Tian Han and Xiayan planned to rewrite Zhou’s play to emphasize the threat of foreign invasion. After the success of A’Ying’s *Sorrow*, he wrote three more plays on the Late Ming: *Heroes from the Sea* (Haiguo Yingxiong), *Tale of Yang’e* (Yang’e Zhuan), and *Li, the Dashing King* (Li Chuangwang). Stories of other famous late Ming courtesans like Chen Yuanyuan, Dong Xiaowan and Li Xiangjun are also made into spoken dramas and films.

<sup>69</sup> Herbert Lindenberger, *Historical Drama: The Relation of Literature and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 73.

or what may happen - are shared in common by other members of the community.”<sup>70</sup> The affective speech in *Sorrow* manifested such sharedness, both horizontally among people who were suffering the war and vertically between historical figures and contemporary audience. Through speech, historical distance was constantly established, dissolved, and reestablished, emphasizing both the historicity and relatability of the characters, whose patriotic spirit enchanted the audience through a strong resonance with the nation’s past.

### **Singing in Ancient Costume Films**

Ever since the earliest experiment with sound in Chinese cinema, singing has been a central focus of filmmakers throughout the 1930s.<sup>71</sup> The vast majority of ancient costume films during the war include music numbers to enhance their popular appeal. Even in an utterly serious film like *Sorrow*, the scriptwriter and filmmaker take advantage of the pleasure quarter setting to incorporate two soft, flirtatious songs.<sup>72</sup> A’Ying also comments on the act of singing through the conversation between Nennieng and traitor Cai Huheng. After hearing Nennieng’s singing, Cai cites Du Mu’s poem and says, “this is what they call ‘courtesans perceive not the sorrow for the fall of the country, across the river singing the backyard flower tune composed by a captive king.’” Later in the scene, Nennaing brings up this quote again and asks Cai, “If our singing has to be criticized as such, what about decent gentlemen who are still lingering in the pleasure quarter at this time (when the invader is at the doorstep)?” Evidently, Nennieng is the very opposite of

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<sup>70</sup> Paul. A Cohen, *History and Popular Memory: the Power of Story in Moments of Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 206.

<sup>71</sup> For discussions on film songs and leftist cinema, see Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema*, 214-220; Sue Touhy, “Metropolitan Sounds: Music in Chinese Films of the 1930s,” in Yingjin Zhang, ed., *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922 – 1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 200-221.

<sup>72</sup> In A’Ying’s script, the first song appears as the background music that opens Act 1 and the second song is sung by Meiniang. In the film version, Nennieng sings both of the songs.

the senseless courtesans in Du Mu's poem, which allows her to convincingly turn the blame on the male patrons. Through the words of Nenniāng, A'Ying compels the audience to reflect on their indulgence in entertainment during national crisis – and also justifies his own use of “decadent” songs as a necessity to set up such critical reflection.

Music, like any other cultural products of the time is subjected to a neat binary division between a progressive form of national mobilization and regressive escapist “yellow music.” Such dichotomy has been challenged by Andrew Jones' pioneering study of Li Jinhui's “yellow music” in the 1920s and 1930s. For Jones, “Li's yellow music and the mass-mediated sing-song girls who performed it were as much a product of nation-building as they were of mass culture.”<sup>73</sup> In wartime ancient costume films, the majority of songs could easily fall into the category of yellow music for their soft, mellifluous melody and romantic lyrics. Their relation with national defense may be somewhat farfetched, but when studied in the context of cinema, their enchanting effect becomes evident through the transcendental quality of music numbers. If watching films based on popular tales and familiar history ensured people a feeling of collectivity and togetherness, songs in films helped to reinforce such sense beyond discursive consciousness. It is somehow ironic that the discovery of such power in songs catalyzed the decline of ancient costume films, as singing combined with contemporary setting became a new trend in Orphan Island cinema.

Like speech, songs in ancient costume films rarely reinforce the feeling of the ancient. In most cases, they are almost indistinguishable from other contemporary popular songs (*shidai qu*) that mix pentatonic folk tunes with western music. The lyrics

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<sup>73</sup> Andrew Jones, *Yellow Music: Media Culture and Colonial Modernity in The Chinese Jazz Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 76.

of the songs are often written in easily comprehensible modern language, and only occasionally imitate the classical style. Even so, Li Jinguang still complained about the “antiquity” of song lyrics in some ancient costume films, criticizing them as countering the modern effort of language standardization.<sup>74</sup> As an accomplished composer and a brother of Li Jinxi, one of the leading figures of *guoyu* movement, Li Jinguang perceived popular songs as an effective means to promote modern Chinese Language, paralleling the effort of his other brother Li Jinhui. Li Jinguang was the music director for Pathé Records in Shanghai, and had written numerous songs for ancient costume films by then. His attitude was representative of the general consensus and the dominant practice of his time. Similar to dialogues, songs in ancient costume films should help to bridge the distance between past and present.

Although the songs did not necessarily make the films sound more ancient, the ancient setting tended to diversify the ways songs were used in the film. Jean Ma emphasizes the centrality of the songstress figure in early Chinese cinema, stressing the gendering of song performance in Chinese filmic tradition.<sup>75</sup> The songstress as discussed in Jean Ma’s book is mostly a modern profession grounded in the cosmopolitan culture of Shanghai and Hong Kong, reflecting the “female-centered musical amusements of the urban demimonde.”<sup>76</sup> In ancient costume films, however, the identities of singing characters are far more flexible, like in the opera. From children to the elder, from housemaids to monks, from military generals to Confucius, everyone could get a chance to sing, as if the ancient setting enabled a new potential of its characters. Gender bias is

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<sup>74</sup> Li Jinguang, “Dianying Gequ de Gudong Geci” [Antique Lyrics in Film Songs], *Yishu Shijie* (1940): B18.

<sup>75</sup> Jean Ma, *Sounding the Modern Woman: The Songstress in Chinese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

still palpable but to a lesser degree, and it is more likely determined by the unequal status between male and female film stars rather than the gender roles within the diegesis. Female stars often enjoyed higher popularity and their songs held a better chance to be released in gramophone records.<sup>77</sup> In ancient costume films, the songstress is no longer the solitary “lyrical agent,” and singing takes place in multiple modes beyond a professional or semi-professional setting of performance.

In *Mulan*, the three songs are presented in three different forms. The controversial “Sunrise” song is a chorus sung together by Mulan and children in the village after her return from hunting. It almost serves as a celebration of Mulan’s outwitting of the harassers, and on the formal level it is a full-fledged music number developed from the harassers’ semi-singing-like rhythmic talk at the end of the hunting scene. “Where is the Moon” is a duet between Mulan and Yuandu, and an instant hit of the time. Hiding their affections behind the moon metaphor, it is a typical verbal play delivered through singing. Besides the two songs by the protagonists, director Bu also incorporated the performance of a real singsong girl and an Er’hu player into the diegesis. With the intensification of competitions among companies, experiments with film songs opened up new directions for innovation. Guohua Film Company was a pioneer in the field, thanks to their collaboration with Fan Yanqiao and of course the company’s superstar Golden Throat Zhou Xuan.

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<sup>77</sup> For example, in Yihua’s *Three Smiles*, the male protagonist Tang Bohu has more screen time than the female protagonist Qiuxiang, but Tang’s impersonator Yan Hua was only paid 40 yuan in addition to 85 yuan monthly salary, whereas the female lead Li Lihua earned 100 yuan on top of 300 yuan monthly salary. See “*San Xiao Choulao you Piantan, Tang Bohu Xinli bu Kaixin*” [Unfair Salary for *Three Smiles* disappoints Tang Bohu], *Yingyi* 6 (1940): 12.

Compared to other Mandarin Duck and Butterfly writers, Fan is a belated participant in the film industry.<sup>78</sup> After joining Guohua in 1938, He wrote numerous lyrics for film songs and seven film scripts, five out of which are musicals.<sup>79</sup> Musical in the Chinese context is rather loosely defined, and ranges widely from films that include multiple songs in the diegesis (*gechang pian*) to backstage singing and dancing films (*gewu pian*). It is significantly different from the musical genre in Hollywood, and as Yeh Yueh-yu forcefully argues, “Hollywood-style musicals never existed in China as a major film genre.”<sup>80</sup> However, the influence of Hollywood musical on Chinese films was evident. Fan’s two ancient costume musical films *Three Smiles* and *Romance of the West Chamber* were both promoted as the Chinese version of Lubitsch’s *The Love Parade* (1929), which had been hugely popular in China since its release in 1930. Despite all the significant differences, the incorporation of song lyrics into characters’ conversations and the abundance of music numbers in these two films indeed bear clear resemblance with their Hollywood counterpart. Chinese scholars tend to relate Fan’s endeavor to a culturally specific style (*minzu fengge*) influenced by traditional theater.<sup>81</sup> However, artistic influence is never an either-or question. Learning from the West and attending to tradition do not necessarily lead to two complete opposite directions, as the birth of

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<sup>78</sup> Fan Yanqiao became Mingxing Film Company’s head secretary in 1936, and entered Guohua with Zhang Shankun in 1939. However, Fan already started to write on films in the late 1920s and was one of the early promoters of history film.

<sup>79</sup> These five musicals are *Three Smiles* (1940), *Romance of the West Chamber* (1940), *Fig* (*Wuhuaguo*, 1941), *Soul Mate* (*Jieyu Hua*, 1941), and *All Consuming Love* (1947).

<sup>80</sup> Yeh Yueh-yu, “Historiography and Sinification: Music in Chinese Cinema of the 1930s.” *Cinema Journal* 41, 3 (2002): 78-97.

<sup>81</sup> Li Daoxin, “Zuowei Leixing de Zhongguo Zaoqi Gechang Pian” [Early Chinese Musical Film as a Genre], *Dangdai Dianying* 6 (2000): 83-88; Li Bin, “Fan Yanqiao yu Zhongguo Zaoqi Dianying” [Fan Yanqiao and Early Chinese Cinema], *Suzhou Jiaoyu Xueyuan Xuebao* 31, 5 (Oct 2014): 7-12; Jiang Min, *Fan Yanqiao Gechang Pian Yanjiu* [A Study on Fan Yanqiao’s Musical Film]. Master Thesis, Nanjing Yishu Xueyuan, 2015.

ancient costume film in China has demonstrated (chapter 1), and they seem to converge again in the experiment of musicals.

The presence of Zhou Xuan almost guarantees the inclusion of singing in a film, but it was not until *Three Smiles* that the number of songs exploded. As mentioned in chapter 4, Guohua's *Three Smiles* is a "twin film" released almost simultaneously with Yihua's production of the same title and same story, and both versions miraculously entered the ten top bestselling list.<sup>82</sup> Yihua's *Smiles* is a hilarious comedy that includes two songs and the selling point of Guohua's film is clearly its music. The huge success of *Smile* encouraged the company to further invest in the musical mode, which led to the production of *Romance of the West Chamber* later that year. Like *Smile*, *Romance* also contains ten songs, all written by Fan Yanqiao and composed by Li Jinguang, Zhang Fuhua, and Zhou Xuan's husband Yan Hua. In *Smiles*, the male protagonist Tang Bohu sings in all the ten songs, including two solos, whereas Zhou Xuan's Qiu Xiang only sings partially in five songs.<sup>83</sup> But when it comes to *Romance*, half of the songs are solos by Zhou Xuan, and two of her solos *Lovers' Night* (*Yueyuan Huahao*) and *Beating Crimson* (*Kao Hong*) are released by the Pathé Records.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> "Shangban Niandu Shibu Maizuopian" [Ten Bestsellers of the First Half of 1940], *Zhongguo Yingxun* 1, 18 (1940): 140. Guohua's *Smile* was the fourth bestseller with a running time of 28 days, and Guohua's was number 7, running for 23 days. Nine out of this top ten list are ancient costume films, and the only contemporary film *Li A'mao and Dongfang Shuo* also features ancient costumes in its extensive use of play-within-plays.

<sup>83</sup> The film *Three Smile* is no longer extant, but all the songs are recorded in written forms in popular music magazines, including *Love Process* (Ai de Guocheng), *Lovers Talk in Kitchen* (Chufang Qinghua), *Drawing the Bodhisattva* (Hua Guanyin), *Wish* (Xinyuan), *Becoming a Servant* (Maishen Toukao), *Picking Qiuxiang* (Dian Qiuxiang), *Persuading Tang* (Quan Tang), *Love Confession* (Su Zhongqing), *Lovesickness* (Xiangsi Yin), and *Reunion Celebration* (Qing Tuanyuan).

<sup>84</sup> The music number of *Lovers' Night* is not included in the extant version of the film due to the damage of the film print. But it is still widely circulated today.

Zhou Xuan is cast as the maid Crimson, and Oriole's impersonator Murong Wan'er, who plays Nanzi in *Confucius*, was a last minute decision of the company.<sup>85</sup> Such casting undoubtedly turns Crimson into the leading role of the film, which is immediately made clear in the first music number that introduces the two female characters and their encounter with Student Zhang. After a long shot of Zhang visiting the Pujiu Temple, it fades to a beautiful garden scene of flowers and butterflies with dulcet music accompaniment orchestrated by violin, Western concert flute, clarinet, and harp. Crimson first emerges from the back of a flower bush, slowly walking across a stone bridge followed by Oriole. The camera slowly tracks back to keep them in the foreground. With the appearance of the title of the song, as well as the names of its composer and lyricist, Crimson starts to sing, turning the seemingly non-diegetic music into the prelude of a diegetic song. Although both characters occupy the center of the frame, Crimson's singing and lively body movement attract most of audience's attention while Oriole remains silent and mostly still.<sup>86</sup>



Fig. 6.5 Zhou Xuan singing *Song of the Butterfly*

<sup>85</sup> “*Xixiang Ji Jiaqiang Zhenrong*” [Improvement in the cast of *Romance of the West Chamber*], *Dazhong Dianying* 1, 22 (1940): 176.

<sup>86</sup> In Wang Shifu's *Romance of the West Chamber*, neither Oriole nor Crimson sings. It is Student Zhang who sings three arias to express his affection after seeing Oriole.

Compared to the encounter scene in the 1927 version of *Romance* where parallel editing meticulously stitched together various tourist sites in Hangzhou (chapter 3), the attraction here is primarily acoustic. The number is shot in one single take, but interrupted by a cut to Student Zhang watching them in a light trance. Zhang almost serves as a stand-in for the audience, being taken away by the enchanting performance. Immediately after the music number, Zhang comments, “I have never seen such a beauty before.” Coming right after of the singing performance, the comment should be made about Crimson due to the “tendency for the audience to conflate the physical beauty of the singer with the acoustic beauty of the song,” as Judith Zeitlin argues.<sup>87</sup> However, in the film diegesis, Zhang’s comment is actually referring to Oriole rather than Crimson, as reinforced in the next eye-match shot between Zhang and Oriole. This mismatch between the sensorial attraction for the audience and the romantic attraction in the narrative remains consistent throughout the film, pushing the romance between Zhang and Oriole to the periphery of audience’s attention. It is the mediating effort of Crimson, often punctuated with her singing, that grasps the interest of the audience. The lyrics of the first song also clarify the “mediating” theme of the film, comparing Crimson to the butterfly that pollinates flowers.

The songs in *Romance* can be roughly divided into two categories, personalized songs that enable the expression of deeper feelings of a character, like the *Butterfly Song*, and narrativized songs that function as characters’ dialogues. Neither of them presents a narratively motivated performance. The best way to accommodate so many songs in the

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<sup>87</sup> Judith Zeitlin, “‘Notes of Flesh’ and the Courtesan’s Song in Seventeenth-Century China,” *The Courtesan’s Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 79-80.

films is to change the rule of the narrative world, turning singing from a form of performance into a default way of communication. According to Fan Yanqiao, he started such experiment in *Li Sanniang*, making the character recount the narrative in singing, and in *Three Smiles* he finally integrated singing into conversations.<sup>88</sup> In *Romance*, not only do the characters “talk” to each other through singing, one character’s singing can also be responded or interrupted by other characters’ talking, creating a smooth alternation between the two vocal forms. This indeed brings the film closer to traditional opera performance, but precisely because of such resemblance, filmmakers had stayed away from this style that countered the new dramatists’ enduring effort to separate singing from speaking. For this reason, the Guohua Company had to repeatedly emphasize the Hollywood reference to legitimize their experiment.

The integration of singing into speaking does not reduce the unique effects of music numbers to pure narrative function. In singing and songs, as Mark Booth suggests, “music tones transform speech away from presupposition of separation among speaker, hearer, and the object of discourse.”<sup>89</sup> Singing provides a transcendental space where the boundary between the self and others becomes fluid, regardless of the narrative functions of the songs. This enchanting experience of unity and togetherness is also reinforced by the cinematography of the music numbers in *Romance*. Among the nine numbers in the extant version, five are filmed in one take with no cuts. Except for the duet between Zhang and Oriole that is physically separated by the wall, all the singing scenes start as a long shot that unites the characters together rather than isolating the singer from the

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<sup>88</sup> Fan Yanqiao, “Cong *Huizhen Ji* dao Dianying de *Xixiang Ji*” [From *Huizhen Ji* to the Film Version of *Romance of the West Chamber*], *Jincheng Yuekan* 17 (1940), 7-10. Fan Yanqiao also mentions Xu Zhuodai’s *Li A’mao* and *Dongfang Shuo* as his source of inspiration. This film contains eight silent film segments accompanied by extra-diegetic songs accounting the narrative.

<sup>89</sup> Mark Booth, *The Experience of Songs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 18.

background. Even the star Zhou Xuan seldom gets a close-up during her singing. She is always presented as the mediator between Zhang and Oriole. (It might be different in the damaged number of *Lovers' Night*, where Crimson sings in the garden alone during Zhang and Oriole's rendezvous.) Regardless of all the conflicts in the narrative, in the space of songs, a sense of unity occurs beyond the diegesis.

This sense of unity is not just contained among the singers and listeners in the film, but also extends to envelop the audience, ensuring them a sense of togetherness with the film characters. This is especially evident when the audience sings along with the film songs. During the second run of *Romance*, film viewing became a collective singing experience as *Beating Crimson* and *Lovers' Night* had been frequently broadcasted through radio.<sup>90</sup> *Lovers' Night* was also remixed as a popular dancing song played in major dancing halls in Shanghai.<sup>91</sup> Songs were often an important reason for multiple viewings of a film during the war.<sup>92</sup> They rarely convey any direct political messages that reflect the situation of the war, but carve a utopian space of joy and collectivity that belong neither solely to the film diegesis nor audience's reality.

Although ancient costume films provided an experimental ground for new forms of music numbers, songs and music had no exclusive connection with ancient setting. Contemporary costume films also relied on songs as a major attraction. Chinese film scholar Li Daoxin sees the Wartime era as the formation stage of musical as an

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<sup>90</sup> “*Xixiang Ji Ying Zaochang, Jincheng Saiguo kai Changge Ban*” [Morning Screening of *Romance of the West Chamber* turns into a Singing Class], *Dianying Xinwen* 149 (1941): 593; Fan Yanqiao, “Zhou Xuan zhi Ge” [Songs of Zhou Xuan], *Libai Liu* 65 (1947): 12-13.

<sup>91</sup> Fan Yanqiao, “Zhou Xuan zhi Ge,” *Libai Liu* 65 (1947): 12-13.

<sup>92</sup> In Chen Cunren's memoir of wartime life in Shanghai, he mentioned his multiple viewing of *Mulan* for the song *Where is the Moon?* See Chen Cunren, *Kangzhan Shidai Shenghuo Shi* [History of Everyday Life during the War of Resistance] (Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe, 2007). Li Xianglan's singing in *Eternal Fame* (*Wanshi Liufang*) is also mentioned by audience as the reason for repeated viewing of the film.

independent genre in China.<sup>93</sup> Hollywood style singing and dancing films, like *Moon and Stars* (*Sanxing Banyue*, dir. Fang Peilin, 1938) and *Cloud Fairy* (Yunshang Xianzi, dir. Yue Feng, 1939) made their debut in this period.<sup>94</sup> By the time Guohua's contemporary costume musical *The Wandering Songstress* (*Tianya Geü*, dir. Wu Cun 1941) was released,<sup>95</sup> filmmakers and critics realized that musical would be a promising form to "sweep out ancient costume films."<sup>96</sup> So did it happen. According to its contemporary report, *The Wandering Songstress* contains ten newly composed songs and twenty popular songs of the time, which almost sounds like an impossible task to accomplish.<sup>97</sup> Like the martial arts-magic spirit elements that departed from ancient costume films and exploded into a genre of its own in the late 1920s, singing joint contemporary costumes and became a new dominant trend of the early 1940s.

### **Coda: The Sound of the Past**

The question "what the ancient sounded like" did not completely elude the attention of ancient costume filmmakers during the war, although it was not a primary concern for most directors. It might not be possible to recuperate the soundscape of the ancient world, but various ancient musical instruments provided a feasible means to recreate certain sounds from the past. In the limited examples of ambient sound in

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<sup>93</sup> Li Daoxin, "Zuowei Leixing de Zhongguo Zaoqi Gechangpian," 84-85.

<sup>94</sup> The production of Fang Peilin's *Moon and Stars* started before the outbreak of the war, but was released in 1938. *Cloud Fairy* is a remake of Bu Wancang's half sound film *Glory of Motherhood* (1933). It contains four dancing sequences and four songs, two of which are written by Tian Han.

<sup>95</sup> *Wandering Songstress*, also starring Zhou Xuan, was made between *Smiles* and *Romance*, but was released after *Romance* due to the censorship.

<sup>96</sup> "Saodang Minjianpian de Xianfeng: Ge Gongsì Jun Gai She Gechang Pian" [The Pioneer that Sweeps Folklore Film: Film Companies start to make Musical], *Dianying Ribao*, September 16, 1940; "Ge Gongsì jiang Jingpai Gechang Pian" [Film Companies Compete to make Musicals], *Dianying Zhoukan* 100 (1940): 3.

<sup>97</sup> Zhu Hua, "Tianya Genü Hengpoumian" [Cross-Section of the *Wandering Songstress*], *Jincheng Yuekan* 17 (1940): 39.

existing ancient costume films, the sound of bell, drum, and gong are most commonly used to convey the acoustic atmosphere of the past. In *Mulan*, the jingle bells around the neck of Mulan's horse mark the most prominent non-vocal sound in the film diegesis. The delightful jingling sound they make imbue many otherwise silent scenes a sense of liveliness. The knocking of a giant bronze bell appears in both *Empress Wu* and *Confucius* as a palace ritual. Although they are not necessarily used in a historically accurate way, the thick, vigorous, and reverberating sound of the bell conveys a feeling of historicity, as if coming through the depth of time.

A different bronze bell also appears at the beginning and end of *Confucius*, accompanied by the film's theme song *Eulogy for Confucius*, written by a famous Song dynasty painter Mi Fu. Here, it is the image of the bell that evokes antiquity, echoed by the singing voice that resurrects Mi Fu's writing. Like other films of the time, ambience sound is mostly presented by music, both diegetic and non-diegetic. Fei Mu devoted one fifth of the film budget on music, a bold choice that few if any of his contemporaries in China would make. As the film's music composer Qin Pengzheng notes, all the music used in the film is based on the Ming Dynasty *Complete Book on Tone System (Yuelü Quanshu)* by Zhu Zaiyu and various ancient zither (*guqin*) scores. Ancient Chinese bamboo and string instruments *xun*, *chi*, *xiao*, *sheng*, *guan*, *qin*, and *se*, and percussive instruments bells, chimes and drums are used in the film music. Qin apologetically admits that they also employed Western instruments, but emphasizes that those were only used to achieve certain desired effects.<sup>98</sup> In fact, Western instruments were featured more

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<sup>98</sup> Qin Pengzhang, "Kong Fuzi Yingpian yu Yinyue" [*Confucius: The Film and Its Music*], *Shenbao* December 25, 1940, collected in *FMDK*, 72.

significantly than Qin puts it.<sup>99</sup> There is no doubt that Fei Mu and his team aimed to create a proper ancient atmosphere through music, but for Fei Mu such retrospective reconstruction of the Chinese past did not have to be limited to Chinese means. Despite his perpetual pursuit of unique Chinese film aesthetics, Fei kept open to Western influences.

Besides the theme song, Fei Mu also makes Confucius sing at the most difficult time of his life – his besiegement between the Chen State and the Cai State. After days of starvation and the tragic death of one disciple, the film comes to its emotional climax. The scene starts with Confucius playing the zither at his shelter while the body of the dead disciple is carried across the screen. At the end of the tune, Zilu comments, “how come the teacher is still in the mood of playing music at such difficult time?” Hearing Zilu’s doubt, Confucius starts the music again, and this time accompanied with his own singing, “Boundless is the wilderness, the grass withered and yellowing. We run far and wide, desolate and shivering. Wiping out the traitors and invaders like chasing out jackals and wolves.” The camera pans to show the faces of Yan Hui, Zigong and Zilu, and cuts to a closer shot of Zilu picking up his axe and shield. The last line is repeated twice, first accompanied with a medium close-up on Confucius sad but dignified face, and then showing Zilu dancing with the axe and humming the line with Confucius. To further intensify the emotional tone of the “wiping out invader” line, Fei Mu uses the tremulous effect of the cello to underscore the deep sound of the zither. Towards the end of the song, the image of Yan Hui breaking an arrow is punctuated by a beat of the gong that

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<sup>99</sup> For detailed discussion on the music in *Confucius*, see Xie Junren “*Kong Fuzi* Dianying Yinyue de ‘Yang Wei Zhong Yong’” [Western Instruments, Chinese Sounds: Music in *Confucius*], *FMDK*, 52-55.

forcefully terminates the scene, as if waking everyone up from the sorrow and anger that have been accumulated throughout the sequence.

This scene allows for the strongest emotional identification with Confucius in the entire film. Confucius singing and intensive use of close-ups dissolves the sense of historical distance that has been firmly established in the rest of the film. Singing and dancing here are presented as the ultimate expression of emotion, echoing the famous line in “The Great Preface” to *The Book of Poetry*, “If words are not enough (to express emotion), we speak in sigh. If sighs are not enough, we sing. If singing is not enough, unconsciously our hands dance and our feet tap.”<sup>100</sup> Fei Mu wrote the lyrics himself in the *Chuci* style.<sup>101</sup> He perceives no need to rely on modern language to facilitate audience’s identification with ancient characters. The saturated emotion in Confucius singing and Zilu’s dancing far transcends the temporal barrier of history and the physical barrier of the screen, generating a strong resonance between past and present, between the cinematic world and the world of the audience.

Fei Mu’s *Confucius* is probably the only film from the Republican era, at least among the existing ones, that seriously takes historicity as its subject of depiction. Although it is far from being a flawless film in terms of historical accuracy and technical perfection, it stands out as an exceptional case that responds to Chinese filmmakers’ initial expectations for history films in the mid 1920s. When the film was rediscovered in 2001, part of the sound track had been severely damaged, leaving a significant part of the film in silence. The past rarely presents itself to us in an intact way, but the hide and seek

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<sup>100</sup> Confucius is believed to be the editor of *The Book of Poetry*. But the author of the Great Preface to the Mao Heng edition, commonly known as *Mao Shi*, is still under debate.

<sup>101</sup> Each line consists of a four-stressed-syllable phrase and a three-stressed-syllable phrase, separated by the unstressed syllable “xi.”

game with history is a perpetual attraction for filmmakers and scholars in the past, present, and the future.

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## Chinese History Films and Ancient Costume Films from 1925 – 1941

- Organized by release time in Shanghai, location-shooting information based on advertisements. Extant Films are marked with \*

### The Silent Era, 1925 - 1931

- Including adaptations of ancient tales with contemporary settings

*A Daoist Dream* (Qingxu Meng, 清虚梦) – Adapted from *The Daoist of the Lao*

*Mountain* 崂山道士 in *Strange Stories from A Chinese Studio* 聊斋志异

The Commercial Press (New Ellen Theater, October 19, 1922)

- **Contemporary Costume, Contemporary Setting**

Scr: Chen Chunsheng Dir: Ren Pengnian Pho: Liao Enshou

Cast: Ding Yuanyi, Bao Guiying, Zhang Shenwu

*Soup from a Filial Daughter-in-Law* (Xiaofu Geng, 孝妇羹) – Adapted from *Shanhu* in

*Strange Stories from A Chinese Studio* 聊斋志异

The Commercial Press (New Ellen Theater, October 19, 1922)

- **Contemporary Costume, Contemporary Setting**

Scr: Chen Chunsheng Dir: Ren Pengnian Pho: Liao Enshou

Cast: Wang Fuqing

*Finding Gold in Barren Hills* (Huangshan De Jin, 荒山得金) – Adapted from *Song*

*Xiaoguan Unites with his Family Through an Old Hat* 宋小官团圆旧毡笠

The Commercial Press (Empire Theater, June 11, 1923)

- **Contemporary Costume, Contemporary Setting**

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr: Chen Chunsheng Dir: Ren Pengnian Pho: Liao Enshou

Cast: Zhang Shengwu, Bao Guirong, Wang Guilin, Hong Jingling

*Lotus Blossom* (Canzhong Han, 残钟憾)

Wha Ming (Huamin) Film Company (Filmed in L.A. in 1921; Shanghai release: Embassy Theater, September 6, 1923)

- **Ancient Costume**

Dir: Francis Grandon, Jamens Leong

Cast: Lady Tsen-mei, Tully Marshall, Noah Beery, Yutaka Abe

*A Lotus Rhyme* (Lianhua Luo, 莲花落)

The Commercial Press (Shenjiang Theater, December 11, 1923) – Adapted from *Li Yaxian and Zheng Yuanhe* 李亚仙与郑元和

- **Contemporary Costume, Contemporary Setting**

Scr: Chen Chunsheng Dir: Ren Pengnian Pho: Liao Enshou

Cast: Zhang Huichong, Zhang Xijuan, Bao Guirong, Wang Fuqing

*Interlocked Ruse* (Lianhuan Ji, 连环计 a.k.a. Fengyi Ting, 凤仪亭) – *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Tongpeng Photoplay Company (Carter Theater, January 12, 1925)

- Peking Opera Costume

Location Shooting: Jinzhou (Dalian)

Dir: Tanaka Konosuke Pho: Kawatani Shohei

Cast: Peking opera performers in Dalian

*Rouge* (Yanzhi, 胭脂) – Adapted from *Rouge* 胭脂 in *Strange Stories from A Chinese Studio* 聊斋志异

Minxin Film Company (Filmed in Guangzhou. Released in Hong Kong in February 1925, Shanghai release unknown)

- **Contemporary Costume, Contemporary Setting**

Dir: Li Minwei, Li Beihai

Cast: Li Minwei, Lin Chuchu, Liang Shaopo

*Three Taoist Talismans* (San Qifu, 三奇符)

- Ancient Costume

British- American Tobacco Company (Carlton Theater, September 1925)

*Lingbo Fairy* (Lingbo Xianzi, 凌波仙子)

Kaixin Film Company (New Stage, February 16, 1926)

- Ancient Costume (**linked play**)

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Dir: Xu Zhuodai, Wang Youyou

Cast: Fang Hongye, Pan Yueqiao, Xu Zhuodai

*The Veil of Happiness* (Shiren Wamu Ji, 诗人挖目记)

Aubert Film (Filmed in France. French Release: September 21, 1923; Shanghai Release: Embassy Theater, March 13, 1926)

- Ancient Costume

Scr: Georges Clemenceau Dir: Édouard-Émile Violet

Cast: Xu Hu, Susie Wata, Liao Shiqin

*The Legend of the Willow Pattern Plate* (Liudie Yuan, 柳碟缘)\*

British- American Tobacco Company (Carlton Theater, April 13, 1926)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Hangzhou

Dir: William Jansen

Cast: Li Manli

*Red Rose* (Hong Meigui, 红玫瑰)

Kaixin Film Company (New Stage, April 30, 1926)

- Ancient Costume (**linked play**)

Location Shooting: Changshu

Dir: Xu Zhuodai, Wang Yoyou

Cast: Zhou Fengwen, Xu Zhuodai, Pan Yueqiao, Xia Yueyun, Wu Zhuxiang

*Liang Zhu* (Liang Zhu Tongshi, 梁祝痛史)

Tianyi Film Company (First released in Huzhou and Hangzhou in May 1926; Shanghai

Release: Grand Central Theater, June 2, 1926)

- Contemporary Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Yixing

Scr: Dong Xuexue Dir: Shao Zuiweng Pho: Xu Shaoyu

Cast: Hu Die, Wu Suxin, Jin Yuru, Wei Pengfei

*Tale of the White Snake* (Baishe Zhuan, 白蛇传), I, II

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, July 11, 1926)

- Contemporary and Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Hangzhou, Zhenjiang

Scr: Shao Shanke, Shao Cunren Dir: Shao Zuiwen Pho: Xu Shaoyu

Cast: Hu Die, Wu Suxin, Jin Yuru, Wei Pengfei, Wang Wukong

*Lotus Princess* (Lianhua Gongzhu, 莲花公主) I

Grand China Film Company (Gong Stage, June 28, 1926)

- Ancient Costume (**linked play**)

Location Shooting: Shanghai, Huzhou

Scr / Dir: Gu Wuwei

Cast: Fen Juhua, Lu Cuilan, Lin Ruxin, Xiao Lanchun, Zhang Shaochuan, Chen Caixia, Gu Baolian, Xu Lanfang

*Ma Jiefu* (Ma Jiefu, 马介甫)

Great China-Lily Company (Grand Central Theater, July 21, 1926)

- **Contemporary Costume, Contemporary Setting**

Scr: Zhou Shoujuan Dir: Zhu Shouju Pho: Zhou Shimu, Yu Xingsan

Cast: Zhou Wenzhu, Wang Naidong, Wang Jingwo, Xie Yunqing

*The Cowboy and Weaving Fairy* (Niulang Zhinü Queqiao Hui, 牛郎织女鹊桥会)

Grand China Film Company (Gong Stage, August 11, 1926)

- Ancient Costume (**linked play**)

Scr / Dir: Gu Wuwei Pho: Kawatani Shohei

Cast: Lin Ruxin, Lu Cuilan

*Lotus Princess* (Lianhua Gongzhu, 莲花公主), II

Grand China Film Company (Gong Stage, October 25, 1926)

- Ancient Costume (**linked play**)

Location Shooting: Beijing, Nanjing, Hangzhou, Jiaying, Huzhou, Suzhou

Scr / Dir: Gu Wuwei Pho: Kawatani Shohei

Cast: Xu Lanfang, Li Guifang, Fen Juhua, Lu Cuilan, Lin Ruxin, Xiao Lanchun, Gu Baolian,

*Pearl Pagoda* (Zhenzhu Ta, 珍珠塔), I, II

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, November 5, 1926)

- Contemporary Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou, Xuzhou

Scr: Shao Cunren, Qiu Qixiang Dir: Shao Zuiwen Pho: Shao Yifu, Xu Shaoyu

Cast: Hu Die, Zhang Huixian, Wu Suxin, Ding Ziming, Jin Yuru, Wang Wukong, Wei Pengfei, Xiao Tiandai

*Lady Mengjiang* (Mengjiang Nü, 孟姜女)

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, December 5, 1926)

- Contemporary Costume

Scr: Shao Cunren, Gu Kenfu Dir: Shao Zuiwen

Cast: Hu Die, Jin Yuru, Zhang Jingxian, Wang Wukong, Xiao Tiandai

*Peacocks Fly Apart* (Kongque Dong Nan Fei, 孔雀东南飞)

Peacock Film Company (Beijing Theater, December 5, 1926)

- Contemporary and Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Shanghai, Suzhou

Scr / Dir: Cheng Shuren

Cast: Wei Yifei, Yan Suzhen, Zhou Wancheng, Zhou Kongkong, Li Lina

*Living Buddha Jigong* (Jigong Huofo, 济公活佛), I

Kaixin Film Company (Grand Central Theater, December 15, 1926)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Hangzhou

Dir: Wang Youyou Set: Ni Gulian, Yao Jiguang

Cast: Wang Youyou, Xu Zhuodai, Zhou Fengwen

*Lotus Princess* (Lianhua Gongzhu, 莲花公主), III, IV

Grand China Film Company (Gong Stage, December 22, 1926)

- Ancient Costume (**linked play**)

Scr / Dir: Gu Wuwei

Cast: Xu Lanfang, Li Guifang, Fen Juhua, Lu Cuilan, Lin Ruxin, Xiao Lanchun, Gu Baolian,

*Piggy's Marriage* (Zhubajie Zhaoqin, 猪八戒招亲) – *Journey to the West*

Grand China Film Company (Grand Central Theater, January 19, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Scr / Dir: Chen Qiufeng Pho: Kawatani Shohei Set: Jiang Jingcheng

Cast: Zhu Jianling, Lin Ruxin, Wang Huiying

*The Cave of the Spider Spirit* (Pansi Dong, 盘丝洞)\* – *Journey to the West*

Shanghai Shadowplay Company (New Central Theater, February 5, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr: Guan Ji'an Dir: Dan Duyu

Ph: Dan Ganting Set: Dan Duyu

Cast: Yin Mingzhu, Wen Wenchao, He Rongzhu, Xia Peizhen, Dan Erchun

*Monkey King Fights the Leopard* (Sunxingzhe Dazhan Jinqianbao, 孙行者大战金钱豹)  
– *Journey to the West*

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, February 11, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Dir: Shao Zuiwen, Gu Kenfu, Li Pingqian

Cast: Hu Die, Zhang Zizhi, Zhang Dagong, Wei Pengfei, Wu Aizhu, Xiao Tiandai

*Han Xiangzi* (Hang Xiangzi, 韩湘子)

Grand China Film Company (Suzhou China Cinema, February 8, 1927; Shanghai Release: Grand Central Theater, February 14, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Dir. Xia Chifeng Pho: Ji Gongran Set: Jiang Jingcheng

Cast: Chen Qiufeng, Liu Aili, Dong Tian'e, Liu Yixin, Wang Xueqin

*The Tale of a Mirror* (Lijing Zhuan, 荔镜传)

Youlian Film Company (Finished in December 1926; Released at Suzhou China Cinema, February 1927; Shanghai Release info unknown)

- **Contemporary Costume, Contemporary Setting**

Dir. Ren Pengnian, Wen Yimin

Cast: Fan Xuepeng, Lu Jianfen

*Xue Rengui's Western Expedition* (Xue Rengui Zhengxi, 薛仁贵征西) I, II

Grand China Film Company (Gong Stage, February 15, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Dir: Gu Wuwei Pho: Kawatani Shohei

Cast: Fen Juhua, Li Guifang, Lu Cuilan, Dong Tian'e

*Lady Mengjiang* (Mengjiang Nü, 孟姜女)

Yitian Film Company (Grand Central Theater, February 17, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Beijing, Shanhai Pass

SCr: Zhou Xichen Dir: Zheng Chigong Pho: Wen Qisheng

Cast: Xu Jingzhen, Bi Haomin, Zhou Kongkong, Chen Qiuying

*Living Buddha Jigong* (Jigong Huofo, 济公活佛), II

Kaixin Film Company (Grand Central Theater, February 23, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Scr: Xu Zhou dai Dir: Wang Youyou

Cast: Xu Zhuodai, Zhou Fengwen, Wang Youyou, Ye Honglin

*Three Smiles* (San Xiao, a.k.a. Tang Bohu Dian Qiuxiang, 三笑姻缘), I, II

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, March 9, 1927)

- Contemporary Costume

Scr: Shao Shanke, Li Pingqian Dir: Shao Zuiwen, Qiu Qixiang

Cast: Lin Yongrong, Chen Yumei, Zhou Kongkong, Wang Wukong

*Tale of the White Snake* (Baishe Zhuan, 白蛇传), III

Tianyi Film Company (New Central Theater, April 20, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Scr: Shao Shanke Dir: Shao Zuiwen, Li Pingqian

Cast: Hu Die, Chen Yumei, Wu Suxin

*Cao Cao Controls the Court* (Cao Cao Bigong, 曹操逼宫) – *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*

Grand China Film Company (Grand Central Theater, May 8, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Dir: Xia Chifeng Set: Shen Leitian

Cast: Gu Wuwei, Lin Ruxin, Zhou Kongkong, Jiang Chengjing, Wang Huiying

*Living Buddha Jigong* (Jigong Huofo, 济公活佛), III

Kaixin Film Company (Grand Central Theater, May 15, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Scr: Xu Zhoudai Dir: Wang Youyou

Cast: Xu Zhuodai, Zhou Fengwen, Wang Youyou, Ye Honglin

*Monkey King Creates an Uproar in Heaven* (Sun Wukong Danao Tiangong, 孙悟空大闹天宫) – *Journey to the West*

Grand China Film Company (Grand Central Theater, June 5, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Dir: Chen Qiufeng Pho: Kawatani Shohei

Cast: Chen Qiufeng, Zheng Ruinian

*Beauty Ruse* (Meiren Ji, 美人计), I, II – *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*

Great China – Lily Company (Embassy Theater, June 6, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr: Zhu Shouju Dir: Lu Jie, Zhu Shouju, Wang Yuanlong, Shi Dongshan

Pho: Zhou Shimu, Yu Xingsan

Cast: Zhang Zhiyun, Wang Yuanlong, Wang Naidong, Wang Yingzhi, Xie Yunqing

*Oil Vender and the Top Courtesan* (Maiyoulang Duzhan Huakuini, 卖油郎独占花魁女)

Shenzhou Film Company (Grand Central Theater, June 12, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr / Dir: Wan Laitian Pho: Hong Zhongshan, Zhouke

Cast: Lu Meiling, Sun Min, Huang Junzhen, Zhou Kongkong, Wan Laitian

*Xue Rengui's Eastern Expedition* (Xue Rengui Zhengdong, 薛仁贵征东)

Meimei Film Company (Suzhou Sanmin Theater, June 15, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Cast: Li Meimei, Zhu Wenhui

*Living Buddha Jigong* (Jigong Huofo, 济公活佛), III

Kaixin Film Company (Grand Central Theater, June 19, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Scr: Xu Zhoudai Dir: Wang Youyou

Cast: Xu Zhuodai, Lu Xiaolan, Wang Yanqiu, Gu Cuiying, Liu Yixin

*Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei Defeat the Yellow Turban* (Liu Guan Zhang Dapo

Huangjin, 刘关张大破黄巾) – *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, June 29, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Dir: Shao Zuiweng, Qiu Qixiang, Li Pingqian, Gu Kenfu, Shao Cunren, Wang Fuqing

Cast: Xiao Zhengzhong, Tan Weiyu, Zhang Zhizhi, Hu Die, Ni Hongyan

*Nezha Causes Uproar in the Ocean* (Nezha Naohai, 哪吒闹海) – *Investiture of the Gods*

Grand China Film Company (Grand Central Theater, July 10, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Scr: Lin Ruxin Dir: Gu Wuwei Pho: Kawatani Shohei

Cast: Gu Baolian, Lin Ruxin, Wang Huixian, Gu Mengchi

*Yan Jian Defeats Seven Demons* (Yang Jian Meishan Shou Qiguai, 杨戬梅山收七怪)

– *Investiture of the Gods*

Grand China Film Company (Grand Central Theater, July 10, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr: Wu Hanyi Dir: Xia Chifeng Pho: Xu Shaoyu

Cast: Chen Xiufeng

*Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou Meng, 红楼梦)

Fudan Film Company (Grand Central Theater, July 20, 1927)

- Contemporary Costume

Dir: Ren Pengnian, Yu Boyan Pho: Zhou Yanxi

Cast: Lu Jianfen, Lu Jianfang, Zhou Kongkong, Fan Xuepeng, Wen Yimin

*Tale of the Black Pot* (Wupen Ji, 乌盆记)

Great China – Lily Company (Grand Central Theater, July 27, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Scr / Dir: Zhu Shouju Pho: Zhou Shimu

Cast: Yang Jingwo, Wang Zhengxin, Xie Yunqing, Ma Shouhong

*Pigsy Causes Uproar at the Liusha River* (Zhubajie Danao Liushahe, 猪八戒大闹流沙河)  
– *Journey to the West*

Hequn Film Company (Suzhou Lequn Society, July 13, 1927; Grand Central Theater, August 10, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Dir: Hong Ji Set: Fang Peilin

Cast: Li Manli, Yu Hanmin

*Romance of the West Chamber* (Xixiang Ji, 西厢记)\*

Minxin Film Company (Grand Central Theater, September 21, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Hangzhou, Shanghai

Scr / Dir: Hou Yao Titles: Pu Shunqing

Pho: Liang Linguang, Li Minwei Sets: Fan Zhuyun, Li Qianchu, Hu Jingrong

Cast: Lin Chuchu, Li Dandan, Ge Cijiang

*Country of Women* (Nü'er Guo, 女儿国) – *Journey to the West*

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, September 25, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Hangzhou

Scr: Qiu Qixiang Dir: Li Pingqian

Cast: Chen Yumei, Ni Hongyan

*Fengyi Pavilion* (Fengyi Ting, 凤仪亭 a.k.a. Interlocked Ruse, 连环计) – *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Grand China Film Company (Test Screening among the Armies, October 1927, release detail unknown)

- Ancient Costume

Scr / Dir: Gu Wuwei

Cast: Lu Cuilan, Gu Baolian, Chen Qiufeng, Jiang Jingcheng

*The Tang Emperor Visits Hell* (Tanghuang You Difu, 唐皇游地府)

– *Journey to the West*

Yuanyuan (Tianyi) Film Company (Grand Central Theater, October 16, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Dir: Li Pingqian

Cast: Ni Hongyan, Xiao Zhengzhong, Fu Guifeng, Zhang Zhizhi, Zhang Zhenduo

*Jiang Ziya Burns the Pipa Spirit* (Jiang Ziya Huoshao Pipajing, 姜子牙火烧琵琶精)

– *Investiture of the Gods*

Grand China Film Company (Grand Central Theater, October 19, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr: Wu Hanyi Dir: Xia Chifeng Pho: Xu Shaoyu

Cast: Wang Huixian, Lu Cuilan, Wu hanyi, Shen Leitian, Gu Mengchi

*Seven Captures of Meng Huo* (Qiqin Meng Huo, 七擒孟获) – *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*

Grand China Film Company (Grand Central Theater, October 21, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr: Chen Qiufeng Dir: Chen Yechan Pho: Chen Yongkang

Cast: Gu Mengchi, Fen Juhua, Xiao Lanchun, Liu Yixin, Zhu Jianling, Shen Leitian

*Wu Song Kills His Sister-in-Law* (Wu Song Shasao, 武松杀嫂) – *The Water Margin*

Dadong Film Company (Hangzhou Cinema, August 3, 1927; Shanghai release: Baixing Theater, Oct 26, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Scr: Cao Yuankai Dir: Wang Fuqing Pho: Zhou Qimin Set: He Zhigang

Cast: Xu Suying, Wang Fuqing, He Zhigang, Zhou Wuneng

*The Raccoon Prince* (Limao Huan Taizi, 狸猫换太子) I, II

Tiansheng (Tianyi) Film Company (Grand Central Theater, November 6, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Scr: Chang Chunheng Dir: Tan Weiyu, Wei Pengfei Pho: Wu Weiyun

Cast: Ni Hongyan, Wu Jingjuan, Gu Qixia, Wei Pengfei

*Five Gallants in Dongjing* (Wushu Nao Dongjing, 五鼠闹东京)

Tiansheng (Tianyi) Film Company (New Central Theater, November 9, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr: Xiao Zhengzhong Dir: Tan Weiyu, Wei Pengfei, Zhou Nian'ai

Cast: Zhang Zhenduo, Wei Pengfei, Zhu Gang, Hong Tingting

*Leopard Head Lin Chong* (Baozi Tou Lin Chong, 豹子头林冲) – *The Water Margin*

Fudan Film Company (Suzhou Park Cinema, November 15, 1927)

- Costume Unknown

Dir: Yu Boyan

Cast: Wen Yimin, Xu Kuiguan, Fan Xuepeng, Lu Jianfen

*Hua Mulan Joins the Army* (Hua Mulan Congjun, 花木兰从军)

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, November 30, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Hangzhou

Dir: Li Pingqian

Cast: Ni Miaoyu, Hu Shan, Zhu Gang, Zhang Zeduo, Zhang Zhizhi

*The Imperial Consort Yang* (Yang Guifei, 杨贵妃)

Shanghai Shadowplay Company (Grand Central Theater, December 11, 1927)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr: Yao Sufeng Dir / Ph: Dan Duyu Set: Qian Binghe

Cast: He Rongzhu, He Peiyang, Xia Peizhen, Chen Baoqi, Xue Qishi

*Fang Shiyu* (Fang Shiyu Da Leitai, 方世玉打擂台)

Xinren Film Company (Hangzhou Cinema, January 1, 1928)

- Costume Unknown

Dir: Ren Pengnian

Cast: Ren Chaojun, Ding Degui, Wang Yangqiao

The Conquest of Gaotangzhou (Dapo Gaotangzhou, 大破高唐州) – *The Water Margin*

Great China – Lily Company (New Central Theater, January 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr / Dir: Zhu Shouju Pho: Zhou Shimu

Cast: Xu Jingzhen, Sun Min, Xie Yunqing, Jiang Qifeng

The Country of Slow Carts (Chechi Guo, 车迟国) – *Journey to the West*

Star Film Company (New Central Theater, January 26 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Putuo Mountain

Scr: Zheng Zhengqiu Dir: Zhang Shichuan

Pho: Dong Keyi Design: Zhang Yuguang Set: Dong Tianya

Cast: Zheng Xiaoqiu, Wang Jiting, Huang Junfu, Gong Jianong, Xiao Ying, Tang Jie

*A Bottomless Pit* (Wudi Dong, 无底洞) – *Journey to the West*

Grand China Film Company (Grand Central Theater, January 26, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Hangzhou

Scr: Chen Yechan Dir: Chen Qiufeng, Li Yuanlong Pho: Kawatani Shohei

Cast: Lin Ruxin, Zheng Ruinian, Zhu Jianling, Yuan Xue'ou

*Monkey King Causes Uproar at the Heifeng Mountain* (Sunxingzhe Danao Heifeng Shan, 孙行者黑风山) – *Journey to the West*

Grand China Film Company (New Ellen Theater, January 26, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Scr: Chen Yechan Dir: Chen Qiufeng, Li Yuanlong Pho: Kawatani Shohei

Cast: Chen Qiufeng, Zhu Jianling, Liu Aili

*Country of Black Chicken* (Wuji Guo, 乌鸡国) – *Journey to the West*

Grand China Film Company (Guangming Theater, January 26, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Dir: Chen Qiufeng

*New Shaolin Temple Fang Shiyu* (Fang Shiyu, 新少林寺方世玉)  
Grand China Film Company (Aofeimu Theater, January 27, 1928)

- Contemporary and Ancient Costume

Dir: Chen Yechan

Cast: Liu Aili, Wang Tiancong, Shen Leitian

*Taiping Heavenly Kingdom* (Taiping Tianguo, 太平天国)  
Grand China Film Company (Hankou Theater, January 28, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr: Xia Chifeng, Ni Gulian Dir: Xia Chifeng, Fu Zhuoqun

Cast: Jiang Chengjing, Shen Leitian, Chen Qiufeng, Kang Mengmei, Zhu Jianling

*Five Generals Conquer the West* (Wuhu Pingxi, 五虎平西)  
Grand China Film Company (Tongsu Theater, January 29, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Scr: Wu Hanyi Dir: Xia Chifeng Pho: Xu Shaoyu

Cast: Wang Lihua, Wang Lingbo, Gu Mengchi

*The Lotus Lamp* (Pishan Jiumu, 劈山救母)  
Grand China Film Company (Hankou Theater, February 2, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Dir: Gu Wuwei

Cast: Gu Baolian, Lu Cuilan, Chen Yechan

*The Luoyang Bridge* (Luoyang Qiao, 洛阳桥)  
Star Film Company (New Central Theater, February 6, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Quanzhou

Scr / Dir: Zhang Shichuan Pho: Dong Keyi

Cast: Ruan Lingyu, Zhu Fei, Gong Jianong, Zheng Xiaoqiu, Ding Ziming

*Bodhisattva Guanyin* (Guanyin Dedao, 观音得道)  
Minxin Film Company (New Central Theater, February 8, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Putuo Mountain

Dir: Zhu Ranchen (Qizi Shanren) Pho: Li Minwei

Cast: Dong Pianpian, Lin Chuchu

*Dream of the Red Chamber* (Honglou Meng, 红楼梦)  
Peacock Film Company (Peacock Donghua Theater, February 17, 1928)

Location Shooting: Shanghai

- Ancient Costume

Dir: Cheng Shuren Pho: Zhou Ke Set: Wang Yushu

Cast: Lu Meiling, Chen Yitang, Yan Yuexian, Yin Mingzhu, Xia Peizhen

*The Red Boy* (Hong Hai'er, 红孩儿) – *Journey to the West*  
Grand China Film Company (New Central Theater, February 22, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Dir: Gu Wuwei

Cast: Gu Baolian

*Cuiping Mountain* (Cuiping Shan, 翠屏山) – *The Water Margin*  
The Great Wall Film Company (Finished in December 1927; released in 1928, detail unknown)

- Ancient Costume

Scr: Cheng Zhiqing Dir: Yang Xiaozhong

Pho: Cheng Peilin Set: Wan Dihuan

Cast: Gu Menghe, Zhang Chunli, Xu Jingzhen, Xia Peizhen, Hong Jingling

*Song Jiang* (Song Jiang, 宋江) – *The Water Margin*  
Tianyi Film Company (Finished in March 1928; release info unknown)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Dir: Qiu Qixiang

Cast: Ni Miaoyu, Xiao Zhengzhong, Xu Kuiguan, Meng Zhicheng, Hu Shan

*Di Qing Causes Uproar in the Wanhua Tower* (Di Qing Danao Wanhualou, 狄青大闹万花楼)

Jinan Film Company (Zhongshan Theater, March 12, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr: Cao Yuankai Dir: Huang Kuisheng, Wang Fuqing

Cast: Wang Fuqing

*Zhaojun Bids Farewell to the Frontier* (Zhaojun Chusai, 昭君出塞)  
Haifeng Film Company (Zhongshan Theater, March 22, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Scr / Dir: Guan Haifeng Pho: Guan Shaofeng

Cast: Ye Juanjuan, Ren Yutian

*The Two Musketeers* (Er Jianke, 二剑客)

- About Taiping Heavenly Kingdom

Funian Film Company (First released at Suzhou YMCA; Release at Hangzhou Cinema, April 5, 1928; Shanghai Release unknown)

- Ancient Costume

Dir: Xu Xinfu

Cast: Wang Weixin, Lu Xiufen, Tang Yin

*Phantom of the Ancient Palace* (Gugong Moying, 古宫魔影) – *Journey to the West*  
Great China – Lily Company (Grand Central Theater, April 1, 1928)

- Ancient (Indian) Costume

Scr: Zhu Shouju Dir: Jiang Qifeng

Pho: Zhou Shimu Set: Hu Xuguang

Cast: Zhou Wenzhu, Chen Yitang, Wang Zhengxin, Zhang Fufeng

*Wu Song Causes Uproar at the Lion Tower* (Wu Song Danao Shizilou, 武松大闹狮子楼)  
– *The Water Margin*

Hequn Film Company (Hangzhou Cinema, November 8, 1927; Shanghai Release: Grand Central Theater, May 3, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Ningbo

Scr: Yan Duhe Dir: Zhao Chen

Cast: Han Yunzhen, Shen Kefu, Yu Youmin, Chen Renzhen

*Zhuzi Country* (Zhuzi Guo, 朱紫国) – *Journey to the West*  
Yueming Film Company (Zhongshan Theater, May 9, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Putuo Mountain

Dir: Reng Pengnian

Cast: Zhao Yongni, Wu Lizhu

*The Birth of Nezha* (Nezha Chushi, 哪吒出世) – *Investiture of the Gods*

The Great Wall Film Company (Shanghai Theater, June 3, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Dir: Li Zeyuan

Cast: Lei Xiadian, Zhang Zhede, Liu Jiqun, Liu Hanjun

*Yang Wenguang Conques the South* (Yang Wenguang Pingnan, 杨文广平南)

Grand China Film Company (Zhongshan Theater, June 8, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Dir: Chen Qiufeng, Li Yuanlong

Cast: Chen Yechan, Wang Lihua

*Mulan Joins the Army* (Mulan Congjun, 木兰从军)

Minxin Film Company (Grand Central Theater, June 13, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location: Xiaogan, Xinyang, Zhumadian, The Great Wall, Nanjing, Suzhou

Scr / Dir: Hou Yao Pho: Liang Liguang

Cast: Lin Chunchun, Li Dandan, Liang Menghen, Xing Shaomei

*Sorrow of the Forbidden City* (Qinggong Mishi, 清宫秘史)

- Qing Costume

Great China – Lily Company (Grand Central Theater, June 24, 1928)

Dir: Wang Cilong Pho: Yu Xingsan

Cast: Zhou Wenzhu, Wang Yuanlong, Tang Tianxiu, Xie Yunqing, Zhang Meiyu

*The Iron Fan Princess* (Tieshan Gongzhu, 铁扇公主) – *Journey to the West*  
Tianyi Film Company (Finished in 1927; earliest release info: Hangzhou Cinema, July 4, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Hangzhou

Dir. Li Pingqian

Cast: Hu Die, Chen Yumei, Wei Pengfei, Tan Yongkui, Zhang Qinlong

*The Lotus Cave* (Lianhua Dong, 莲花洞) – *Journey to the West*

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, July 4, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Hangzhou, Ningbo, Tiantong Mountain

Dir. Shao Zuiweng Set: Qiu Yiwei

Cast: Chen Yumei, Ni Miaoyu, Wei Pengfei

*Meng Lijun* (Meng Lijun, 孟丽君; a.k.a. Huali Yuan 华丽缘) I, II

Fudan Film Company (First Released in Southeast Asian in February 1927; Shanghai release: New Ellen Theater, July 6, 1928)

- **Contemporary Costume; Contemporary Setting**

Dir: Chen Tian

Cast: Lu Jianfen, Fan Xuepeng, Huang Yueru, Ding Xiqing

*Eight Beauties of JiaXing* (Jiaxing Bamei Tu, 嘉兴八美图) I

Jinan Film Company (Test Screening at New Central Theater, May 15, 1927; Southeast Asia Release: November 1927; Shanghai Released: Grand Central Theater, July 15, 1928)

- Costume Unknown

Location Shooting: Jiaxing

Dir: Ren Pengnian

Cast: Zhao Yongni

*The Ming Emperor Zhu Hongwu* (Ming Taizu Zhu Hongwu, 明太祖朱洪武)

Tianyi Film Company (Finished in November 1927; earliest release info: Tongsu Theater July 26, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Dir: Meng Junmou

Cast: Tan Yongkui, Feng Zhicheng, Zhang Duosheng

*Wu Song's Revenge at the Yuanyang Tower* (Wu Song Xuejian Yuanyang Lou, 武松血溅鸳鸯楼)

– *The Water Margin*

The Great Wall Film Company (New Ellen Theater, August 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Scr / Dir: Yang Xiaozhong Pho: Cheng Peilin Set: Wan Guchan

Cast: Wang Zhengqing, Zhang Chunli, Xia Peizhen, Gu Menghe, Hong Jingling

*Second Blossom* (Erdu Mei, 二度梅)

Great China – Lily Company (Grand Central Theater, August 15, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Scr / Dir: Zhu Shouju Pho: Zhou Shimu

Cast: Wang Yiming, Wang Yiman, Xie Yunqing, Yang Jingwo, Chen Yitang

*Huang Tianba's Marriage* (Huang Tianba Zhaoqin, 黄天霸招亲)

The Great Wall Film Company (New Ellen Theater, September 9, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Dir. Lei Xiadian Pho: Li Wenhuan

Cast: Han Yuqing, Wang Guilin, Tan Jianqiu, Hong Jingling, Yan Gongshang

*The Love of Hong and Bi* (Hongbi Yuan, 宏碧缘) I

Yuanyuan (Tianyi) Film Company (Finished in May 1927; earliest release info:

Zhongshan Theater, September 23, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Dir. Shao Zuiweng, Li Pingqian

Cast: Liu Baoyun, Peng Tianyu, Ni Hongyan, Zhang Huaiyu, Jin Yuru, Tan Yongku

*Real and False Monkey Kings* (Zhen Jia Sunxingzhe, 真假孙行者)

– *Journey to the West*

The Great Wall Film Company (Test Screening: Shanghai Theater, April 20, 1928;

Released in Thailand in June 1928; Shanghai release: New Ellen Theater, September 24, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou, Hangzhou

Scr. Zhang Weitao Dir. Li Zeyuan Pho: Li Wenguang Set: Wan Guchan

Cast: Liu Hanjun, Tan Jianqiu, Liu Jiqun

*Flaming Mountain* (Huoyan Shan, 火焰山) – *Journey to the West*

The Great Wall Film Company (Tongsu Theater, Oct 21, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Scr / Dir. Yang Xiaozhong

Cast: Yang Aili, Hong Jingling, Wang Guilin, Huang Yueru

*Mu Guiying* (Mu Guiying, 穆桂英)

Tianyi Film Company (Finished in December 1927; earliest release info: Hangzhou West Lake Stage, December 1, 1928)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Dir: Tan Weiyu

Cast: Chen Yumei, Dong Yingying, Wei Pengfei

*The Love of Hong and Bi* (Hongbi Yuan, 宏碧缘) II

Yuanyuan (Tianyi) Film Company (Finished in June 1927; earliest release info: Hangzhou Cinema, January 21, 1929)

- Ancient Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou, Hangzhou

Dir. Meng Junmou

Cast: Li Huilan, Ni Hongyan, Jin Yuru, Yu Qiaoweng

*The Love of Hong and Bi* (Hongbi Yuan, 宏碧缘) III

Yuanyuan (Tianyi) Film Company (Finished in July 1927; earliest release info: Hangzhou Cinema, January 24, 1929)

Dir. Meng Junmou

*The Love of Hong and Bi* (Hongbi Yuan, 宏碧缘) IV

- Ancient Costume

Yuanyuan (Tianyi) Film Company (Finished in July 1927; earliest release info: Hangzhou Cinema, January 24, 1929)

Dir. Meng Junmou

Cast: Jin Yunu, Liu Yunmei

*A Pair of Pearl Phoenixes* (Shuang Zhufeng, 双珠凤)

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, February 19, 1929)

- Contemporary Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Dir: Shao Zuiweng

Cast: Chen Yumei, Wu Aizhu, Tao Yayun, Zhou Kongkong, Wei Pengfei

*Eight Beauties of Jiaxing* (Jiaxing Bamei Tu, 嘉兴八美图) II

Jinan Film Company (Finished in December 1927; Shanghai Release: Grand Central Theater, June 12, 1929)

- Costume Unknown

Dir: Lu Hanping

Cast: Xia Peizhen, Wang Chuqin, Dong Yingying, Liu Baoqin, Lu Cuiyun

*Eight Beauties of Jiaxing* (Jiaxing Bamei Tu, 嘉兴八美图) III

Jinan Film Company (Shanghai Release: Grand Central Theater, June 12, 1929)

- Costume Unknown

Dir: Ren Yutia

*Tongtian River* (Tongtian He, 通天河) – *Journey to the West*

Fudan Film Company (Finished in April 1928; Earliest Release Info: Grand Central Theater, September 4, 1929)

- Costume Unknown

Location Shooting: Fujian, Guangdong

Dir: Ren Pengnian Pho: Zhou Jianjia

Cast: Yu Hanmin, Zhao Yongni, Yan Yuexian, Yan Gongshang, Wang Dongxia

*Qianlong Emperor Visits Jiangnan* (Qianlong You Jiangnan, 乾隆游江南), I  
Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, October 10, 1929)

- Contemporary and Qing Costume

Dir: Shao Zuiweng, Li Pingqian

Cast: Chen Yumei, Zhang Zhenduo, Hu Shan, Zhou Kongkong, Tao Yayun, Qin Haha, Shao Suxia, Wei Pengfei

*Qianlong Emperor Visits Jiangnan* (Qianlong You Jiangnan, 乾隆游江南), II  
Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, October 13, 1929)

- Contemporary and Qing Costume

Dir: Shao Zuiweng, Li Pingqian

Cast: Chen Yumei, Zhang Zhenduo, Hu Shan, Zhou Kongkong, Tao Yayun, Qin Haha, Shao Suxia, Wei Pengfei

*Qianlong Emperor Visits Jiangnan* (Qianlong You Jiangnan, 乾隆游江南), III  
Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, October 16, 1929)

- Contemporary and Qing Costume

Dir: Shao Zuiweng, Li Pingqian

Cast: Chen Yumei, Zhang Zhenduo, Hu Shan, Zhou Kongkong, Tao Yayun, Qin Haha, Shao Suxia, Wei Pengfei

*Imperial Assassins* (Xuedizi, 血滴子)

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, December 3, 1929)

- Costume Unknown

Dir: Jiang Qifeng

Cast: Zhang Dagong, Zhang Zhenduo, Jiang Qifeng, Zhou Kongkong, Wei Pengfei, Yan Bingheng, Chen Yumei, Hu Shan, Tao Yayun, Lu Jianfen

*Hero Overseas* (Haiwai Yingxiong, 海外英雄)

- About Zheng He's Maritime Expeditions

Fudan Film Company (Finished in April 1928; Earliest Release Info: Hangzhou Theater, December 29, 1929)

- Costume Unknown

Location Shooting: Southern Fujian, Suzhou

Dir: Ren Pengnian Pho: Zhou Jianjia

Cast: Zhao Yongni, Yan Yuexian, Yan Gongshang, Dong Tian'e

*Qianlong Emperor Visits Jiangnan* (Qianlong You Jiangnan, 乾隆游江南), IV  
Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, February 4, 1930)

- Contemporary and Qing Costume

Dir: Jiang Qifeng

Cast: Chen Yumei, Lu Jianfen, Zhang Zhenduo, Tao Yayun, Wei Pengfei, Zhou Kongkong, Ge Furong, Ma Dongwu, Fu Jiqu

*Yang Naiwu* (Yang Naiwu, 杨乃武)

- Contemporary Costume

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, June 20, 1930)

Dir: Qiu Qixiang Pho: Zhou Shilu

Design: Maxu Weibang Set: Wu Yonggang

Cast: Lu Jianfen, Chen Yumei, Sun Min, Zhang Zhenduo, Fu Jiqu

*Qianlong Emperor Visits Jiangnan* (Qianlong You Jiangnan, 乾隆游江南), V

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, September 21, 1930)

- Contemporary and Qing Costume

Dir: Jiang Qifeng Pho: Zhou Shilu

Design: Maxu Weibang Set: Wu Yonggang

Cast: Chen Yumei, Lu Jianfen, Zhang Zhenduo, Tao Yayun, Muxu Weibang, Fu Jiqu

*Judge Shi* (Shigong An, 施公案), I

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, October 6, 1930)

- Contemporary and Ancient Costume

Dir: Shao Zuiweng

Cast: Fu Jiqu, Tao Yayun

*Qianlong Emperor Visits Jiangnan* (Qianlong You Jiangnan, 乾隆游江南), VI

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, November 2, 1930)

- Contemporary and Qing Costume

Location Shooting: Suzhou

Dir: Jiang Qifeng

Cast: Zhang Zhenduo, Xiao Zhengzhong, Maxu Weibang, Zheng Jiduo, Tao Yayun, Qin Haha, Qi Zhengmin, Wei Pengfei

*Three Marriages of Yang Yunyou* (Yang Yunyou Sanjia Dong Qichang, 杨云友三嫁董其昌)

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, November 17, 1930)

- Costume Unknown

Location Shooting: Hangzhou

Cast: Chen Yumei, Sun Min, Ge Furong, Xu Jingzhen, Shu Lijuan, Xiao Zhengzhong, Qin Haha, Qi Zhengmin, Ma Dongwu, Yang Tianle, Fu Guifeng

*Li Sanniang* (Li Sanniang, 李三娘)

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, November 29, 1930)

- Contemporary Costume

Dir: Hong Ji

Cast: Sun Min, Lu Jianfen, Shu Lijuan, Zhang Zhenduo, Wei Pengfei, Xu Jingzhen, Qi Zhengmin

*Judge Shi* (Shigong An, 施公案), II

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, December 26, 1930)

- Contemporary and Ancient Costume

Dir: Li Pingqian

Cast: Shu Lijuan, Lu Jianfeng, Jiang Naifang, Xu Jiangzhen, Qin Haha, Ge Furong, Wei Pengfei, Zhang Zhenduo, Chi Juzhen, Xiao Zhengzhong, Fu Guifeng

*Judge Shi* (Shigong An, 施公案), III

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, January 22, 1931)

- Contemporary and Ancient Costume

Dir: Jiang Qifeng

Cast: Wu Lizhu, Jiang Naifang, Xu Jingzhen, Fu Jixiu, Qin Haha, Ma Dongwu, Ge Pengfei, Chen Shaoyao

*Qianlong Emperor Visits Jiangnan* (Qianlong You Jiangnan, 乾隆游江南), VII

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, March 14, 1931)

- Contemporary and Qing Costume

Location Shooting: Hangzhou

Dir: Hong Ji

Cast: Zhang Zhenduo, Jiang Naifang, Shu Lijuan, Xu Jingzhen, Tao Yayun, Qin Haha, Fu Jiqu

*Lady Hengniang* (Hengniang, 恒娘) – Adapted from *Hengniang* 恒娘 in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* 聊斋志异

Lianhua Film Company (Beijing Theater, June 20, 1931)

\* **Contemporary Costume, Futuristic Setting**

Scr: Zhu Shilin Dir: Shi Dongshan

Pho: Zhou Ke Set: Shi Dongshan, Fang Peilin

Cast: Zhu Fei, Zhou Wenzhu, Tang Tianxiu, Ye Juanjuan, Chen Yitang

*One Thousand and One Nights of the East* (Dongfang Yetan, 东方夜谭)

Shanghai Shadowplay Company (Beijing Theater, August 1931)

- Ancient (Exotic) Costume

Scr: Zheng Yimei Dir: Dan Duyu

Cast: Yin Mingzhu, Wang Chunyuan, Yuan Congmei

*Qianlong Emperor Visits Jiangnan* (Qianlong You Jiangnan, 乾隆游江南), VIII

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, September 4, 1931)

- Contemporary Costume

Dir: Li Pingqian

Cast: Zhang Zhenduo, Chen Yumei, Jiang Naifang, Qin Haha

*Qianlong Emperor Visits Jiangnan* (Qianlong You Jiangnan, 乾隆游江南), IX

Tianyi Film Company (Grand Central Theater, December 11, 1931)

- Contemporary and Qing Costume

Dir: Li Pingqian

Cast: Zhang Zhenduo, Fu Jiqui, Xiao Zhengzhong, Sun Min, Tao Yayun, Xu Jingzhen, Wei Pengfei, Qin Haha, Yang Tianle, Yan Bingheng, Jiang Naifang, Ge Furong

### **Soud Films From 1932 to 1937**

*Legend of Hong and Yang* (Hong Yang Haoxia Zhuan, 红羊豪侠传)

Xinhua Film Company (Grand Cinema, Feb 3, 1935)

- Qing Costume

Dir. Yang Xiaozhong Pho: Shen Yongshi

Cast: Wang Huchen, Xu Qinfang, Tian Fang, Tong Yuejuan

*Daiyu Burying Flowers* (Daiyu Zanghua, 黛玉葬花) – *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Dahua Film Company (Rongguang Theater, April 1, 1936)

- Ancient Costume, Cantonese Opera Singing

Dir. Jin Pengju

Cast: Li Xuefang, Feng Xiahun, Li Xueyan, Gao Feifeng, Zhu Lan

### **Orphan Island Shanghai (1938– 1941)**

- All in ancient costume unless noted

*The Beggar Lady* (Qigai Qianjin, 乞丐千金)

Xinhua Film Company (Lyric Theater, February 1938)

Dir: Bu Wancang Pho: Huang Shaofen

Cast: Chen Yanyan, Mei Xi, Han Langen, Liu Jiqun, Yin Xiucen

*Sable Cicada* (Diao Chan, 貂蝉)\*

Xinhua Film Company (Grand Cinema, April 27, 1938)

Scr / Dir: Bu Wancang Pho: Hong Weilie, Huang Shaofen

Cast: Gu Lanjun, Jin Shan, Gu Eryi, Diao Banhua, Wei Heling, Xu Manli, Tang Jie

*Wu Song and Pan Jinlian* (Wu Song yu Pan Jinlian, 武松与潘金莲)\*

Xinhua Film Company (Xinguang Theater, October 10, 1938)

Scr / Dir: Wu Cun Pho: Huang Shaofen

Cast: Gu Lanjun, Jin Yan, Liu Qiong, Xia Xia, Liu Jiqun

*Cold Moon Over Poetic Spirit* (Lengyue Shihun, 冷月诗魂)

Xinhua Film Company (Lyric Theater, October 10, 1938)

- Qing Costume

Scr / Dir: Maxu Weibang Pho: Yu Xingsan

Cast: Tan Ying, Wang Yin, Yin Xiucen, Hong Jingling, Zhang Zhizhi

*Heroic Sons and Daughters* (Ernü Yingxiong Zhuan, 儿女英雄传)

Xinhua Film Company (Central Theater, November 4, 1938)

Scr / Dir: Yue Feng Pho: Wang Chunquan, Zhou Shimu  
Cast: Gu Lanjun, Mei Xi, Mei Lin, Hong Jingling, Yin Xiucen, Han Langen

*Four Pan Jinlians* (Si Pan Jinlian, 四潘金莲)  
Xinhua Film Company (Lyric Theater, December 14, 1938)

- Opera Costume, Opera Singing

Scr / Dir: Wu Cun Pho: Huang Shaofen  
Cast: Yuan Meiyun, Gu Lanjun, Chen Yanyan, Tong Yuejuan

*Four Knights-Errant of the Wang Family* (Wangshi Sixia, 王氏四侠)  
Guangming Film Company (Central Theater, December 31, 1938)  
Scr / Dir: Wang Cilong Pho: Yao Shiquan  
Cast: Wang Cilong, Wang Yin, Wang Naidong, Li Ying, Shang Guanwu, Zhang Cuihong

*Mulan Joins the Army* (Mulan Congjun, 木兰从军)\*  
Huacheng (Xinhua) Film Company (Huguang Theater, February 16, 1939)  
Scr: Ouyang Yuqian Dir: Bu Wancang  
Pho: Yu Xingsan, Xue Boqing Set: Zhang Hanchen  
Cast: Chen Yunshang, Mei Xi, Han Langen, Yin Xiucen, Zhang Zhizhi

*The Hegemon of Chu* (Chu Bawang, 楚霸王)\*  
Yihua Film Company (Xinguang Theater, February 16, 1939)  
Scr / Dir: Wang Cilong Pho: Zhou Daming Set: Bao Tianming  
Cast: Wang Yuanlong, Jin Suqin, Li Ying, Wang Naidong, Wang Guilin, Wen Yimin

*Lady Mengjiang* (Mengjiang Nü, 孟姜女)  
Guohua Film Company (Lyric Theater, February 16, 1939)  
Scr / Dir: Wu Cun Pho: Dong Keyi  
Cast: Zhou Xuan, Cai Jin, Zhou Qi, Xu Feng, Bai Yan, Tan Zhiyuan, Shen Yalun, Han Langen, Yin Xiucen, You Guangzhao

*Empress Wu Zetian* (Wu Zetian, 武则天)\*  
Xinhua Film Company (Grand Shanghai Theater, March 15, 1939)  
Scr: Ke Ling Dir: Fang Peilin Pho: Yu Xingsan Set: Fang Peilin  
Cast: Gu Lanjun, Xia Xia, Yin Xiucen, Han Langen, Huang Naishuang, Zhang Zhizhi

*Lin Chong's Revenge on a Snowy Night* (Lin Chong Xueye Jianchou Ji, 冲雪夜歼仇记)  
Huaxin (Xinhua Film Company, May 24, 1939)  
Scr / Dir: Wu Yonggang Pho: Zhou Shimu  
Cast: Jin Yan, Li Hong, Zhang Zhizhi, Sun Min, Hong Jingling, Cang Yinqiu

*Li Sanniang* (Li Sanniang, 李三娘)  
Guohua Film Company (Lyric Theater, June 16, 1939)  
Scr: Li Changjian Dir: Zhang Shichuan Pho: Dong Keyi  
Cast: Zhou Xuan, Shu Shi, Hong Dou, Zhou Qi, Feng Huang, Zhang Tong

*The Tale of a Pipa* (Pipa Ji, 琵琶记)

Xinhua Film Company (Lyric Theater, August 3, 1939)

Scr: Chen Dabei Dir: Yang Xiaozhong Pho: Yu Xingsan

Cast: Chen Yanyan, Mei Xi, Tong Yuejuan

*Female Leper* (Mafeng Nü, 麻疯女) \*

Xinhua Film Company (Lyric Theater, September 22, 1939)

- Qing Costume

Scr / Dir: Maxu Weibang Pho: Yu Xingsan

Cast: Tan Ying, Mei Xi, Huang Naishuang, Zhang Wan

*Queen for One Night* (Yiye Huanghou, 一夜皇后)

Huacheng (Xinhua) Film Company (Xinguang Theater, September 26, 1939)

Scr / Dir: Zhang Shankun

Cast: Chen Yunshang, Mei Xi, Xia Xia, Wang Xianzhai, Tang Jie, Han Langen

*Wang Xifeng Causes Uproar in Ningguo Mansion* (Wang Xifeng Danao Ningguofu, 王熙凤大闹宁国府) – *Dream of the Red Chamber*

Xinhua Film Company (Xinguang Theater, October 5, 1939)

Scr: Chen Dabei Dir: Yue Feng Pho: Xue Boqing

Cast: Gu Lanjun, Lu Luming, Meixi, Bai Hong, Li Hong

*The Young Female Knight-errant* (Xiao Xianü, 小侠女)\*

Guohua Film Company (Lyric Theater, October 5, 1939)

Dir: Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Xiaoqiu Pho: Dong Keyi

Cast: Hu Rongrong, Gong Qiuxia, Feng Huang, Gong Jianong, Zhou Qi

*Yang Naiwu* (Yang Naiwu, 杨乃武)

Guohua Film Company (Lyric Theater, October 18, 1939)

Scr: Cheng Xiaoqing Dir: Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Xiaoqiu

Cast: Yuan Shaomei, Xu Feng, You Guangzhao, Bai Yan, Zhou Qi, Hong Dou

*Wang Baochuan* (Wang Baochuan, 王宝钏)

Yihua Film Company (Grand Shanghai Theater, November 24, 1939)

Scr / Dir: Wu Cun Pho: Yan Bingheng

Cast: Zhang Cuihong, Li Ying, Diao Banhua, Wen Yimin, Yu Lin

*Wen Suchen* (Wen Suchen, 文素臣) I

Hezhong Film Company (Xinguang Theater, December 12, 1939)

Scr / Dir: Zhu Shilin Pho: Dong Keyi Set: Zhang Hanchen

Cast: Wang Xichun, Liu Qiong, Yang Wenying, You Guangzhao, Lü Fangkun

*The Tale of the White Snake* (Baishe Zhuan, 白蛇传)\*

Huaxin (Xinhua) Film Company (Xinguang Theater, December 30, 1939)

Scr / Dir: Yang Xiaozhong Pho: Huang Shaofen  
Cast: Chen Yanyan, Tong Yuejuan, Sun Min, Wang Xianzhai

*Fei Zhen'e Assassinates General Luo* (Fei Zhen'e Ci Hu, 费贞娥刺虎)\*  
Xinhua Film Company (Lyric Theater, December 31, 1939)  
Scr / Dir: Li Pingqian Pho: Xue Boqing, Yu Xingsan  
Cast: Chen Yunshang, Liu Qiong, Xu Shenyuan, Sun Min, Huang Naishuang

*Sorrow for the Fall of the Ming* (Mingmo Yihen, 明末遗恨 a.k.a. Ge Nenniang, 葛嫩娘)\*  
Huacheng (Xinhua) Film Company (Huguang Theater, December 31, 1939)  
Scr: A'Ying Dir: Zhang Shankun Pho: Huang Shao Fen Set: Fang Peilin  
Cast: Gu Lanjun, Mei Xi, Li Hong, Wang Xianzhai, Tu Guangqi

*Biyun Palace* (Biyun Gong, 碧云宫 a.k.a. Limao Huan Taizi, 狸猫换太子)  
Yihua Film Company (Huguang Theater, January 18, 1940)  
Scr: Gao Tianqi Dir: Wen Yimin Pho: Wang Chunquan  
Cast: Li Li, Fan Xuepeng, Yu Lin, Zheng Zhong, Yan Hua

*Dong Xiaowan* (Dong Xiaowan, 董小宛)  
Guohua Film Company (Lyric Theater, February 3, 1940)  
• Qing Costume  
Scr: Jian Weng Dir: Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Xiaoqiu Dir: Dong Keyi  
Cast: Zhou Xuan, Shu Shi, Lanlan, You Guangzhao, Xu Feng, Gong Jianong, Lü Fangkun

*Wen Suchen* (Wen Suchen, 文素臣) II  
Hezhong Film Company (Xinguang Theater, February 4, 1940)  
Scr / Dir: Zhu Shilin Pho: Dong Keyi Set: Zhang Hanchen  
Cast: Wang Xichun, Liu Qiong, Lin Hongyu, Lü Yukun

*Qin Liangyu* (Qin Liangyu, 秦良玉)  
Huacheng (Xinhua) Film Company (Huguang Theater, February 7, 1940)  
Scr: Zhou Yibai Dir: Bu Wancang Pho: Huang Shaofen, Xue Boqing  
Cast: Chen Yunshang, Mei Xi, Han Langen, Jiang Ming, Xu Shenyuan

*Chen Yuanyuan the Beauty* (Juedai Jiaren, 绝代佳人)  
Huaxin (Xinhua) Film Company (Xinguang Theater, February 21, 1940)  
- Filmed in Hong Kong  
Scr: Hu Chunbing Dir: Wang Cilong  
Cast: Hu Die, Wang Yin, Wang Naidong, Bai Lu, Jiang Junchao

*Assassination of the Qin Emperor* (Ci Qinwang, 刺秦王)  
Yihua Film Company (Xinguang Theater, March 28, 1940)  
Scr: Ye Gong Dir: Yan Youxiang Pho: Zhou Shimu

Cast: Wang Yuanlong, Lu Ming, Zi Wei, Zheng Zhong, Yan Hua

*Fragrant Princess* (Xiang Fei, 香妃)

Hezhong Film Company (Grand Shanghai Theater, April 4, 1940)

Scr / Dir: Zhu Shilin

Cast: Wang Xichun, Zhang Yi, Tu Guangqi, Chen Qi

*Heroes of the Storm* (Luanshi Yingxiong, 乱世英雄)

Guohua Film Company (Lyric Theater, April 5, 1940)

Scr: Fan Yanqiao Dir: Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Xiaoqiu Pho: Dong Keyi

Cast: Zhou Manhua, Shu Shi, Bai Yun, Chen Jingfang, You Guangzhao, Xu Tianren, Zhou Qi, Meng Na

*Huang Tianba* (Huang Tianba, 黄天霸)

Lianmei Film Company (Xinguang Theater, Xinguang Theater, April 11, 1940)

Scr / Dir: Xu Xinfu Pho: Shen Yongshi Set: Zhang Hanchen

Cast: Gu Lanjun, Li Ying, Xu Shenyuan, Jinag Ming, Hong Jingling, Wang Youzhu

*Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* (Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai, 梁山伯与祝英台)

Lianmei Film Company (Huguang Theater, April 11, 1949)

Scr: / Dir: Yue Feng Pho: Wang Chunquan

Cast: Zhang Cuihong, Gu Yelu, Han Langen, Cao E

*Yue Fei's Patriotism* (Yue Fei Jinzhong Baoguo, 岳飞尽忠报国)

Xinhua Film Company (Lyric Theater, April 19, 1940)

Scr / Dir: Wu Yonggang Pho: Xue Boqing

Cast: Liu Qiong, Xia Xia, Zhang Zhizhi, Ge Furong

*Righteous Guan Yunchang* (Guan Yunchang Zhongyi Qianqiu, 关云长忠义千秋)\*

Huacheng (Xinhua) Film Company (Huguang Theater, May 23, 1940)

Scr: Chen Dabei Dir: Yue Feng Pho: Xue Boqing

Cast: Wang Yuanlong, Wang Xianzhai, Shi Ping, Zhang Zhizhi, Jiangxiu, Zhang Wan

*Pan Qiaoyun* (Pan Qiaoyun, 潘巧云) – *The Water Margin*

Huaxin (Xinhua) Film Company (Xinguang Theater, April 25, 1940)

- Filmed in Hong Kong

Scr: Chen Dabei Dir: Wang Yin

Cast: Tan Ying, Wang Yin, Wang Naidong, Jiang Junchao, Zhou Wenzhu, Bai Lu

*Yan Xijiao* (Yan Xijiao, 阎惜姣) – *The Water Margin*

Yihua Film Company (Xinguang Theater, May 16, 1940)

Scr: Ye Yifang Dir: Yue Feng Pho: Wang Chunquan

Cast: Diao Banhua, Mei Xi, Wang Long, Guan Hongda

*Three Smiles* (San Xiao, 三笑) I

Yihua Film Company (Huguang Theater, June 6, 1940)  
Dir: Yue Feng Pho: Wang Chunquan  
Cast: Li Lihua, Yan Hua, Fan Xuepeng, Han Langen

*Legends of the Sui Dynasty* (Suigong Chunse, 隋宫春色)  
Huaxin (Xinhua) Film Company (Xinguang Theater, June 7, 1940)  
Scr / Dir: Yang Xiaozhong  
Cast: Chen Yanyan, Liu Qiong, Jiang Ming, Lu Luming, Zhang Zhizhi

*Three Smiles* (San Xiao, 三笑)  
Guohua Film Company (Lyric Theater, June 8, 1940)  
Scr: Fan Yanqiao Dir: Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Xiaoqiu Pho: Dong Keyi  
Cast: Zhou Xuan, Bai Yun, Yuan Shaomei, Gong Jianong, Chen Jingfang, You Guangzhao, Zhou Qi, Meng Na

*Jade Hairpin* (Biyu Zan, 碧玉簪)  
Huaxin (Xinhua) Film Company (Xinguang Theater, July 4, 1940)  
Scr: Xu Zhuodai Dir: Zhen Xiaoqiu  
Cast: Zhou Manhua, Bai Yun, Chen Jingfang, You Guangzhao, Gong Jianong, Meng Na

*Jade Hairpin* (Biyu Zan, 碧玉簪)  
Guohua Film Company (Lyric Theater, July 5, 1940)  
Dir: Bu Wancang, Zhang Shankun  
Cast: Chen Yunshang, Li Hong, Gu Yelu, Han Langen, Xu Shenyuan, Yin Xiucen

*Jade Dragonfly* (Yu Qingting, 玉蜻蜓)  
Huacheng (Xinhua) Film Company (Huguang Theater, June 27, 1940)  
Scr / Dir: Yue Feng  
Cast: Tan Ying, Sun Min, Han Langen, Lu Luming, Gu Yelu, Zhang Wan

*Golden Phoenix* (Miao Jinfeng, 描金凤)  
Huacheng (Xinhua) Film Company (Huguang Theater, July 13, 1940)  
Scr / Dir: Tang Jie  
Cast: Li Hong, Tang Jie, Wang Xianzhai, Chen Yitang

*Meng Lijun* (Meng Lijun, 孟丽君)  
Chunming Film Company (Xinguang Theater, July 23, 1940)  
Dir: Zhu Shilin, Tu Guangqi  
Cast: Wang Xichun

*Oil Vendor and the Top Courtesan* (Huakui Nü, 花魁女)  
Huaxin (Xinhua) Film Company (Huguang Theater, July 25, 1940)  
Scr / Dir: Wu Yonggang Pho: Xue Boqing  
Cast: Chen Yanyan, Liu Qiong, Huang Naishuang, Han Langen

*Meng Lijun* (Meng Lijun, 孟丽君)

Guohua Film Company (Lyric Theater, August 1, 1940)

Scr: Cheng Xiaoqing Dir: Zhang Shichuan

Cast: Zhou Xuan, Shu Shi, Yuan Shaomei, Xu Feng, Gong Jianong, You Guangzhao

*A Pair of Pearl Phoenixes* (Shuang Zhufeng, 双珠凤) I\*

Huaxin (Xinhua) Film Company (Xinguang Theater, August 3, 1940)

Scr / Dir: Yang Xiaozhong Pho: Yu Xingsan

Cast: Yuan Meiyun, Mei Xi, Tong Yuejuan, Bai Hong

*Bodhisattva Guanyin* (Guanshiyin, 观世音)

Yihua Film Company (Huguang Theater, August 14, 1940)

Scr: Ye Gong, Ye Yifang Dir: Yan Youxiang Pho: Yan Bingheng

Cast: Zhang Cuihong, Wang Yuanlong, Diao Banhua, Zi Wei, Fan Xuepeng

*Amorous Emperor* (Fengliu Tianzi, 风流天子)\*

Guohua Film Company (Lyric Theater, August 15, 1940)

Scr: Xu Zhuodai Dir: Zhang Shichuan

Cast: Zhou Manhua, Baiyun, Gong Jianong, You Guangzhao, Zhou Qi, Meng Na

*Amorous Life of Su San* (Su San Yanshi, 苏三艳史)

Guohua Film Company (Grand Shanghai Theater, August 15, 1940)

Scr / Dir: Wu Cun Pho: Dong keyi

Cast: Zhou Xuan, Shu Shi, Gong Jianong, You Guangzhao, Xu Rentian, Zhou Qi

*A Pair of Pearl Phoenixes* (Shuang Zhufeng, 双珠凤) II\*

Huaxin (Xinhua) Film Company (Xinguang Theater, August 16, 1940)

Scr / Dir: Yang Xiaozhong Pho: Yu Xingsan

Cast: Yuan Meiyun, Mei Xi, Tong Yuejuan, Bai Hong

*Living Buddha Jigong* (Jinggong Huofo, 济公活佛)

Huamei Film Company (Lyric Theater, August 28, 1940)

Scr: Xu Zhuodai Dir: Zheng Xiaoqiu Pho: Dong Keyi

Cast: You Guangzhao, Yuan Shaomei, Meng Na, Gong Jianong, Xu Tianren, Zhou Qi

*Female Emperor* (Nü Huangdi, 女皇帝)

Yihua Film Company (Xinguang Theater, September 10, 1940)

Dir: Yan Youxiang, Wen Yimin

Cast: Li Qinian, Zhang Yi, Zhen Zhong, Han Langen, Fan Xuepeng

*Li Xiangjun* (Li Xiangjun, 李香君)\*

Jinxing Film Company (Lyric Theater, September 11, 1940)

Scr: Zhou Yibai Dir: Wu Cun Pho: Luo Congzhou

Cast: Gu Lanjun, Bai Yun, Gong Jianong, You Guangzhao, Xu Shenyuan, Yuan Shaomei

*Autumn Rain* (Xiaoxiang Qiuyu, 潇湘秋雨)\*

Huacheng (Xinhua Film Company (Huguang Theater, September 12, 1940)  
Dir: Bu Wancang, Zhang Shankun Pho: Yu Xingsan  
Cast: Chen Yunshang, Mei Xi, Wang Yuanlong, Bai Hong, Wang Xianzhai

*Qin Xianglian* (Qin Xianglian, 秦香莲)

Yihua Film Company (Xinguang Theater, September 25, 1940)  
Scr: Ye Yifang Dir: Wen Yimin  
Cast: Zhang Cuihong, Wang Yuanlong, Zheng Zhong, Yu Lin, Fan Xuepeng

*Du Shiniang* (Du Shiniang, 杜十娘)

Huacheng (Xinhua) Film Company (Huguang Theater, October 8, 1940)  
Scr / Dir: Li Pingqian Pho: Xue Boqing  
Cast: Chen Yanyan, Liu Qiong, Chen Juanjuan, Yan Yueleng, Wang Xianzhai

*Lady Diaoliu* (Diaoliu Shi, 刁刘氏)

Huaxin (Xinhua) Film Company (Xinguang Theater, October 9, 1940)  
Scr / Dir: Maxu Weibang Pho: Zhou Daming  
Cast: Gu Lanjun, Sun Min, Bai Hong, Zhang Wan, Han Langen

*Liang Hongyu* (Liang Hongyu, 梁红玉)

Yihua Film Company (Lyric Theater, October 9, 1940)  
Scr: Zho Yibai Dir: Yue Feng Pho: Yan Bingheng  
Cast: Li Qinian, Mei Xi, Yu Lin, Yan Hua, Tan Youguang, Guan Hongda

*Hongxian Steals the Box* (Hongxian Daohe, 红线盗盒)

Huacheng (Xinhua) Film Company (Huguang Theater, November 1, 1940)  
Scr: A'Ying Dir: Li Pingqian Pho: Zhou Daming  
Cast: Gu Lanjun, Sun Min, Bai Hong, Han Langen

*Pearl Pagoda* (Zhenzhu Ta, 珍珠塔) I, II\*

Huacheng (Xinhua) Film Company (Huguang Theater, November 1, 1940)  
Scr / Dir: Fang Peilin Pho: Xue Boqing  
Cast: Li Hong, Gu Yelu, Yan Yueleng, Yan Yuexian, Cang Yinqiu

*Fishermen's Struggle* (Dayu Shajia, 打渔杀家)

Xinhua Film Company (Lyric Theater, November 20, 1940)  
- Filmed in Hong Kong  
Scr: Hu Chunbing Dir: Chen Qiangran Pho: Wang Jianhan  
Cast: Lu Ming, Wang Naidong, Jiang Junchao

*Three Smiles* (San Xiao, 三笑) II\*

Yihua Film Company (Guolian Theater, November 22, 1940)  
Scr: Ye Yifang Dir: Chen Huanwen  
Pho: Chen Zhenxiang, Cao Jinyun Set: Shen Weishan

Cast: Li Lihua, Yan Hua, Yin Xiucen, Han Langen, Guan Hongda

*Sai Jinhua* (Sai Jinhua, 赛金花)

Hezhong Film Company (Xinguang Theater, December 5, 1940)

Scr / Dir: Zhu Shilin

Cast: Ying Yin, Ding Zhi, Tu Guangqi, Chen Qi, Wu Jingping, Huang He

*Lost Golden Fan* (Luo Jinshan, 落金扇)

Lianmei Film Company (Guolian Theater, December 15, 1940)

Dir: Wen Yimin

Cast: Li Hong, Zi Wei, Yan Hua, Zheng Zhong, Cang Yinqiu, Yin Xiucen, Guan Hongda

*Invisible Female Knight-errant* (Yinshen Nüxia, 隐身女侠)

Yihua Film Company (Xinguang Theater, December 18, 1940)

Dir: Wu Wenchao Pho: Yan Bingheng

Cast: Li Lihua, Zheng Zhong, Yang Liu, Guan Hongda

*Confucius* (Kong Fuzi, 孔夫子)\*

Minhua Film Company (Lyric Theater, December 19, 1940)

Scr / Dir: Fei Mu Pho: Zhou Daming

Cast: Tang Huaiqiu, Zhang Yi, Sima Yingcai, Murong Wan'er, Tu Guangqi

*Romance of the West Chamber* (Xixiang Ji, 西厢记)\*

Guohua Film Company (Xindu Theater, December 24, 1940)

Scr: Fan Yanqiao Dir: Zhang Shichuan Pho: Dong Keyi

Cast: Zhou Xuan, Bai Yun, Murong Wan'er, Meng Na, Feng Huang, Zhou Qi

*Su Wu Herds Sheep* (Su Wu Muyang, 苏武牧羊)

Huaxin (Xinhua) Film Company (Xinguang Theater, December 30, 1940)

Scr: Zhou Yibai Dir: Bu Wancang Pho: Yu Xingsan

Cast: Chen Yunshang, Mei Xi, Jiang Ming, Tang Jie, Wang Zhuyou

*Beauty and War* (Hongfen Jinge, 红粉金戈)\*

Jinxing Film Company (Lyric Theater, December 31, 1940)

Scr / Dir: Wu Yonggang Pho: Luo Congzhou

Cast: Wang Xichun, Shu Shi, Qiao Qi, Zhou Qi, Zhang Zhizhi, You Guangzhao

*Yanmen Pass* (Yanmen Guan, 雁门关)

Huacheng (Xinhua) Film Company (Huguang Theater, December 31, 1940)

Scr / Dir: Fang Peilin Pho: Yu Xingsan

Cast: Yuan Meiyun, Mei Xi, Hong Jingling, Gong Qiuxia, Xia Xia

*Wen Suchen* (Wen Suchen, 文素臣) III

Hezhong Film Company (Guolian Theater, December 31, 1940)

Scr / Dir: Zhu Shilin

Cast: Wang Xichun, Li Ying, Tu Guang qi, Chen Qi

*Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* (Huoshao Hongliansi, 火烧红莲寺)

Yihua Film Company (Guolian Theater, January 8, 1941)

Scr / Dir: Wu Wenchao Pho: Yan Bingheng, Cao Jinyun

Cast: Wang Yuanlong, Yu Lin, Yang Liu

*Beauty of Beauties* (Xi Shi, 西施)

Xinhua Film Company (Grand Cinema, January 15, 1941)

Scr: Chen Dabei Dir: Bu Wancang Pho: Yu Xingsan Set: Fang Peilin

Cast: Yuan Meiyun, Mei Xi, Wang Yuanlong, Li Hong, Wang Xianzhai, Xia Xia

*Zhao Kuangyin Escorts Jingniang* (Qianli Song Jingniang, 千里送京娘)\*

Yihua Film Company (Guolian Theater, January 23, 1941)

Scr: Ye Yifang Dir: Wen Yimin Pho: Wang Chunquan

Cast: Li Lihua, He Bin, Zheng Zhong, Yang Liu, Yan Hua, Guan Hongda

*Li Shishi the Beauty* (Luanshi Jianren, 乱世佳人 a.k.a. Li Shishi, 李师师)\*

Huacheng Film Company (Huguang Theater, January 26, 1941)

Scr / Dir: Zhang Shankun Pho: Yu Xingsan

Cast: Chen Yunshang, Liu Qiong, Wang Xianzhai, Xu Shenyuan, Jiang Ming

*Xue Rengui and Liu Yingchun* (Xue Rengui yu Liu Yingchun, 薛仁贵与柳迎春)

Xinhua Film Company (Guolian Theater, February 18, 1941)

- Filmed in Hong Kong

Dir: Wang Cilong

Cast: Lu Ming, Wang Yin, Wang Naidong

*Lady Snow* (Xue Yanniang, 雪艳娘)

Dacheng Film Company (Huguang Theater, February 19, 1941)

Scr / Dir: Zhu Shilin Pho: Shen Yongshi

Cast: Wang Xichun, Tu Guangqi, Chen Qi, Huang He

*Linked Jade Rings* (Yu Lianhuan, 玉连环)

Lianhe Film Company (Guolian Theater, March 6, 1941)

Scr / Dir: Yue Feng Pho: Shi Fengqi

Cast: Tan Ying, Gu Yelu, Xu Shenyuan, Han Langen

*The Tale of Hongfu* (Hongfu Zhuan, 红拂传)

Yihua Film Company (Guolian Theater, March 20, 1941)

Dir: Sun Jing Pho: Yan Bingheng

Cast: Wang Yuanlong, Yu Lin, Zheng Zhong, Han Langen, Guan Hongda

*Taiping Heavenly Kingdom* (Taiping Tianguo, 太平天国)

Yihua Film Company (Huguang Theater, March 21, 1941)

- Qing Costume

Dir: Wang Yuanlong Pho: Yan Bingheng

Cast: Wang Yuanlong, Wen Yimin, Yu Lin, Zheng Zhong

*Tale of the Heroes* (Yinglie Zhuan, 英烈传)\*

Yihua Film Company (Lyric Theater, March 26, 1941)

Scr / Dir: Li Pingqian Pho: Wang Chunquan

Cast: Li Lihua, Meixi, Zheng Zhong, Fan Xuepeng

*Wen Suchen* (Wen Suchen, 文素臣) IV

Hezhong Film Company (Guolian Theater, March 29, 1941)

Scr / Dir: Zhu Shilin Pho: Dong Keyi

Cast: Wang Xichun, Li Ying, Tu Guangqi, Chen Qi

*Imperial Consort Mei* (Mei Fei, 梅妃)

Guohua Film Company (Lyric Theater & Jindu Theater, April 9, 1941)

Scr: Cheng Xiaoqing Dir: Zhang Shichuan Pho: Dong Keyi

Cast: Zhou Xuan, Yuan Shaomei, Murong Wan'er, Feng Huang, Meng Na, Lü Yukun, Zhou Qi, Gong Jianong

*Lady Yunduo* (Xiangsi Zhai, 相思寨)

Huaxin (Xinhua) Film Company (Xinguang Theater, May 1, 1941)

Scr: Zhou Yibai Dir: Bu Wancang Pho: Yu Xingsan

Cast: Chen Yunshang, Mei Xi, Zheng Yuru, Zou Lei, Dai Yanwan

*Princess Biluo* (Biluo Gongzhu, 碧萝公主)

Dacheng Film Company (Xinguang Theater, June 18, 1941)

Scr / Dir: Zhu Shilin

Cast: Wang Xichun, Tu Guanqi, Huang he, Fu Jiqu

*Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva* (Dizangwang 地藏王 a.k.a. Mulian Jiumu, 目莲救母)

Lianmei Film Company (Lyric Theater, September 19, 1941)

Dir: Li Pingqian

Cast: Lu Luming, Gu Yelu

*Zhuo Wenjun* (Zhuo Wenjun, 卓文君)

Xinhua Film Company (Grand Shanghai Theater, April 1, 1942)

Scr / Dir: Yang Xiaozhong Pho: Wang Chunquan

Cast: Yuan Meiyun, Mei Xi, Jiang Ming, Xu Shenyuan

*New Cave of the Spider Spirits* (Xin Pansi Dong, 新盘丝洞)

Yihua Film Company (Finished in 1940, Shanghai Release: Guolian Theater, April 10, 1942)

Dir: Wu Wenchao

Cast: Wang Yang, Wang Long, Yang Liu

*Hong Xuanjiao* (Hong Xuanjiao, 洪宣娇)

Huanian Film Company (Finished in 1941, Released after the War)

Scr: A'Ying Dir: Fei Mu Pho: Zhou Daming, Fei Junxiang

Cast: Tang Ruoqing, Tang Huaiqiu, Zhang Yi