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Scenes of The Turbulent Days: On The 1930s Chinese Leftist Film Movement

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by

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ABSTRACT

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In this master thesis, I focus on a controversial historical movement—the 1930s' Chinese Leftist Film Movement (1932-1937) to study its development, function, main characteristics and influence. I argue that in the 1930s because of the serious national crisis, shared circular history of the community and various discussions on cultural values, Chinese intellectuals in the film field transformed their transcendences, which might more or less contain a radical tendency, into a dialogical degree. The dialogical transcendence also contributed to the formation of a public space in the film field. Conversely, the public space promoted the transformation of the transcendence. Thanks to the effect of the dialogical transcendence, discussion and negotiation became an effective method to address social issues. Chinese film production also changed in this situation. More and more filmmakers turned to concentrate on portraying social issues. Cinematic strategies like an open ending, which could encourage and broaden the engagement of discussion, were employed in the 1930s film practice. Accordingly, in the 1930s film texts, various discourses and multiple truths coexisted.

Being a component of the 1930s film practice, the leftist film movement shared a similar tolerance to alien discourses. On the other hand, it also had its specific distinctiveness. Relying on discussion and negotiation, intellectuals achieved a comparative consensus and

drew a framework with two core principles for leftist film production: exposing social darkness and looking for an alternative modernity. In this framework, various attitudes and expressing forms were acceptable. The constitution of participants in this movement was complex. Some filmmakers took an active part in it; but some might be passively selected because their particular texts could fit in this framework. In addition to filmmakers, intellectuals in the printing press field were also engaged. Some of their film reviews showed a trend to guide film interpretation to a particular political perspective, even though as cultural texts, leftist films are open to diverse interpretations. In this sense, the leftist film movement actually was in a canonization process

I use two leftist film cases: *Street Angel* and *Big Road* to concretely analyze the different cinematic strategies used by filmmakers to expose social issues and express their inclination to an alternative modernity, like using the POV to fix the audiences' identities and the dynamic object/subject relationship between male and female characters. The two films also construct allegories to educate the masses to be modern subjects.

Although leftists and the members of the Chinese Communist Part (CCP) took part in this movement and worked as influential roles, the CCP's ideology cannot completely and perfectly explain the whole process and cultural meanings of this movement. Nevertheless, as open texts with a mission to look for an alternative modernity, the leftist film movement leaves enough room for the CCP to modify and re-narrate it in its own ideology after 1949. Actually, the 1930s Leftist Film Movement was reduced in the process of the CCP's second canonization from the perspectives of film list, textual richness and cultural complexity. It may be a reason why scholars always face contradictions when they study this movement based on the CCP's film lists and interpretations.

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I. Introduction

In his later years, the influential Chinese film historian Li Shaobai called for using the term "New Cultural Movement in Cinema" (dianying xinwenhua yundong 電影新文化運動) to rename the Chinese film phenomenon of the 1930s to avoid overemphasis of an ideological approach. His plea seemed to contradict his earlier views that were represented in the influential book, *The History of The Development of Chinese Film*, widely considered the official textbook on Chinese film in Mainland China. In this book, he and his colleagues argued that some of the 1930s' Chinese films should be categorized as part of a leftist[1] movement led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with the mission of resisting feudalism, imperialism, and the Kuomintang (KMT). Li's strong statement reveals the contesting discourses hiding behind this historical event, and it prompted scholars to reflect on its complexity and actual meaning.

From 1932 to 1937, China's relationship with other countries was quite complex. In the field of film, it was a period of stiff competition with foreign powers in the local market and subsequently a golden time for Chinese film production. In the name of supporting national film, Chinese intellectuals launched various types of film practices. Being the ruling party of New China, the CCP selected films which were produced in the 1930s, and showed class struggle and the "accurate" ideology of the CCP as a group and canonized it as the Chinese

[1] Here the term "leftist" is different from the international definition, although it also refers to Communism and Socialism, since in a Chinese context, this "leftist" and "rightest" are very different from the original French "leftist." In addition, in different periods Chinese history, the meaning and reference of the two terms has changed. Some scholars even point out that the Chinese leftist should be seen as to the Western rightist. That debate is beyond the scope of this essay.

Leftist Film Movement (Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong 中國左翼電影運動)[2] In order to legitimize the CCP's authority, the leftist film movement was politicalized according to the CCP's ideology and ideology became the primary method by which to study film in China.

However, there are many debates and disagreements between scholars regarding this movement and its influence, since it had so many ambiguous aspects that cannot be explained from an ideological standpoint. The challenges of an ideological approach drove many scholars to look for new perspectives to study it. In her book, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932–1937*, Laikwan Pang views the left-wing film movement as a "national product"[3] and examines it from the perspective of the construction of nationalism. Jubin Hu shares the same perspective. He indicates that during the 1930s, the realm of film was used as a battlefield for contending political agendas between the CCP and the KMT. The leftist film movement is a "cultural reflection of political and military conflicts between the KMT and the CCP."[4] There is no doubt that the KMT and the CCP's nationalisms were different. But this difference cannot explain why were some films[5] not only appreciated by the KMT as the representative films of China under its control, but also canonized as masterpieces promoted by the CCP?

[2] Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Wu Zuguang, *The History of Development of Chinese Film* (Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi 中國電影發展史), Beijing: Chinese Film Press, 1963, 177.

[3] Laikwan Pang, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-wing Cinema Movement, 1932–1937,* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 9.

[4] Jubin Hu, *Projecting A Nation: Chinese National Cinema Before 1949*, (HK: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 77.

[5] For instance, the film *Song of the Fisherman* (Yuguang qu 漁光曲, dir. Cai Chusheng, 1934)

Paul Pickowicz turns to the conflict between the West and China. He appropriates the Chinese political leader Deng Xiaoping's statement of avoiding "spiritual pollution"[6] to describe the leftist film productions in the 1930s. He points out that leftist films treated Western and bourgeois cultures as the main reason for China's moral corruption. But when he highlights the conflict between the West and China, another interesting question rises to the surface: in what ways did the concept of the nation-state transform among certain groups of Chinese intellectuals during the 1930s? Actually, this question is very important, since it may help to avoid falling into the CCP's ideological trap. The ambiguous concept of the nation-state China has been appropriated by the CCP to construct the illusion of historical continuity between the past and the present. Accordingly, if one does not distinguish the differences and functions of the concepts *China* in the past and present, one may easily be puzzled by the CCP's post-1949 discourse, when his or her research refers to nationalism, modernity and so on.

Victor Fan offers a different view from this consensus that the 1930s leftist film movement represented the CCP's discourse. Fan analyzes two of Sun Yu's films and claims, "The leftist film could be interpreted as an attempt to create a voice within the KMT-dominated cultural discourse."[7] Although Fan's claim is bold, his analysis relies only on two films directed by a single leftist filmmaker, which were produced by Lianhua, a film studio that had a close relationship with the KMT. Furthermore, although Sun Yu and Lianhua were significant in this movement, one need more evidence to prove that they were influential enough to represent the integration of this movement.

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[6] Paul Pickowicz, *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 44.

[7] Victor Fan, "The Cinema of Sun Yu: Ice Cream For they Eye…But With a Homo Sacer," *Journal of Chinese Cinema*, No.3, 5(2011): 22.

Leo Ou-fan Lee appropriates Jurgen Habermas's theory about "public sphere." Lee focuses on the "urban modernity"[8] in Shanghai and the relationship between literature and film. He claims, "The leftist scriptwriters managed to tap into the anxieties of the Chinese audience not by injecting any blatant political ideology into their screenplays (censorship made this impossible) but by employing a new narrative mode."[9] However, Habermas's public sphere has a limitation: it relies on a bourgeois society. In order to make Habermas's theory effective for the Shanghai case, Lee's statement also mainly relates to those Chinese urban intellectuals, like Liu Na'ou and Huang Jiamo, who might have a bourgeois or quasi-bourgeois backgrounds. Although Habermas's description of the characteristics of "public sphere," which underscores negotiation and discussion about national project among intellectuals, in some sense, is similar to Shanghai's social background in the 1930s. This public sphere model can hardly comprehend all the participants in the leftist film movement. In addition, in this book Lee does not concretely analyze the significant phenomenon for this film movement that the leftist film movement was full of contradictions and ambiguities.

Although these scholars discuss the 1930s leftist film movement from various perspectives—nationalism, the conflict between China and the West, and Western modernism, most of them linger on an ideological dualism: the KMP/the CCP; West/China; Bourgeois/Proletariat. They seemingly treat the 1930s leftist film movement as a persistent conflict in every aspect without paying attention to the fact that the attitudes and opinions of the intellectuals shown in films were dynamic and sometimes compatible. For instance, as I mention previously, the KMT and the CCP could praise and accept the same films as

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[8] Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930–1945*, (Harvard University Press, 1999), 63.

[9] Ibid.,102.

representatives of their discourses. The leftists, in some sense, could tolerate others' discourses, like urbanization and industrialization, which were from the West. In this sense, the boundary between the leftist and non-leftists films defined by the CCP is ambiguous. Conflict was not the whole picture of the 1930s. Besides conflict, tolerance, assimilation and mutual influence also existed.

Facing these puzzling contradictions, Zhiwei Xiao calls into question the existence of the leftist film movement in his Chinese article, "The Mythology of The 1930s' Leftist Film," after he scrutinizes film censorship during the Republican period. Considering that many so-called leftist films were praised by the KMT, Xiao concludes, "Even if the leftist film existed, it was not irreconcilable with the KMT's policies."[10] Xiao's question about the existence of the leftist film movement in some sense reveals that he turns to emphasize the aspect of ambiguities rather than the contradictions.

Xiao's question is effective if one asks: did the CCP's leftist film movement exist in the 1930s? His question also reminds that there are two concepts one needs to distinguish when he or she studies the leftist film movement: the CCP's leftist film movement; a particular group of film practice in the 1930s, which in some sense subtly overlapped with the CCP's one. For the studies of the previous scholars, including Xiao, the two concepts are to some degree intertwined. For instance, they always rely on the CCP's list of leftist films and query the accuracy of the list. However, the CCP's list, which was artificially defined after 1949, is not so reliable to restore the real history of the leftist film movement. In this thesis, I focus on the particular historical film practice, instead of the artificial one defined by the CCP. Although those scholars fail to distinguish the two subtle and deceptive concepts, their

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[10] Zhiwei Xiao, "The Mythology of The 1930s' Leftist Film," (Sanshi niandai zuoyi dianying shenhua 三十年代左翼電影神話), *Hong Kong 21 Century*, No. 103 (2007): 42.

observation of the 1930s leftist film movement is correct: it did co-exist with numerous ambiguities and conflicts. Accordingly, for the sake of analyzing the leftist film movement, one needs to find an alternative way to explain both the contradictions and ambiguities.

In the 1930s, "modernity" was indeed an attractive topic for Chinese intellectuals. In his national project the New Life Movement (Xinshenghuo yundong 新生活運動), the political leader of the KMT Chiang Kai-Shek called out to ordinary people to learn from "modern countries"[11] in order to make China become *modern*.[12] Ordinary filmmakers also paid attention to the importance of modernization of Chinese films. For instance, in his essay "A Brief History of Modern Chinese Film," Zheng Junli underscores the significant mission of Chinese filmmakers in the 1930s was to improve "the economic and cultural standards of Chinese film…to the degree of modernization."[13] In this sense, the attempt of the 1930s Chinese film practice (no longer the leftist film movement but the whole 1930s film practice) had a close and subtle relationship with modernity.

However, the definition of modernity is still in question. The modernity that scholars, like Lee, generally employ, actually, is Western modernity. In his book *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and A Sustainable Future*, Prasenjit Duara has observed the negative influence of Western modernity on various aspects of society. He indicates "the model of modernity and modernization based on conquest of nature and driven by increasing

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[11] Chiang Kai-Shek, "The Essentials of New Life Movement," (Xin shenghuo yundong zhi yaoyi 新生活運動之要義), *Education Weekly* (Jiaoyu zhoukan 教育週刊), No. 8, 9(1934): 16.

[12] Chiang's so-called modern was different from the general understanding. On the contrary, it inclined to traditional Confucianism. But his behavior of appropriating this term still demonstrated that modernity was an important topic in the 1930s.

[13] Zheng Junli, "A Brief History of Modern Chinese Film," (Zhongguo dianying shilue 中國電影史略), in China Film Archive edit, *Chinese Silent Film* (Zhongguo wusheng dianying 中國無聲電影), (Beijing: Chinese Film Press, 1996), 1432.

production is no longer sustainable."[14] Duara also points out that Westernized modernity is just one type of modernity. In his book, *Globalization and Culture*, John Tomlinson defines the term modernity as a category that "refers at the same time to a particular type of social formation, to a form of cultural imagination, and to notions of novelty, contemporaneity, the present the 'up-to-date'."[15] In addition, deviating from discourse on Orientalism to discuss modernity as a typical Western cultural phenomenon, Tomlinson suggests using the term "global modernity"[16] to highlight "the different, multiple forms of modernity that presently exist."[17] Accordingly, Tomlinson's broader concept of global modernity leaves room for us to study the 1930s Chinese leftist film movement.

In order to replace Westernized modernity, Duara turns to the Asian tradition. Based on his study of the characteristics and functions of the Asian tradition, Duara defines several important concepts. According to Duara, dialogical transcendence is a category, which highlights exchange, coexistence and absorption of various discourses.[18] Confucianism belongs to it. Circulatory history, which can go beyond the limitation of boundaries, can contribute to reduce confrontation and connect the self with others. Culture can generate powerful moral authority, which will encourage ordinary people to sacrifice for the community, and therefore it has a significant function on the achievement of dialogical

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[14] Prasenjit Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and A Sustainable Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 279.

[15] John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture*, (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 34.

[16] Ibid., 66.

[17] Ibid., 65.

[18] Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity,* 154-155.

transcendence. Duara concludes that only by holding a circulatory worldview and dialogical transcendence can humans find a way to work together to deal with crisis.

Duara's theory, actually, deals with a topic about how various, even opposite discourses can coexist peacefully and how their coexistence can contribute to the resolution of social crisis. Therefore, his model may be helpful for us to study the reason of the existence of ambiguities in the 1930s Chinese film field and its significance. In part II, I will appropriate Duara's theory to outline the overall background of the 1930s Chinese film field and explain the process of formation of a pubic space[19] in film field. I need to clarify that although Duara's theory can be employed to explain the leftist film movement, it does not mean that his theory and terms guide the 1930s Chinese intellectuals.

Following the May Fourth Movement, which appealed to completely Westernized China, in the 1930s, Chinese intellectuals turned to reflect on social crisis and tried to find a way to sustainably develop. Driving by the different backgrounds, the participants of 1930s' film practice held various transcendences and diverse imaginations of the Chinese nation-state. Some of the transcendences showed a radical tendency, which enforced a single truth on masses and paid more attention to purification and exclusion. However, relying on the power of culture and the shared circulatory history of the community, many discussions about the topic of survival of the community helped to transform participants' various transcendences into a dialogical degree, which in turn supported wider social discussions. In this way, a public space generated and developed in the field of film. The pubic space, conversely, strengthened and helped to expand social negotiation. Accordingly, filmmakers' practice and thoughts showed assimilation and mutual influence from various discourses.

[19] In fact, this public space shares the similar characteristics of Habermas's public sphere. However, in order to go beyond the political limitation of Habermas's term and avoid falling into the debate about whether China had such a class in the 1930s, I will use public space to replace Habermas's controversial term.

Being a branch of the whole 1930s film practice, leftist films also shared the similar characteristic to tolerate alien discourse to some degree. However, it does not mean that the leftist film movement had no difference with others. In part III, I will turn to the aspect of distinction and try to distinguish the leftist film movement by comparing it with soft films and films resonating with the KMT's New Life Movement. The distinction of leftist films with non-leftist films lies in whether they expose social issues and whether they claim that remaining in a modern society but calling for transforming it to be a much healthier and suitable one for 1930s' China. The two main principles made up the general framework of the leftist films. I continue to use the term *leftist film movement* to emphasize the inclination of the participants to progressiveness and social reform in the sense of modernity, instead of so-called ideological progressiveness. I argue that the behaviors of those Chinese intellectuals who participated in the leftist film movement should be seen as part of a dynamic process: they define Chinese form of modernity by comparing, selecting, absorbing, and rejecting cultural elements from both Chinese traditions and Western modernity. This new form of modernity did not have a set definition and was instead left open for discussion and negotiation. In addition to the active participants, some film texts were also selected as the components of this movement, since they could fit or mostly fit in its frame, although the directors and producers of those films did not intend on relying upon the principles of leftist films. In this sense, the leftist film movement of the 1930s was already part of a process of canonization.

In part IV, I select two films—Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel* (*Malu tianshi* 馬路天使 1937) and Sun Yu's *Big Road* (*Dalu* 大路, 1935)—representing the general stereotype of leftist films. For the first film, I analyze the cinematic strategy, which filmmakers employed to educate ordinary masses. First, the filmmakers intertwined the audience's position with

films' principals and created social allegories by constructing the male protagonists' subjective points of view. Accordingly, principals, especially those male protagonists, become models to educate audiences on how to live in reality. By this strategy, the filmmakers led the audience to conclude that in the period of the 1930s people needed to choose and adjust to a Chinese type of modernity instead of going back to tradition. In my analysis of Sun's film, I will center on the gender perspective to state that the variety of expressing forms and the diversity of discourses towards basic social issues in different leftist film texts based on the same framework. Sun's film portrays how a girl with a degree of transcendence transforms from witness to participant. Unlike the female principal as object in *Street Angel*, the female lead in Sun's film becomes the subject and model, which educates the masses on how to be a modern subject.

In the conclusion, I trace the 1930s leftist film movement from a Longue Durée perspective to explain the reason why this movement becomes a controversial topic and its function in the CCP's historical discourse. I propose to pay more attention to concepts of the Chinese nation-state in the 1930s and post-1949. In the 1930s, the concept of the Chinese nation-state was ambiguous because of its unique social background. The ambiguity of the concept in the 1930s helped the CCP substitute its national imagination for various other discourses imperceptibly after 1949. It means that after 1949, only the CCP can represent the Chinese nation-state, no matter referring to pre-1949 China or post-1949. The substitution is influential. First, in the name of the Chinese nation-state, only the films reflecting discourses which could support the legalization of the CCP's authority were selected and canonized as Chinese film. Others were expelled in the name of being "non-Chinese" or "backward". In this sense, not only the whole of 1930s film practice, but also the real leftist film movement

was reduced in CCP discourse. Accordingly, when one used the CCP's lists to study the historical leftist film movement, he or she will face the same ideological trap.

II. Letting A Hundreds Flowers Bloom: The Background of The 1930s' Chinese Film Practice

A. Brief Introduction of the 1930s Chinese Film Production

After the May Fourth Movement, which called for breaking down all the Chinese traditions and establishing a completely Westernized China, China rapidly pushed forward its projects of urbanization, industrialization, and modernization. Many Western-style metropolises like Shanghai were built on the mainland. Until the 1930s, the KMT had nominally unified China, and went into the comparatively flourishing age of the Nanjing Decade. But at the same time the early crisis of Western modernization became clear in 1930s China, the shadow of war loomed darker and began to encapsulate China with the Japanese invasion. In cities, unemployment was increasing and social gaps became bigger. Accompanying the expansion of industrial capitalism, materialism and hedonism resulted in moral corruption. Wars driven by accumulating resources and benefits never stopped for a long period in China. At the same time, the pressure from the burgeoning need of productivity and material accumulation resulting from urbanization, the development of capitalism, and the continuous war situation, also influenced the countryside. Natural disasters and famines frequently happened. As writer Mao Dun indicated, "it has been a hard fact that the countryside was also on the edge of bankruptcy."[20]

Before the 1930s, Chinese film production moved ahead in its struggle to compete with foreign films. There is no doubt that Chinese filmmakers absorbed a lot from foreign films in

[20] Mao Dun, "Torrent and Night in the City" (Kuangliu yu chengshi zhiye《狂流》與《城市之夜》), first published in *Shenbao* (申報), 1933, in *Chinese Leftist Film Movement* (Zhongguo zuoyi dianying yundong 中國左翼電影運動), Chinese Film Archive edit, (Beijing: Chinese Film Press, 1933), 413.

terms of narrative, cinematic language, and production, especially from Hollywood and the Soviet Montage School. But as time went on, seeking profit became the main drive for many Chinese filmmakers. In director Zheng Junli's film historical analysis from 1926 to 1930, Chinese filmmakers created a Chinese genre: Marital Art Fantasy Films, but subsequently the film industry went into a period of decline, because of the general low quality.[21] Turning to the 1930s, with the complex social background, according to film director Cheng Bugao, "the various strong voices give [Chinese people] a big simulation: reaction, change, looking for solutions, transforming thoughts, and social reforms. Film also changes."[22] During this period of the 1930s, Chinese intellectuals and filmmakers initiated a film practice including three significant branches—leftist film, soft film, and film resonating with the KMT's New Life Movement. Film became a powerful stage to portray and discuss social problems.

Sun Yu's *Big Road* and Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel* describe the wide gulf between rich and poor in the city. Mingyou and Zhu Shilin's cooperative film *National Customs* (*Guofeng* 國風, 1935) focuses on moral corruption in cities. Wu Yonggang's *Waves Washing the Sand* (*Langtaosha* 浪淘沙, 1936) tries to reflect on the contradiction between morality and law. Zhang Shichuan's *The Tenderness Market* (*Zhifen shichang* 脂粉市場, 1933) and Wu Yonggang's *The Goddess* (*Shennu* 神女, 1934) depict female issues in urban areas. Fei Mu's *A Sea of Fragrant Snow* (*Xiangxuehai* 香雪海, 1934) refers to warfare's negative impact on the countryside and the contradictions between belief, superstition, and reality. In addition, real natural disasters also attracted filmmakers' attention. Bu Wancang's *Conscienceless*

[21] Zheng Junli, "A Brief History," 1387.

[22] Cheng Bugao, "Torrent," (Kuangliu 狂流) originally published in *Modern Film* (Dangdai dianying 當代電影), No. 1(1933), in *Chinese Silent Film* (Zhongguo wusheng dianying 中國無聲電影), China Film Archive edit, (Beijing: Chinese Film Press, 1996), 348.

(*Rendao* 人道, 1932) relates to a catastrophic drought in the countryside. In his *Torrent* (*Kuangliu* 狂流, 1933), Cheng Bugao not only takes the Yangtse River flood in the Jiangnan area as his subject but also directly appropriates the record of the image of real floods in his film. Another of Cheng's films, *Spring Silkworms* (*Chuncan* 春蠶, 1933), is inspired by news that the sericulture in the Northern Zhejiang has been harvested, but the sericulturists are bankrupt because of the pressure from capitalist powers. Therefore, as Zheng Junli observed, in the 1930s, Chinese film "became closer to social reality and fulfilled the needs of the era."[23]

B. Coexistence of Multiple Transcendences Among Chinese Intellectuals

One of the outstanding characteristics of the 1930s film practice was the participants' complex background from the perspectives of economy, politics, and culture.[24] In the area of political background, some of them, like many filmmakers from the Lianhua film studio, had a sensitive relationship with the ruling KMT.[25] There were participants from the CCP, like Xia Yan and Zheng Boqi. Some were pro-leftist (or future leftists), like Hong Shen and Zheng Junli. Some of them had no clear political tendency like Fei Mu. From the perspective of the economy, the film tycoons like Luo Mingyou belonged to the capitalist class. Proletarians like Cai Chusheng were also influential figures in this movement. From the angle of culture, the backgrounds of the participants became more complex. In the 1930s, globalization sped up communication among different cultures. Director Sun Yu and

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[23] Zheng, "A Brief History," 1430.

[24] Even in the same film branch, like the leftist film group, filmmakers might be from different political parties and have different beliefs.

[25] Victor Fan, "The Cinema of Sun Yu," 228.

intellectual Hong Shen were trained in American universities. The writer and filmmaker Liu Na'ou was culturally influenced by Japan and Europe. The famous filmmaker Fei Mu grew up in a family with a deep atmosphere of Confucianism. There is no doubt that Russian and Japanese Marxism significantly influenced those leftists like Xia Yan. Besides his status as a capitalist, the film tycoon Luo Mingyou believed in Christianity.[26]

What is more interesting is the fact that the personal background did not draw clear lines among those intellectuals. On the contrary, they could work together in the same companies and studios. For instance, although Lianhua had a close relationship with the KMT, some pro-leftist filmmakers like Cai Chusheng still worked in it and produced many influential leftist films. In fact, although leftists were sensitive and dangerous figures in the political background of the 1930s, almost all of the big film companies in Shanghai, including Star, Lianhua, Tianyi and Yihua at some point recruited leftists to join their film production.[27] Moreover, a single individual might represent several identities. The director Fei Mu had a strong affinity for traditional culture. But his *The Wolf Hill* (*Langshan diexue ji* 狼山喋血記, 1936) was highly appreciated by leftists. Fei Mu was also categorized as leftist filmmaker in the CCP's discourse, although most of his 1930s films had a close relationship with Confucianism and traditional values, which were blamed by leftists. Accordingly, it is very hard to separate and distinguish the 1930s Chinese intellectuals by their personal backgrounds, especially from the political perspective. Coexistence permeated almost every aspect of society.

Those participants' complex backgrounds in some sense revealed the fact that they held diverse transcendences. According to Duara, transcendence is not limited to religion, but a

[26] Pang, *Building A New China*, 35.

"human yearning . . . beyond here and now of the word."[28] In this definition, ideologies, like Marxism, and nationalism, to some degree, may be transcendent. He also distinguishes two types of transcendence: radical and dialogical. Radical transcendence, like Abrahamic monotheism, is a type of transcendence in which people try to "distinguish themselves from others . . . [and their] contestation led to highly competitive and intolerant environment."[29] As the example of Islam exposes, radical transcendence has a tendency to exclude others for the sake of what they see as the purity of their own group. On the contrary, dialogical transcendence is "one of exchange, competition, coexistence and partial absorption . . . [and] has remained relevant for many who seek guidance for moral transformation of self and society."[30] Unlike radical transcendence, dialogical transcendence underscores tolerant attitude towards others, coexistence of multi-truth, and negotiation among different opinions.

Based on Duara's definitions, among the participants of the 1930s film movement, there were at least three clear types of transcendence: Marxism, Confucianism, and Christianity, and these transcendences might have radical tendencies to some degree. The main reason motivating the CCP to accept the proposal that they would send three party members, Xia Yan, Qian Xingtun, and Zheng Boqi, to participate in film production was the benefit of absorbing more followers and apostates of other parties to join the CCP. Nonetheless, before the three party members went into the film field, the political leader Qu Qiubai reminded

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[27] Vivian Shen, *The Origins of Left-wing Cinema in China, 1932-1937*, (Routledge, 2012), 21.

[28] Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity,* 5–6.

[29] Ibid., 121.

[30] Ibid., 154-155.

them, "you must be especially careful."[31] Qu's words made the three young leftists think for a long time. They believed that Qu tried to warn them to "work scrupulously and cautiously, insist on their position . . . [and to] avoid being contaminated by others' bad behavior and habits."[32] His warning revealed that their transcendence (Chinese Marxism[33]), similar to radical transcendence, had a tendency to exclude others. Paul Pickowicz indicates that the 1930s leftist film movement should be interpreted as an act of "avoiding spiritual pollution."[34] At least in the beginning period, Pickowicz is correct and this term clearly points out the exclusive characteristic of Chinese Marxism. During the Cultural Revolution, when this transcendence became completely subordinated to political power, its radical tendency to purge others went to an extreme degree.

Moreover, although in Duara's interpretation, traditional Confucianism can be seen as the representative of dialogical transcendence, the KMT's political appropriation of Confucianism in some sense transformed it into an exclusive tendency in the New Life Movement. The political leader of the KMT, Chiang Kai-Shek, announced that the weakness of China was due to the country's moral degeneracy. In order to save the nation-state, Chiang Kai-Shek argued that Chinese people should have "national morality."[35] Relying on traditional Confucian's doctrines, Chiang defined "propriety, righteousness, honesty, and a

[31] Xia Yan, *Recording of the Old Dream*, (Lanxun jiumeng lu 懶尋舊夢錄) (Beijing: DX Joint Publishing Company, 1985), 227.

[32] Ibid.

[33] In fact, in the 1930s, although all the CCP members and leftists believed in Marxism and used Marxism to motivate ordinary people, their doctrines were not the original version of Marxism. On the contrary, what they learned in that period was heavily influenced by the Russian and Japanese versions, in that instead of directly translating original Marxism, they translated the Japanese version into Chinese.

[34] Paul Pickowicz, *China on Film*, 44.

[35] Chiang Kai-Shek, "The Essentials of New Life Movement," 20.

sense of shame"[36] as the central themes of the national morality. In order to emphasize the importance and significance of Confucian morality, Chiang also compared it with Western disciplines and stated that "if we forget those moralities, and just teach [Chinese youths] Physics, Chemistry and English, although we can teach them very well, it is nothing meaningful, since even beasts can be taught to learn [those Western disciplines]. It is the morality that distinguishes human beings from beasts."[37] Through his words, Chiang indeed tried to transform the Chinese society back to a Confucian tradition. Moreover, this transformation explicitly belittled and excluded Western cultures. On the other hand, the KMT's political coercion on every individual in order to prompt this project also revealed the influence from the West in the deeper structure of this movement, especially Fascism, which propagates a much more exclusive attitude towards others. Therefore, the dialogical transcendence in some sense was transformed by the political goal into a comparatively radical tendency and shared the similar hint of "avoiding spiritual pollution" with the CCP.

There is no doubt that Pickowicz' theory is suitable to describe the early stage of the 1930s film practice. However, one cannot ignore the fact that as the development of this film practice, the radical tendency was seemingly transformed. Discourses from others became tolerable among different groups. Of course, one can find banned and censored films in the 1930s. On the other hand, it cannot be refused that the KMT did not ban all the heterodox discourses. It is clear that films with various, even opposite discourses, like leftist films and soft films, coexisted and released in the similar period. It seems that the transcendences, which support people's actions, were changed to be a dialogical degree. Therefore, one needs to find an answer to explain how and why the change occurred.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

C. Approaching Dialogical Transcendence: The Formation of Public Space in Film Field

According to Duara, transcendence can create moral authority, which can "serve as a historical motor to empower the quest for justice and its ideal of a better world."[38] And the better world will have "a new order that more truthfully represent[s] the transcendent ideas."[39] Therefore, this moral authority can be employed to motivate ordinary people to sacrifice themselves for it. Because of the relationship between transcendence and moral authority, the process of occupying and fixing particular moral authority symbolized the competition to gain legalized specific transcendence. The participants in the 1930s film movement also contended for the prominence of the moral authority matched with their transcendence by discussions and evaluations of lowercase cultures. The lowercase culture, in Duara's interpretation, "refers to the meanings and significances which people give to events, practices, customs and institutions that enable everyday activity, interpersonal relationships, career and life courses, and the like."[40] In the film field, from the perspective of moral authority, filmmakers promoted a wide discussion with diverse topics relating to the lowercase culture, including Western/traditional education, extravagant/comfortable urban life, free love/arranged marriage, female virtues, and so on.

In 1935, Fei Mu directed a film named *A Song of China* (*Tianlun* 天輪). This film, as leftist critic Shi Linghe indicates, discusses a theme relating to traditional filial piety—"expanding the respect of the aged in one's family to that of other families; expanding the

[38] Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity,* 125.

[39] Ibid., 106.

[40] Ibid., 104.

love of the youth in one's family to that of other families"--by portraying the change of four generations in a family.[41] Filmmakers equate moral corruption with the urban world, and morality with countryside, by way of a comparison between the second and third generation. The second generation became the moral model, since they opened an orphanage in the countryside and tried to re-educate the third generation by leading them to live in a rural area. But the third generation who insists on living in the city is degenerate. Everyday they go out to gamble and lose themselves in parties. They are neither filial to their parents nor do they educate their children. Accordingly, the film explicitly highlights the moral authority of traditional Confucianism.

In 1936, Cai Chusheng's leftist film *A Lamb Astray* (*Mitu de gaoyang* 迷途的羔羊) implied a tendency to try and underscore the moral power of the working class and blame capitalism as the origin of moral degeneration. In this film, the only character who gives real sympathy to the homeless children in the city is a poor servitor. Although the waifs in the film are poor, they are not moral, since they steal. Only by working can they become moral and therefore distinguish themselves with the rich but immoral capitalist. In this sense, working and working class occupy the moral authority.

In the famous soft film *Tomboy* (*Huashen guniang* 化身姑娘, dir. Fang Peilin, 1936), the filmmakers do not mention moral corruption, but highlight the comfortable urban life using a mismatched love triangle between three youths. The protagonists never try to reflect on their colonial living situation (in Qingdao and Singapore); on the contrary, they seem to view their living situation as a matter of course and are immersed in the comfortable spaces, where there are no poor people, no social issues, no darkness, and no conflicts; the only

[41] Shi Linghe, "I watched *A Song of China*," (Wo guan Tianlun 我觀《天輪》), in *Women Life* (Funu shenghuo 婦女生活), No. 1, 2(1936): 217.

trouble for youths is their personal love. In fact, by refusing to refer to moral discussion, this kind of film tried to treat materialism and capitalism as normal, even as moral.

Duara also mentions "competition based on the belief in truth did not necessarily lead to large-scale elimination of the Other."[42] Although those film groups had different ideas about a particular social issue and tried to compete with each other to propagate and fix the moral authority of their transcendences among ordinary people, they still shared a consensus on a higher moral authority—saving the community, which kept their competition in a degree of negotiation instead of exclusivity and purification. Here, one needs to pay attention to the term *community*, instead of the Chinese nation-state, considering the complexity of nation-states and nationalism in 1930s China.

Actually, although almost all the participants cried for nationalism and national survival, "China" was an ambiguous entity that covered the coexistence of different types of nationalism and ideology. Only in Shanghai had the existence of foreign concessions already made the consciousness of nationalism complex for people who lived there. Besides, there were also some people from Taiwan and Hong Kong, like Liu Na'ou and Luo Mingyou,[43] who migrated to Shanghai to participate in 1930s film production. It is hard to simply declare that those people shared the same nationalism as other local people, considering their differences in education, training, and life experience in colonial areas. Moreover, filmmaker Li Minwei, who was born in Japan but was seen as the father of Hong Kong film, was also active in 1930s Shanghai film circles. When it comes to filmmakers like Li, issues of national identity become a complex issue that is not always easily boiled down to essentialist views.

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[42] Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity*, 122.

[43] Luo Mingyou was born in Hong Kong, but lived in Guangzhou.

At the same time after the Northern Expedition, the KMT in the late 1920s ended the rule by warlords and nominally controlled the mainland. The New Life Movement was a significant campaign to support and prompt the KMT's nationalism. There is no doubt that the "China" the KMT tried to create was different from the CCP's. For the CCP, although they were in danger of political purging, supported by Chinese Marxism and its comparatively mature institution and organization, they also propagated their own nationalism in their bases and secretly spread it in other areas. As the CCP member Xia Yan recorded, the political leader Qu Qiubai in the 1930s used the phrase: "obtained all under heaven (*tianxia*)"[44] to refer to the CCP's imagined future nation-state.

Besides, the territories, which fix those nationalisms, were very ambiguous and dynamic too. Qu's *tianxia* has a very ambiguous boundary and blurs the CCP's concrete nationalism. It is difficult to know whether Qu's *tianxia* included foreign concessions in Shanghai, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Manchuria, Mongolia, and so on. The same vagueness existed in other groups, too. If Qu's *tianxia* implied that the CCP hoped to get back all those captured areas, the KMT's tolerance of the coexistence of foreign powers, then, demonstrated that the KMT's imaged national territory was different from the CCP. Meanwhile, for the Taiwanese, who grew up and were educated under colonial rule, did Liu Na'ou have the same imagination of the boundary and concept of "China" as local ordinary people and radical progressives? Therefore, although all the participants appropriated the term "China" and the idea of the nation-state, their individual types of nationalism were not necessarily fixed on the same territorial and national boundaries.

But based on Duara's statement that "the very purpose of nationalism remains to advance the national interests through the medium of the nation-state . . . nationalism is

[44] Xia Yan, *Recording of the Old Dream,* 227.

potentially a form of absolutism,"[45] it seems that in the 1930s, the different forms of nationalism should not have tolerated each other but needed to exclude others. However, the fact was on the contrary. Considering it, I argue that it is circulatory history that made a contribution to the coexistence of different kinds of nationalism. Based on the complexity and differences in the perspective of nationalism, the concept "China" was reduced from a nation-state to a community. What motivated and connected those participants to fight for the community was not a particular and concrete nationalism, but the "circulatory history"[46] of their community, which highlighted "the ideas of common origin of a people typically derived from a common ancestor."[47]

According to Duara, the circulatory is not a one-way influence but a multi-process. In other words, the process does not finish by the delivery of the influence from a sender to a receiver. The receiver will absorb and modify the message and re-send the modified version back to the original sender. In some sense, the process can be seen as endlessly circular. During this infinite process, the boundary between self and other become ambiguous, since the multiple influences assimilates each other. Accordingly, the circulatory history can help to leave the hostility and conflict among rivals in abeyance, even though the line between self and other may be still there.

This theory can be appropriated to explain the reason why Chinese intellectuals in some sense gave up their position of hostility in the 1930s. It is their shared circulatory history that weakened their hostility. Although they belonged to different groups and their identities with

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[45] Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity,* 109–110.

[46] Ibid., 54.

[47] Ibid., 85.

various degrees of difference, the circulatory history, instead of the controversial nationalism and nation-state, closely connected them together and highlighted their similarities. In fact, the Japanese military's propaganda about "the Great East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere" also appropriated circulatory history as a strategy in order to persuade the East Asian people to give up their refusal of Japanese colonization. The difference between Japanese strategy and the Chinese one was whether Japan or China was the leader of the circulatory history. For those Chinese intellectuals, there was no doubt that *China* was the leading role. Here, one can find that although the concept "China" was ambiguous among different groups and individuals, it still had a relatively stable content, facing another country or an absolute enemy--Japan. The moral authority of saving the community where all the participants shared a circulatory history guided the participants to move beyond the obstacles of limited nationalism and so-called national interests and to tolerate each other. Finally, they approached dialogical transcendence, which, according to Duara's summary, highlights the characteristics of "exchange, competition, coexistence and partial absorption."[48]

The flourishing publishing industry of the 1930s also offered a comparatively equal and peaceful platform for discussion and negotiation. The debate between soft and hard (leftist) film is a typical example. There is no doubt that the leftists who supported Chinese Marxism had the opposite transcendence of the proponents of soft film who encouraged people to enjoy their material lives. What they did to compete with each other was publishing film reviews and academic discussions in newspapers and magazines. From 1934 to 1935, relating to the topics of the nature of film, the future of Chinese film, and the function of film critics, the supplement of *Chenbao* (晨報)—*Daily Film* (Meiri dianying 每日電影)—not only

[48] Ibid., 154.

published reviews and essays by leaders in the soft film camp, like Mu Shiying and Jiang Jianxia, but also published articles written by leftists like Chen Wu, Tang Na, and Lu Si. The platform of the printing press, similar to the film field, meant more and more people could equally and freely access the various attitudes toward social issues and deeper transcendence.

Moreover, as film practice unfolded throughout the 1930s, the participants began to call for continuing and expanding the discussion by refusing to offer imagined solutions to the issues revealed in films. Most films included open endings to invite discourse, discussion, and negotiation. As the leftist leader Xi Naifang proposed in the 1930s, "the new suggestion is [producing] films without conclusions . . . exposing the contradictions and irrationalities of the reality in front of the eyes of the audience; letting them deeply understand the necessity of social reform; and guiding them to eagerly look for their own outlets."[49] Xi's words explicitly indicate that even the group of leftists, who had a clear truth and belief in their imagination of human's destiny, and was seriously fearful of spiritual pollution at the beginning, had now accepted giving up imposing their unique truth on the masses. The textual openness and consensus of refusal to give a resolution as the unique truth to the masses symbolizes the fact that dialogical transcendence[50] had been achieved. It helped to transform the film field into a public space, in which not only intellectuals could discuss issues on equal terms with one another, but ordinary people could also access various discourses legally. Conversely, the public space made contributions to help the participants' transcendence move much closer to a dialogical space.

[49] Xi Naifang, "Film Crime: A Disguised Cinematic Review," (Dianying zuiyan: bianxiang de dianying shiping 電影罪言：變相的電影時評), *Star* (Mingxing 明星), No. 1, 1(1933): 3–4.

[50] Here I use dialogical transcendence as a category, which highlights tolerant attitude and peaceful negotiation.

III. At the Crossroads: Turn Left or Right?

A. Difficulties to Define the Leftist Film Movement

In the perspective of his theory of "spiritual pollution," Pickowicz emphasizes that in leftist films, filmmakers constructed "a simple dichotomy of Chinese purity and Western moral degradation offer[ing] no middle ground."[51] The countryside represents tradition, innocence and harmony; on the contrary, the modern city like Shanghai is "corrupt, evil and un-Chinese…the symbol of an aggressive Western presence in China."[52] There was a discussion about whether or not China needed to be Westernized in the 1930s. Many people rejected it, like the proponents of the KMT's national project. On the other hand, others showed a different attitude. Shi Dongshan, the leftist filmmaker, who was also a member of Chinese leftist writers camp, published an essay to discuss this issue. He indicated, "the offensive attitude [to believe] that Europeanization is always *bad* is not tolerant. It is also wrong in the aspect of ideology."[53] On the contrary, in order to be stronger, China should not be afraid of the positive assimilations. He proposed, "Now is Europeanization. In the future, it may be other kinds of assimilation. But if it is worth to assimilate, I am eager to be assimilated."[54] In this sense, intellectuals like Shi Dongshan did not completely refuse foreign influences. On the contrary, they praised and welcomed it.

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[51] Pikowicz, *China on Film*, 49.

[52] Ibid., 46.

[53] Shi Dongshan, "Whether Europeanization Is Always Not Good," (Ouhua zongshi buhao ma 歐化總是不好嗎), first published in *Modern Film*, No.3 (1933), in *Chinese Silent Film*, 393.

[54] Ibid., 394.

The inclination to accept positive assimilations can be interpreted by the effect of dialogical transcendence. Being a branch of the 1930s film practice, the leftist film movement did share the similar characteristic to tolerate alien discourses and multi-truth. The public space in film field offered a change for the participants in the leftist film movement to exchange opinions with others. In this process, assimilations were accessible. Their films then became the main products to express the result of assimilations. Consequently, it is easy to find the coexistence of diverse voices in the leftist film movement.

In most of Cai Chusheng's works, the dance hall is a corrupt and decadent. People go there will also be polluted by its alien value. Unlike Cai's portrayal, in Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel,* the dance hall is an attractive element that appeals to ordinary youths to go to explore it. There is a discrepancy of opinion about this symbolism of Western culture between the two filmmakers who are both canonized as great leftist filmmakers. In *New Women*, female worker, A Ying, is powerful and represents the hopeful new women. However, in *Crossroads*, female workers, like Ms. Yang, are weak and struggle under the exploitation of the factory bosses. In *The Goddess*, Western-style education is the final solution and hope of the poor mother. She sacrifices herself in order to exchange an opportunity for her son to attend a Western-style school. But in *A Lamb Astray*, as critic Jin Zeren indicated, it "exposes the corruption of the countryside education, at the same time, eposes the fail of the so-called modern education."[55] Instead, only work can guide them to go to the right way.

The flexible and paradoxical characteristic of the leftist film movement also partly resulted in the difficulties for scholars to find a fixed criterion to distinguish this film branch from others. Moreover, similar to other groups of film practice in the 1930s, leftist film group

[55] Jin Zeren, "The Forum of *A Lamp Astray*," (Mitu de gaoyang zuotanhui《迷途的羔羊》座談會) first published in *Evening News* (Dawanbao 大晚報), 1936, in *Chinese Leftist Film Movement*, 595.

was also composed of participants with complex and intertwined backgrounds. In this situation, how can we clarify the distinctiveness of this movement? I suggest to go back to textual studies: analyzing film texts and film reviews to look for and summarize similarities shared and acknowledged by most participants. It is undeniable that social background and international relations in the 1930s were very sensitive and bewildering. Although intellectuals could have chances to take part in public discussion, it does not mean that they were completely free. Instead, censorship was still strict. As director Shen Xiling mentioned, in 1930s' Shanghai, "we [i.e., intellectuals] cannot say a sentence like getting back the lost territories; we cannot hang on a map of Northeastern China…"[56] The sensitive surroundings and strict censorship restricted intellectuals' writings and film products. In order to escape from the coercive confines, texts including film texts and film reviews in the 1930s were filled with argot, metaphors, symbols and allegories. As director Sun Yu indicated in his interpretation of the film *Big Road*, "when audiences watch my film *Big Road*, [they will find that] many portrayals and subtitles in this film are obscure and difficult. We should feel sorry for it, but it derives from the need of the surroundings."[57] Considering the ambiguities of leftist film texts, paying attention to and deciphering connotations of details in those texts becomes a significant process.

B. Characteristics of the Leftist Film Movement: Two Core Principles

As I mention in Chapter 2, modernity is a prevalent topic among Chinese intellectuals in the 1930s, even Chiang's national project was launched in the name of creating a modern

[56] Shen Xiling, "How to Produce *Crossroads*," (Ruhe zhizuo Shizi jietou 如何製作《十字街頭》), in S*tar*, No. 3, 8(1937).

[57] Sun Yu, "The Words From The Director of The Film Big Road," (Dalu daoyanzhe yan《大路》導演者言), first published in *Lianhua Pictorial* (Lianhua huabao 聯華畫報), No. 5, 1(1935), in *Chinese Silent Film*, 353.

nation-state. Closely relating to this topic, a dominant content in most 1930s' films was the contradiction between the city where in general is portrayed as a symbol of modernity, and the countryside where represents tradition because of the relative lack of influence from Western culture. For participants in the leftist film movement, they could never be satisfied with the Western modernity of the city, or the feudal traditions in the countryside. Resonating to the slogan "exposing the darkness of the society"[58] in almost all the leftist reviews, the contents of leftist film texts likewise refer to social issues in either urban or rural areas. But simultaneously, as the accessible and legalized references, when they discussed social issues and possible solutions, they could not completely give up either of the two. Instead, their attitude towards the possible solutions always relied on their evaluations of the two references. They appealed to ordinary people to accept positive assimilations instead of "remaining any expectations for the old society [i.e., traditional society]."[59] On the other hand, as Shi Dongshan indicated, it does not mean that they should destroy all the old traditions,[60] while "imitating the bad aspect of foreigners should be attacked."[61] In this sense, intellectuals like Shi in the 1930s was looking for an alternative modernity, based on their evaluations of the benefits and harms of their familiar cultural elements from both Western modernity and tradition.

In fact, from the angle of film texts, facing the choice between the city and the countryside, leftist films also generally persuade people to stay in the modern city and

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[58] Xi Naifang, "Film Crime: A Disguised Cinematic Review," 3–4.

[59] Wang Chenwu, "Trying to Review *A Lamp Astray*," (Shiping Mitu de gaoyang 試評《迷途的羔羊》), in *Dawanbao* (大晚報), August 8, 1936.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Shi Dongshan, "Whether Europeanization Is Always Not Good," 393-394.

transform it without urging people to return to the countryside, where modernity has no influence. By examining films separately representing soft films, the films resonating with the KMT's New Life Movement, and the leftist films, the distinctiveness of leftist films will be much clearer. The term "modern" was also pervasive in the essays written by the proponents of soft film. According to Huang Jiamo, who was one of the main activists in soft film camp, "we [i.e., filmmakers] should remember to ask ourselves whether all the themes we want to produce and all the methods we will use in films will fit in modern people' taste."[62] He announced that instead of directly reencountering the dark and serious society in the theater, by watching films, modern audiences expect to be "liberated from the boring ordinary life."[63] Film, in Huang's definition, "is the ice cream for eyes, and sofa for souls."[64] Accordingly, soft filmmakers focused on all the topics, which could produce visual pleasure, like female bodies, love and suspense. As my introduction of Fang Peilin's *Tomboy* in Chapter 2, this typical soft film attracts audience's eyes by a topic about an ambiguous homosexual or heterosexual love. It never refers to the darkness of the society, although the cinematic space in which the story occurs offers a natural chance to portray and discuss social issues. Besides *Tomboy*, almost all soft films, like *Map of Treasures* (*Baibao tu* 百寶圖, dir. Yue Feng, 1936), *Murder in the Wedding* (*Xinhun da xue'an* 新婚大血案, dir. Wang Cilong, 1936), and *A Mystical Flower* (*Shenmi zhihua* 神秘之花, dir. Yue Feng, 1937), insist

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[62] Huang Jiamo, "Audience's Modern Sense," (Xiandai de guanzhong ganjue 現代的觀眾感覺), in *Modern Film* (Xiandai dianying 現代電影), No. 3(1933): 9.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Huang Jiamo, "Soft Film And Hard Film," (Ruanxing yingpian yu yingxing yingpian 軟性影片與硬性影片), in *Modern Film*, No. 6(1933): 3.

on exploring film's ability to evoke and expand sensual pleasure.[65] Some film critics blamed Fang's *Tomboy*, and indicated that this film "intently make[s] the audience forget the reality that the nation is suffering the enemy's invasion and massacre and national heroes are fighting for the survival of the nation. It persuades people to stay in a nonsense story in which woman transforms into man and man transforms into woman."[66] Although this review was aggressive, it demonstrated that the main purpose of soft films were not to expose social issues but to encourage the masses to be attracted to the multiple pleasures deriving from modern life.

In order to propagate the KMT's national project the New Life Movement, the KMT supported Lianhua to produce several films, which could be seen as the KMT's national films in the 1930s. Resonating with the KMT's discourse, in 1935, Zhu Shilin and Luo Mingyou cooperated on a film titled *National Customs*. By portraying two sisters' lives as students in a modern city, filmmakers shared their critiques towards cities' moral corruption while also depicting their appreciation of the beauty and simplicity of the countryside, which was portrayed as typically traditional from the perspectives of both the decoration of the buildings and people's values (Figure 1). In this film, though both the sisters get the same Western education, their lifestyle choices are quite different. The elder sister supports traditional morality and thus keeps her innocence and honesty, though she is surrounded by factors of the city that induce people to be corrupt. However, her young sister is inclined to follow the Western-style modern life and thus degenerates under the temptation of the extravagance of the city. In this sense, the filmmakers try to align the film with Chiang's

[65] It is very hard to watch those films now. My analysis for those soft films mainly based on the introduction, screen scripts, filmmakers' interpretation, and film review on newspaper and magazines.

[66] Mu Weifang, "Review *Tomboy*," (Huashen guniang ping《化身姑娘》評) in *Minbao* (民報)—*Film Discussion* (Yingtan 影譚), June 7, 1936.

political doctrine that Western education cannot save the country if people, like the young sister, do not have Chiang's national morality.

Figure 1. Traditional decoration of the buildings in the countryside

In addition, through the portrayal and the lines of the elder sister, filmmakers repeat the information that people should avoid spiritual pollution from Western cultures, like materialism, being busy with social activities and so-called free love. This film explicitly conveys the viewpoint that people should return to the countryside (or traditional society) to improve their morality, since the young sister and her lover are suddenly transformed to be eager to contribute to the nation after they live in the village for a period of time. Based on those plots, filmmakers make a simple dichotomy in order to exclude Western culture and absolutely applaud Chinese tradition. In this sense, this film's narrative strategy is in accordance with Pickowize's theory. Therefore, Pickowize's theory cannot effectively distinguish leftist films from the KMT's national films.

In fact, most leftist films try to propose that rather than returning to traditional society, staying in modern city and transform it into much more healthy society may be the best

solution. Shen Xiling's *Crossroads* (*Shizi jietou* 十字街頭, 1937) explicitly shows that intellectuals in the leftist film movement were in favor of moving forward to a better type of modernity. Although the young people get a good Western-style education, they face unemployment and poverty again and again in the city. The female lead, Ms. Yang loses her job and must return to her rural home. The male protagonist Mr. Zhao, who loves her, feels worried about her decision and persuades her to stay in the city. His several cries "do not go back" reveal his anxiety about leaving the modern city and can be seen as a metaphor, which implies the rural area—the symbol of tradition—in some sense has been a nightmare for the youth, since going to the village means losing their love, job, and hope. Therefore, his love to Yang can hardly drive him to follow her to leave the city and go to the village. In fact, even though all of the youths in the film encounter many adversities, the modern city is still an attractive place for them. All of them return to the modern city, fueled by the beliefs that as long as they do not lose hearts and insist on doing something meaningful, they will finally find a way to survive in the city.

Even though the youths favor to the modernization in the city, they do not satisfy with the whole situations here. On the contrary, the film mainly attacks the darkness in the city. According to the titles of the newspapers in the close-up, factory, which is a symbol of Western modernity, has become a "world without sun" (Figure 2). The big English words on the brand of Yang's factory connect this space with Western modernity. In this space, a scoundrel flirts with Yang. Unlike other characters, the scoundrel wears a traditional long gown, and therefore can be seen as a symbol of feudal power. In the same space, Yang loses her job, forcing her to be separated from her love. Accordingly, the respective symbolic meanings of the space and characters intertwine with each other and create a subtle

connection between Western modernity, feudal tradition, and serious social issues: it is Western modernity and feudal tradition that result in and sharpen the social issues.

Figure 2. Title of the newspaper: a world without sun

Filmmakers need to offer or hint possible solutions, which may be beneficial to clinch those issues. Obviously, neither Western modernity nor feudal tradition can be the best choice. At the end of the film, filmmakers quote Yang to ask their question—where should we go? In fact, the answers given by Yang's sister and Xiao Tang offer clues about the possible solution in the filmmakers' imagination. Yang's sister encourages the youth to "go forward!" If it is a metaphorical sentence, the word "forward" undoubtedly implies "modern," which generally in the 1930s meant progressiveness. Xiao Tang indicates that they should learn from Gao Ge, who goes to the Northern China and leaves a message saying that he will do something meaningful. Since Gao Ge's message is ambiguous, it is hard to assure that his so-called *meaningful thing* refers to Chinese Marxism or the CCP. Nonetheless, at any rate, through this film, one can get the clear information that the filmmakers employ metaphors to encourage ordinary people to stay in the modern city and do something to make it better. In other words, those intellectuals tried to find an alternative road for China, and this road could help China stay in the direction towards a suitable "modern." In this sense, those intellectuals were actually looking for an alternative modernity.

Moreover, the meaning of the word "alternative" left room for the CCP's discourse, since the CCP's Marxism also might be seen as a third road besides tradition and Western modernity in the 1930s.

The ambiguous description of the possible solutions demonstrated that the participants just drew a framework instead of a strict definition for the leftist films, based on a comparative consensus through discussion and negotiation from the perspective of China's future road. The framework mainly included two aspects: exposing social darkness and looking for an alternative modernity. In this framework, the public space worked very well to tolerate diverse discourses in a certain degree. Although intellectuals looked for an alternative modernity, they could hardly jump out of the two most familiar paradigms—Western modernity and tradition, which in the 1930s' background were the safely and legitimately accessible references for Chinese intellectuals to publicly discuss. Instead, their definition about the alternative road mostly relied on their dynamic and flexible judgments and evaluations of elements from Western modernity and traditions.

As film *Crossroads* shows, the apathy and materialism in Western modernity were bad and should be abandoned. But urbanization and industrialization, as building road in *Big Road,* were good and should be promoted. Being the representative of tradition, rural area was beautiful and peaceful. Personal relationship and humanity here were friendly and harmonious. In *Crossroads*, Yang's sister, who lives in the village, is helpful and active. But the feudal and outdated power structure and values in the traditional villages should be rejected. In *New Women*, Wei Ming tries her best to flee from her traditionally patriarchal family to the modern city—Shanghai—where she can be free and independent. In *Street Angel*, the male protagonists try their best to help Xiao Hong escape the control of her feudal father.

Although filmmakers did not directly and comprehensively indicate what the alternative road was, by the portrayal of positive protagonists, who generally represent the filmmakers' ideal, they hinted it as a mix of beneficial elements from both the Western and Chinese cultures. In *Street Angel*, after Xiao Hong escapes from the control of her adoptive parents, the male protagonists help her change her hairstyle from a traditional Chinese braid to modern short curly hair, which can be seen as a metaphor for modernization. But Xiao Hong still wears her traditional cheongsam. The transformation of Xiao Hong's dress and make-up combining Chinese and Western styles serves as a metaphor to imply that China should change its road from tradition to an alternative modernity combining both Chinese and Western cultures. Other leftist films depict a similar phenomenon. In *Big Road*, being a beautiful and friendly countryside girl, Dingxiang waves her hair in a Western style by herself. In *Wild Rose* (*Ye meigui* 野玫瑰, 1932), although she is from the countryside, Xiao Feng always wears curly hair from the beginning to the end. In *Plunder of Peach and Plum* (*Taoli jie* 桃李劫, dir. Ying Yunwei, 1934), the character, who truly attempts to help the male protagonist Tao Jianping, is an old teacher. Unlike those negative characters who are either in complete western style or in traditional style, the old gentlemen is in a mixed style—wearing traditional long beard in a Western suits (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The appearance of Tao's teacher

C. Roles of Participants: Filmmakers/Critics; Active/Passive

I need to highlight the complex constitution of the participants in the leftist film movement. Although it was a film movement, participants were not confined to the film field. Many intellectuals in printing press field were also involved in and functioned as significant roles. In other words, the leftist film movement not only included film production, but also embraced film reviews. In fact, film reviews, which might help the audience to easily understand the contents of films, became more and more important in the 1930s' leftist film movement, because leftist film texts were quite ambiguous deriving from the pervasive metaphors, symbols, and allegories. Meanwhile, the ambiguity of film texts made various interpretations acceptable, and left room for propaganda. Intellectuals could easily guide the readers' thoughts through writing reviews in a particular direction. In this sense, the printing press became a strategic area essential for contending.

The leftist film movement got important support from many film magazines and newspapers. According to Xia Yan, "from 1932 to 1937… the supplement of *Shibao* (時報)—*Film Times* (Dianying shibao 電影時報), the supplement of *Shenbao* (申報)—*Film*

Special (Dianying zhuankan 電影專刊), the supplement of *Chenbao* (晨報)---*Daily Film* (Meiri dianying 每日電影) were completely controlled by us [i.e., leftists]."[67] Those magazines and newspapers became the significant base for leftists, pro-leftists, and some ordinary intellectuals to discuss their imaginations about the future of China. During this process, they gradually got a comparatively flexible consensus about the criterion of their film practice: exposing social issues and finding an alternative modernity. Conversely, the consensus closely tied those participants together. Based on this criterion, they also selected particular films or some discourses in films as representative and guided filmmakers to work in the selected direction.

There are many filmmakers, who consciously accepted this criterion, and relied on the leftist critics' suggestions to modify their ideologies and film styles. Those people became active participants. For instance, after Cai Chusheng's *Pink Dream* (*Fenhongse de meng* 粉紅色的夢, 1932) was released, leftist activist Nie Er published a review, which showed his disappointment to Cai, who, in Nie's interpretation, was a hopeful youth, but produced an indecent film based on the stance of Capitalist morality.[68] At the end of this article, Nie encouraged Cai to "give up his artistic dream… [and] go to the right direction as soon as possible."[69] In his 1936's retrospection, Cai mentioned the negative criticisms about his *Pink*

[67] Xia Ya, "Ten Years of Leftist," (Zuoyi shinian 左翼十年), in *Chinese Leftist Film Movement*, 787. Although Xia described that the leftists completely controlled those supplements, one cannot completely believe in this statement. In fact, those supplements also published essays conveying non-leftist discourses. Not all the employees working for those supplements were leftist or pro-leftist. But it is true that participants in the leftist film movement could be comparatively free to publish their reviews in those supplements.

[68] Nie Er, "Indecent," (Xialiu 下流) in *Film Art* (Dianying yishu 電影藝術), No.1, 1 (1932): 12.

[69] Ibid.

Dream and "feels regretful to produce this film."[70] He agreed with Nie's evaluation and states, "[filmmakers should be] an author who has the right ideology and works for the masses…I decide that my later films at least will portray the pains of those lower classes and be closer to the masses."[71] Cai's announcement reveals that he had already accepted the guidance and influence of the participants in the leftist film movement. In this essay, Cai also promised, "I will try my best to repay your expectation."[72] Here, the personal pronoun "your" indirectly point to those participants in the leftist film movement, like Nie Er. Through his statement, Cai had already been transformed as an active participant.

However, not all intellectuals actively took part in this movement. There were also some filmmakers whose products just might occasionally match (or partly match) with the criterion of leftist films. After the occasional match, they might return to their ordinary orbit. In 1933, Fei Mu produced *Night in the City* (*Chengshi zhiye* 城市之夜), which successfully exposes the darkness of the decadent city life. In this aspect, the film got positive comments from participants in the leftist film movement. But the end of the film that calls people to "go back to the rural area to create new life," according to Mao Dun, should be seen as wrong, since in Mao's analysis, Fei "takes the branch for the root, As a result, the exposure of the city darkness in the film becomes meaningless."[73] Mao's rejection of the film's ending suggests that he tried to guide Fei to the "accurate" leftist direction. However, Fei did not follow this suggestion. In the next few years, Fei produced several films, like his *A Sea of Fragrant*

[70] Cai Chusheng, "In Meeting Room II," (Huikeshi zhong・xu 會客室中・續), in *Film Drama Monthly* (Dianying xiju yuekan 電影戲劇月刊), No. 3, 1(1936): 6.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Mao Dun, "*Torrent* and *Night in the City*," *Shenbao*, March 24, 1933.

Snow and *Song of China*. In those films, he highly praised Confucian belief, filial piety, traditional female values, and the harmony of traditional patriarchal families, which were closer to the KMT's national morality. After watching Fei's *Life* (*Rensheng*, 人生, 1934), Shi Linghe indicated that, "it is a more backward film than *Night in the City*."[74] But in 1936, Fei's film *The Wolf Hill*, again, attracted leftists' attention and got high appreciation from them.

The changes that Fei's career took was not a unique case. For director Wu Yonggang, his *The Goddess*, is canonized as leftist film, because it deeply exposes the social darkness: the sad situation of a single mother. In this film, the female protagonist has already gone out of the traditional family and until the end Wu never claims that she should give up her independence and go back to the patriarchal family, even though she is in struggle with pains. However, the director's position in the angle of female issue seemingly changed after just one year. In his *A Little Angel* (*Xiao tianshi* 小天使, 1935), the female character Mrs. Huang gives up her independence and goes back to the traditional family living together with her parents-in-law and children. Rather than praising the independence of the modern lady, Wu seemingly supported the return of women's traditional values, like assisting husbands and education children, loyalty and filial piety. In his 1936's film *Waves Washing the Sand,* the cinematic space moved from contemporary society to a desolate island, and Wu stepped away from social issues in order to discuss human nature. This film reflects on several contradictions: law/morality; personal desire/righteousness; friendship/hostility. According to leftist critic Shi Linghe, this film showed "an evasive attitude and just touch[ed] the

[74] Shi Linghe, "Reviewing *Life*," (Ping Rensheng 評《人生》), *Film Special Supplement of Shenbao*, February 4, 1934.

subordinate even unimportant social phenomena."[75] In Shi's evaluation, although this film was better than the soft film *Tomboy*, which emphasized box office return, the focus of Wu's film on art also could not be encouraged.[76]

In order to explain Wu' change, the CCP's scholar Cheng Jihua in his historical book *The Development History of Chinese Film* explains that "Wu left the leftist film movement after producing his *The Goddess* in 1934 because of the stress from the KMT's white terror."[77] However, according to Wu Yonggang, when he produced *The Goddess*, he neither dared to directly analyze or face the darkness of the prostitution issue, nor did he offer any solutions for the social issues he depicted in this film.[78] He changed the theme of the film to "focus on maternal love. [The film is] transformed as a story about a prostitute who is struggling in a double life [i.e., being a mom and working as a prostitute] for her son."[79] Wu's words implied that he actually was not as brave as those leftists thought. Although his film could fit the criteria of a leftist film, he himself, tried to primarily emphasize the humanistic aspects of the film. He comprehensively explores and portrays a woman's psychological contradictions as a single mom at the same time as a prostitute. This film also reveals the conflict between morality/law, which is shared in *Waves Washing the Sand*; and the selfless maternal love, which is depicted in *A Little Angel.* Accordingly, Wu never

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[75] Shi Linghe, "The Recent New Chinese Film Production," (Zuijin qijian de zhongguo dianying xinzuo 最近期間的中國電影新作), *Reading Life* (Dushu shenghuo 讀書生活) No.5, 4 (1936): 266.

[76] Ibid. 267.

[77] Cheng Jihua, *The Development History*, 461.

[78] Wu Yonggang, "After Finished *The Goddess*," (Shennu wancheng zhihou《神女》完成之後), in *Lianhua Pictorial,* No.1, 5 (1935): 3.

[79] Ibid., 2.

changed his film style. On the contrary, as time went on, his style, which relates to the discussion about humanity and psychological contradictions, became much clearer.

In this sense, unlike Cai Chusheng, Fei and Wu may not have been active participants in the leftist film movement, but some of their films do fit in the framework of leftist film production. This phenomenon might derive from the influence of the public space. The public space in cultural field offered and increased the possibility for filmmakers to touch and exchange different opinions. In this process, those inactive participants might have received some influence from leftist films. Therefore, the orbit of their style occasionally met with the leftist group. For those cases, it is hard to state that those filmmakers actually *took part* in the leftist film movement. Rather, their particular films were selected and canonized as leftist films. In this sense, what those active participants had done in the 1930s by writing film reviews and influencing film production was to canonize and create the leftist film movement. Their criteria when it came to canonization mainly relied on film text instead of filmmakers.

Moreover, Wu's *The Goddess* also indicates that some leftist film texts accept multiple interpretations from ideological and political aspects. Victor Fan indicates that for leftist films, "the forms and contents, the image and text all produced within an ideological framework."[80] But soft films were "open to multiple political interpretations."[81] There is no doubt that in many leftist reviews, leftist film texts were interpreted from the political perspective. Some leftists even tried to judge the backwardness and weak points of soft films, since the contents of those films cannot fit in their particular political aspect. But the

[80] Fan, "Cinema of Sun Yu," 232.

[81] Ibid.

statements and announcements in leftist film reviews could not completely represent the original intentions of all the filmmakers. In other words, some leftist critics attempted to guide filmmakers to work in a particular political direction, but some filmmakers did not actively resonate with those critics, like Fei Mu and Wu Yonggang. That the content of those films could fit in ideological discourse mostly was fueled by leftist film reviews, which consciously guided interpretations to a particular direction. It is possible to interpret films like *The Goddess* from a perspective, which has no relation with ideological contradiction. Therefore, being a cultural phenomenon, many leftist film texts actually are open to multiple interpretations.

D. Texts Open to Various Interpretations

Although the effects of leftists in this movement were significant, it does not mean that the leftist film movement only represented the CCP's discourse. First, in the 1930s, *leftist* was a dangerous label from political perspective. No one dared to publicly announce that they were leftist or believed in the CCP's Marxism in film field. Even the leftists who directly took part in film production had to use pseudonyms in order to mask their political status. In this sense, the CCP's political message conveyed by film texts would be relatively weak. Second, as Wu Yonggang's *The Goddess* proves, the leftist film movement, as a cultural phenomenon, in some sense, accepts various interpretations. Third, narrative strategies like open-ended plots, and themes that exposed the darkness of society rather than offering solutions, resulted in many ambiguous texts, not only to help leftist films escape censorship, but also to leave room for multiple explanations. Forth, the attitude of peaceful negotiation and the existence of public space contribute to the fact that, to a certain degree,

the leftists gave up their exclusion. Therefore, the variety of discourse was tolerated in the leftist film movement.

In fact, films in the 1930s, which could completely and perfectly represent the CCP's discourse, were rare. Xia Yan, a leftist leader and the CCP member, wrote the screenplay for the film *Torrent*. Some intellectuals highly appreciated it, and considered it as an example that "displayed the progressive ideology,"[82] and therefore could "represent the new road of Chinese film."[83] But other leftists were not completely satisfied with Xia's work. Mao Dun praised this film, but he also pointed out that the ending of this film "[represents the statement that] heaven's net has wide meshes, but nothing escapes it. [Therefore, it] has a feudal odor."[84] Leftist activist Xi Naifang also felt disappointed since the film did not comprehensively portray the masses activities and power.[85] Even though a trustworthy and loyal leftist leader wrote the script, it still could not satisfy all the leftist and pro-leftist intellectuals. Therefore, although the leftist film movement has a subtle relationship with leftists and the CCP, they are not same. Nonetheless, the existence of the subtle relationship could be used by the CCP as a strategy to create its own historical discourse after 1949.

The so-called leftist film movement is a product of multiple compromises and negotiations among different parties—leftists, pro-leftists, and ordinary filmmakers and intellectuals. Influenced by the public space, where various discourses were tolerant in

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[82] Ke Ling, "The Beginning of The New Road of Chinese Film—*Torrent,*" (Zhongguo dianying xinluxian de kaishi-guanyu Kuangliu 中國電影新路線的開始－關於《狂流》), first published in 1933, in *Chinese Leftist Film Movement*, 418.

[83] Yao Sufeng, "The New And Good Achievement," (Xinde lianghao de shouhuo 新的良好的收穫), in *Chenbao* (晨報)—*Daily Film* (Meiri dianying 每日電影), March 6, 1933.

[84] Mao Dun, "*Torrent* and *Night in the City*."

[85] Xi Naifang, "Evaluation of *Torrent*," (Kuangliu de pingjia《狂流》的評價), first published in 1933, in *Chinese Leftist Film Movement*, 414.

discussion and negotiation, participants of the leftist film movement achieved a consensus and drew a comparatively loose frame for their film production—exposing social darkness and finding an alternative modernity for China. Besides intentional productions, they also selected and canonized film texts, which could fit (or mostly) fit in their frame, as components of this movement. In this way, the leftist film camp became wider. Simultaneously, the leftists and the CCP had to give up their stance of exclusion to some degree. Accordingly, on the one hand, the leftist film movement indeed reflects some of the leftist imaginations of the future of China; On the other hand, it would not perfectly represent the ideology of a single political party. Instead, being a cultural movement, leftist film texts accepted different interpretations from multiple perspectives.

IV. Answering The Nation's Call: Learning to Be A Modern Subject

In this chapter, I try to use two typical leftist films to show how filmmakers used films to construct the dynamic concept of an alternative modernity; how they educated ordinary people to partake in this new modern lifestyle; and how they express various discourses in the same frame. For the first case, I will study Yuan Muzhi's film *Street Angel.* It may represent the mature style of leftist films, in that it was produced in 1937 when the leftist film movement was winding down, and almost all scholars regard it as a leftist film. My analysis focuses on how the filmmakers used cinematic strategies to create social allegories for mobilizing and educating the audience to choose a particular life style—a suitable modernity for China. For the second case, I will study an earlier leftist film *Big Road*, which like *Street Angel*, also fits in the same frame: exposing social darkness and searching for an alternative modernity. But I will pay more attention to its differences, especially from the gender perspective, to explore the colorful expression of forms and various discourses among different leftist film texts behind the same two principles—exposing social darkness and looking for an alternative modernity.

A. Case I: Street Angel

In the 1930s, Chinese filmmakers were highly influenced by foreign films, especially Hollywood and Soviet films, from the perspectives of melodramatic narration, continuity editing and montage. In 1937, a young filmmaker Yuan Muzhi directed his second film *Street Angel*, which shares the same title with a popular American musical. Yuan's film portrays the lives of several poor people living in the underground of a modern city. A

singing girl, Xiao Hong, and her sister Xiao Yun, who is forced into prostitution, make money for their adoptive parents. Xiao Hong falls in love with a trumpeter, Xiao Chen. However, her adoptive father tries to sell her to a local rogue, Lao Gu. In order to rescue Xiao Hong from this horrible life, Xiao Chen and his sworn brother Lao Wang hope to get help from a city lawyer, but because of poverty they fail. Inspired by the news, they persuade Xiao Hong to run away with them. With the help of Xiao Yun, Xiao Hong successfully escapes and marries Xiao Chen. But their adoptive father finally finds them. In order to save Xiao Hong, Xiao Yun sacrifices her life. Behind the simple love story, the film text is very rich. Many social issues are mentioned, like prostitution, the effectiveness of modern law, poverty, war, and other national crises. As a convention of leftist films, the filmmakers just use those issues to appeal to discussions among audiences instead of offering solutions for them.

My analysis of this film focuses on three areas reflecting general stereotypes of leftist films. First, the filmmakers influence the audience's position by constructing the protagonists' subjective points of view. The active and lively images from male protagonists' POV lure the audience to engage in the story and identify with those male protagonists. The lyrics of Xiao Hong's songs, her personal experience, and her position as the object of male desire contribute to her objectification and help to transform her into the incarnation of China. Based on protagonists' subject-object relationship, filmmakers create a social allegory, which mobilizes the audience to defend China. Then, through the protagonists' efforts to be close to the modern city and the modernized transformation of Xiao Hong's custom, filmmakers address that in a semi-modern and semi-traditional society, for the sake of solving the national crisis, China needs to choose its own type of modernity instead of going back to tradition or being completely Westernized.

1. Construction of the POV: Audience's Identity and Female's Function

As Leo Ou-fan Lee mentions, in the 1930s, most of the leftist films paid attention to employ a "new narrative mode,"[86] instead of direct ideological propaganda, although those film texts can be interpreted in ideological perspective. For the new narrative mode, some scholars have been inclined to conclude it was a Hollywood-influenced melodrama., In fact, to be more accurate, and considering the metaphoric functions of almost all protagonists in leftist films and the final purpose of this movement, I argue that this new narrative mode should be that of social allegory. In order to extend the effect of social allegory in reality, filmmakers used their protagonists to construct what, in Lacanian terms, might be called an "ideal self" to attract and encourage the audience to follow and imitate protagonists' behaviors in reality. In some leftist films with high artistic quality, for the sake of strengthening the effect of the ideal self, filmmakers would use cinematic strategies to guide the audience to fix their identities to the selected protagonists.

For *Street Angel*, in the sequence portraying two processions of marching bands at a wedding ceremony, the filmmakers use a series of shots that are, according to Ma Ning's statement, "without a designed point of authority."[87] The series uses montage to connect the separate shots in a point-of-view perspective similar to the omniscient view used in Hollywood films. However, this omniscience is interrupted by several subjective points of view between the protagonists. Interestingly, for this omniscient point of view, most of the Chinese spectators in the images are frozen while the protagonists who occupy the subjective points of view are active. Ma Ning interprets these frozen Chinese spectators as "the typical

[86] Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, 63.

[87] Ma Ning, "The Textual and Critical Difference of Being Radical: Reconstructing Chinese Leftist Films of the 1930s," Harry H. Kuoshu edited, *Celluloid China: Cinematic Encounters with Cultures and Society*, (Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 100.

Chinese spectators similar to Lu Xun's description."[88] Lu Xun's *spectator* reveals his ironic attitude towards Chinese people's apathy, clumsiness and insensitivity. I propose, however, that—besides being satirical—this contrast between the frozen and active images also helps to sway the audience's opinion. The two POV structures represent two positions offered to the audience—omniscience or that of the protagonists. The contrast between scenes in the two POV structures implies that in the omniscient POV, the audience can only see such frozen images like the Chinese spectators. From the protagonists' POV, however, the audience will see a film full of actions. This contrast steers the audience to prefer the protagonists' position. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the audience identifies with the protagonists as the "ideal self." This is vital to achieve the goal of educating the masses to follow and imitate the behaviors of the protagonists in their own lives after they watch this film.

But not all the protagonists share the same function. Unlike the male principals who obtain a position of subjectivity, the female lead is endowed with a particular function: she becomes an object and furthermore the incarnation of China. Xiao Hong's tragic life mainly centers on her close connection to tradition. She is completely controlled by her adoptive father, a master musician, who just views her as a tool to make money. In fact, Xiao Hong is in a traditional or feudal relationship with the musician, which most folk artists complied with. In this relationship, the musician obtains the authority as a father; meanwhile, he views Xiao Hong as a tool to make money instead of an independent subject. In this sense, the musician becomes a symbol of the feudal power. This feudal relationship restricts Xiao Hong and reduces her to be a product without subjectivity. In order to strengthen the sense of

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[88] Ibid.

tradition, both the costumes of Xiao Hong and the musician are traditional. In order to maintain his authority, the musician in the subsequent plot confines Xiao Hong to tradition through an arranged marriage. The beautiful and innocent girl who leads a tragic life mainly resulting from the feudal traditions, undoubtedly, may kindle audiences' sympathy. Moreover, the relationship between the adoptive father and Xiao Hong in the film may have a possible overtone referring to the relationship between the KMT and China. Being the ruling party, the KMT, as the musician does to Xiao Hong, intended to keep Chinese society in a more traditional Confucian mode vis-à-vis the New Life Movement, (although this project did contain a few elements of modernization). In this sense, Xiao Hong's life may resonate with China's destiny.

Actually, in the episode in which she sings her "Song of the Four Seasons" in a tavern, Xiao Hong's relation with China becomes unambiguous: by a process of objectification, Xiao Hong becomes the incarnation of China. Her "Song of the Four Seasons" accompanies images from the past showing the war in northeast China, the loss of her hometown, and people roaming in distant areas—but the scenes are inserted into the present space-time. In Ma's statement, those images reveal that her subjectivity is "inter-subjective,"[89] and her vision "has a degree of omniscience and omnipresence beyond individual subjectivity;"[90] thus, she should be seen as a representative of Mother China. This sequence is crucial to study Xiao Hong's symbolic meaning and her relationship with the nation. However, it is suspect to describe her vision as having a degree of omnipresence. The flashback is made up of objective shots, including the scenes of wars and Xiao Hong's images. Considering the flashback part is a component of Xiao Hong's song, the entire episode may be interpreted as:

[89] Ibid., 103.

[90] Ibid.

Xiao Hong as a subject in the present space-time sees herself as an object in her own flashback. In this sense, Xiao Hong's subjectivity may, as Ma claims, be inter-subjective and have a degree of omniscience. However, considering the ownership of the POV in the present space-time, the function of the entire montage sequence may change. In the present space-time, Xiao Hong consciously escapes to directly face the camera and turns her eyes to focus on her hair (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Xiao Hong escapes to directly face the camera when she is singing

Her action leaves her away from occupying the POV in the flashback. In other words, the flashback scenes may be omniscient, but they do not belong to Xiao Hong. In addition, her face in close up makes her become the object in the present space-time from the audience's POV. Therefore, rather than obtaining a special subjectivity, in both the flashback and present space-time Xiao Hong is objectified. As an object, Xiao Hong leaves away from sharing the same position of the audience.

Indeed, Xiao Hong's objectification makes her become the incarnation of China. I use the term "incarnation" instead of "representative," since I hope to highlight that both Xiao Hong and China are recipients (objects) of national pains and crises, instead of witnesses

(subjects). National pain directly works on Xiao Hong's personal life as they do on China's territory. Using the first section of montage sequence in this flashback as an example.

7:14 Xiao Hong, with her back to the camera, is embroidering beside the window (Figure 5)

Figure 5. Xiao Hong is embroidering

7:26 A bomb is exploding in close up (Figure 6)

Figure 6. A bomb is exploding

7:28 Xiao Hong, with her back to the camera, hears something, stops embroidering, and goes to look out of the window (Figure 7)

Figure 7. Xiao Hong hears the noise outside

7:33 A series of scenes of a war (Figure 8)

Figure 8. Scenes of wars

The montage combines those irrelative scenes together and adds a subject-object relationship to them: the impersonal shots of wars and bombs become the objects of Xiao Hong's version. The whole montage depicts that it is Xiao Hong who is experiencing the pains of the war. Moreover, in the sound track, the lyrics "Suddenly, a blast of merciless beatings, which break up the mandarin ducks," which describe the separation of a couple,

accompanying with the images of wars and bomb create a montage, which intertwines a personal trauma (separation from her lover) with a national crisis (war). In other words, Xiao Hong's personal tragedy works as a metonymy of the traumatic national history, and she also becomes the direct recipient of the national crisis. In this sense, Xiao Hong becomes the incarnation of China.

As the incarnation of China, Xiao Hong's singing can be interpreted as the nation's call for the awakening of masculinity. On the surface, her performance of "The Wandering Song" depicts a love story: a girl sings a song for her lover. But the connotation behind the superficial theme refers to a strategic metaphor for patriotism. Two significant topics composed of four core elements reappear in the lyrics of this song: a homeless girl (personal pain) is calling for her lover's attention (masculinity), and she promises to be loyal (loyalty) to her lover forever (love). In addition to the four elements, the appearance of the actress makes the role Xiao Hong become more attractive. As a 1930s' critic indicated, "when she sings "The Wandering Song," and plays with a small handkerchief, how beautiful she is!"[91] Therefore the whole performance of the song portrays a girl, who uses her feminine charms, pain and loyalty to her lover as bait to attract men's attention for evoking a Freudian rescue fantasy. Considering Xiao Hong's symbolic function as the incarnation of China, the performance becomes a strategy, which makes patriotism appealing to male subjects. Accordingly, the filmmakers construct an allegory involving the audiences' engagement. They imperceptibly guide and educate the audience to fix their identities to male protagonists and furthermore defend and save China in the reality, as the male principals do to Xiao Hong

[91] Mao Chong, "Appreciation After Watching *Street Angel*," (Malu tianshi shipian guangan《馬路天使》試片觀感), Chinese Film (Zhongguo dianying 中國電影), No.8(1937): 2.

in the film. Subsequently, the filmmakers need to address the main issue: how to save China, or which road did China need to choose in order to survive?

2. Choice Between Modernity and Tradition

It may be considered a platitude that leftist films show the contrast between the city and the countryside. For instance, most of Cai Chusheng's films portray the beauty of the countryside and the corruption of city life. Sun Yu's films, like *Big Road* and *Wild Rose*, also imply that the girl in the city who came from the countryside is innocent and attractive. Breaking away from this cliché, Yuan's film offers an alternative angle that portrays the *underground* of the city, where life is semi-traditional and semi-modern. Unlike rural areas, the underground of the city has a closer connection to the city's modernity, which can centralize the contents of the film on discussing topics like modern, modernity and modernization. Based on the comparison between the city and its underground areas, Yuan constructs a social allegory to symbolize China's situation in the 1930s and also brings up the main issue of China choosing its own type of modernity over traditionalism and a completely Westernized modernity.

Different from modern city life, which is completely contemporized like the West, both traditional and modern elements coexist in the underground of the city. Ma Ning interprets the two processions in the peculiar wedding ceremony as showing "the social milieu of China as semi-feudal and semi-colonial state with divided foreign influences."[92] There is no doubt that the two processions hint at the foreign influence, but the term *semi-colonial* strongly implies the control of the colonized country by the colonial ruler. Although this term may help Ma develop his statement on radical characteristics of the leftist film movement, it is

[92] Ma, "The Textual and Critical Difference of Being Radical," 100.

hard to say in this sequence if the two processions are conveying this radical emotion. Even in the rest of the film, filmmakers seldom highlight semi-colonial features of Chinese society. In addition, the terms semi-colonial and semi-feudal—matching the CCP's ideological discourse in this period—may lead one back to the trap of the ideological approach. Considering these facts, I argue that instead of the term *semi-colonial*, using *semi-traditional* and *semi-modern*, which have no strong ideological color, are more suitable to describe not only the meaning of the film sequence but also its metaphorical subject—Chinese society.

As Ma indicates, in this sequence "camera displacement creates a series of mismatches such that the procession seems to continually crisscross its own path."[93] These mismatches result in "confusion and contradiction,"[94] which in Ma's interpretation, symbolizes the 1930s' Chinese situation. Furthermore, viewing the sequence as a whole, the mismatches are in a dynamic process and therefore obtain a metaphorical meaning to imply a possible choice about the future road of China. The mismatches appear repeatedly in the shots of the Chinese procession. The montage displaying the movements of the Chinese procession to the left or right side of the screen forms an illusion that this procession is repeatedly crisscrossing its own path, an allegory symbolizing China's similar situation. In the middle of the sequence, two shots—one showing the Chinese procession moving to the left and the other showing the Western procession moving to the right—imply a meeting between China and the West. After this meeting, the mismatches disappear. Instead, the Western procession melds into the Chinese one. Without hesitation, the mixed procession moves forward. Considering the general meaning of *modern* as progressive and *traditional* as backward in a Chinese context, the movement of the procession implies the director's attitude about the future of China—

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

that China should at least accept the influence of modernization. As the story unfolds, the filmmakers use the behavior of the protagonists to affirm their inclination towards modernity.

Although the boundary between the city and its underworld—obstructing interaction between the two worlds—is explicitly revealed in the image, the protagonists living in the underground of the city still try their best to enter the modern city. In the sequence when Xiao Hong goes to Xiao Chen and his sworn brother Lao Wang's house, they find a newspaper advertisement about a dance hall, and all three decide to secretly explore this exotic world. Their first attempt fails, however, because of Xiao Yun's obstruction. Here, Yuan shows his different attitude towards a Western modern symbol—the dance hall—rather than another leftist icon, Cai Chusheng. According to Pickowicz's study, the dance in Cai's films is a symbol that "is presented as a microcosm of Western civilization … is transparently corrupt, decadent and thoroughly alien to Chinese values."[95] However, in *Street Angel,* Yuan seemingly re-evaluates the cultural meaning of this modern place. At least, he replaces Cai's severe blame for this space. One may interpret this nonconformity as follows: thanks to Xiao Yun's obstruction, the protagonists can be prevented from the Western "spiritual pollution."[96] However, this reason fails to explain the protagonists' persistent efforts to be close to the modern city.

Xiao Chen and Lao Wang finally enter the modern city, hoping to find help from a lawyer. They fail once again and then return back to the city's underworld due to their financial shortage. There is no doubt that in their first contact with the city, its modernity, convenience and comfort shock them. On the other hand, the darkness of the modern city,

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[95] Pickowicz, *China on Film,* 49.

[96] Ibid., 44.

like the apathy and materialism also make them feel disappointed. After they discover just how ineffective the modern legal system really is, they decide to escape from the control of Xiao Hong's adoptive father—or the feudal power. It's interesting that after they do escape from the control of feudal power, the image of skyscrapers—a symbol of modernity—appears outside their window in the new house (Figure 9).

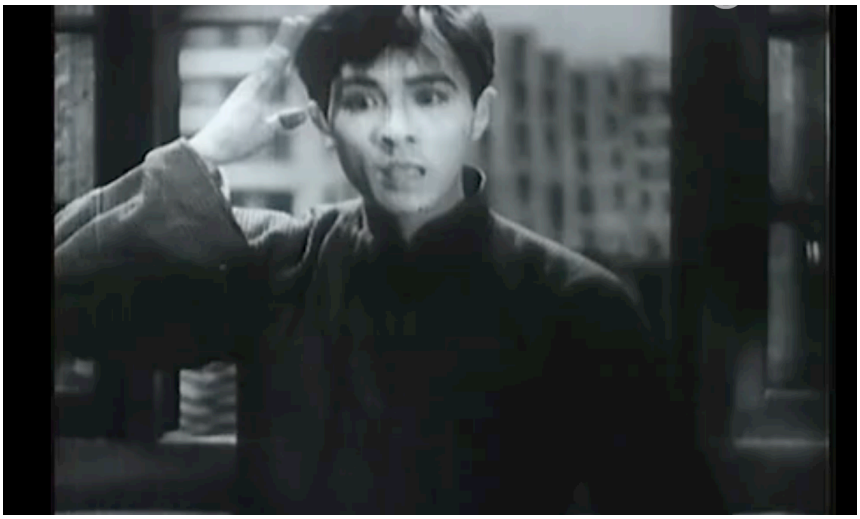

Figure 9. The image of skyscrapers outside the winder

Although in the previous scenes many shots show the youths moving in front of the window, one never sees the skyscrapers. The appearance of the skyscrapers suggests that the protagonists are moving to a place closer to the city, even though they also feel upset by their first contact with the modern city in the law office. Although the ending sequence of the film, which revisits the boundary between the city and its underworld, implies the difficulty the youths face entering the city because of their impoverishment, it's apparent that these youths have a strong desire to enter the city to become urban dwellers.

Furthermore, after the protagonists move closer to the city, Xiao Hong's appearance begins to change. Before they flee, Xiao Hong is in cheongsam and wearing her hair in a pair of braids, a traditional style for Chinese girls. However, after they get closer to the city, Xiao

Chen's friend helps Xiao Hong change her hairstyle to a more fashionable style of short, curly hair—similar to the style worn by city girls. Considering her symbolic meaning, Xiao Hong's active transformation becomes a metaphor that implies that after saving China (Xiao Hong) from the control of the feudal power (the musician), the Chinese people (Xiao Chen and his friends) need to modernize it. As with the Western-style curly hair, the modernization of China should also refer to Western modernity. This does not mean, however, that China should completely Westernize, as the May Fourth elites claimed in the 1920s. As Xiao Hong's new style reveals, filmmakers seemingly propose that China needs to absorb beneficial elements from both traditional and Western modern cultures. Therefore through the behavior and actions of those protagonists in the film, the audience who shares the same position as the male protagonists imperceptibly get an education about the direction of their future life: They needed to promote China to move forward and find an alternative road to modernize it.

3. How to Be A Modern Subject

In addition to presenting the idea that China needs to find a solution to its national crisis by shifting to modernity, filmmakers also educate the masses on how to live as a modern subject in the new modern life by the behavior of the protagonists. In the beginning of the film, Yuan appropriates a series of montage from his other film *Scenes of City Life* (*Dushi fengguang* 都市风光, 1935). The sequence lasting for two minutes depicts scenes of modern Shanghai, an attractive metropolis filled with Western modern elements such as skyscrapers, cars, dance halls, foreign restaurants, English words, banks, and money. Besides being an exotic scene, this sequence also tries to educate the audience on how to live in a modern society. Guo-Juin Hong indicates that in 1930s' Shanghai, intellectuals attempted this

through various ways, such as using the modern time to "tell a story of becoming a modern subject."[97] Yuan also uses this clip to achieve the same goal. The time of a whole day in the city is divided into three parts: starlit nighttime, daytime, and carnival evening. For the nighttime scenes, the screens are filled with restaurant and hotel signs, suggesting people need to be sleeping and resting at this period of time. Most of the signs are written in both Chinese and English, and they suggest a global background with lines like "Indian curry" and "Far East." Subsequent scenes show flying pigeons, daytime stars, friends walking in a park, people going to work, and people participating in religious activities—which clearly refers to foreign religions. A close-up of a clock reveals that the day in the city culminates at around 8:30 p.m. with parties in magnificent dance halls. This montage sequence conveys the idea that if audiences hope to live the modern life and be modern subjects, and then they need to plan their days according to this modern rhythm (Figure 10).

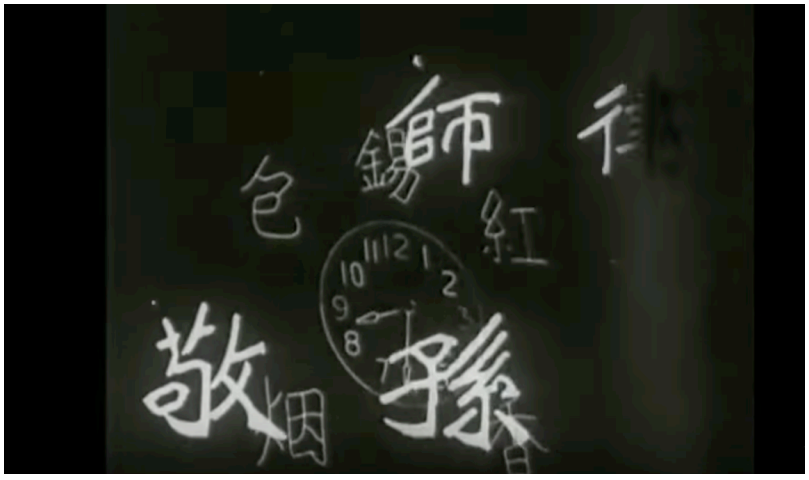

Figure 10. Modern rhythm

The training on this modern rhythm is common in other leftist films. In Zhang Shichuan's *The Tenderness Market*, the clock, which shows 6:05 pm repeatedly appears in

[97] Guo-Juin Hong, "Framing Time: New Women and the Cinematic Representation of Colonial Modernity in 1930s Shanghai," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, No. 3, 15(2007): 554.

the close-up to mark the time when people come off duty. In *Crossroads*, Ms. Yang finishes work at about 6:00 pm. In Ying Yunwei's *Plunder of Peach and Plum*, since the female protagonist Li Lilin does not come back home at about 5:50 pm, her husband begins to be worried. The clock in close shot and the worrying of her husband imply that in generally, the respectable women with family should go home before this time (around 5:50 pm), which may be a social consensus. Considering the party time from 8:30 pm shown in the clip of *Scenes of City life*, these modern times, which are repeatedly emphasized in different films, construct a living schedule to educate the masses how to live in modern city.

In addition to the modern rhythm, two other strategies—newspapers and military—also are regarded as necessary means, which should be obtained by a modern subject. According to Ma Ning, the newspaper headlines shown in the film can be interpreted as "journalistic discourse,"[98] which represents "Chinese bourgeoisie, [because of its] emphasis on individual rights and supremacy of law."[99] In this film, however, the information published in the newspaper is always either incomplete or inaccurate. Ma indicates that the incomplete information reveals that "leftist filmmakers…do not necessarily regard newspaper headlines as a reliable source of information."[100] Even though the newspaper always shows incomplete information, an interesting phenomenon is: the protagonists still rely on newspapers to find solutions for their living issues after they fail so many times.

Given this fact, I argue that in *Street Angel*, newspapers have the significant function of offering reliable information and educating ordinary people on how to live in the modern

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[98] Ma, "The Textual and Critical Difference of Being Radical," 103.

[99] Ibid.

[100] Ibid., 105–106.

world. First, the information offered by the newspaper headlines is various and comprehensive. They include: social problems, such as prostitution issues; national crises, like the Sino-Japanese war in northeastern China; and entertainment advertisements, like the poster for the leftist film, *Life and Death* (*Shengsi tongxin* 生死同心, dir. Ying Yunwei,1936). The inaccuracy of the information shown in the close-up can be interpreted as an intended strategy to avoid censorship. Although they fail several times relying on the methods offered on the newspapers, they still use the way which they find on the newspaper successfully saved Xiao Hong from her tragic life. In addition, Lao Wang's compulsion to search for solutions in the newspaper when he encounters any problem is portrayed as a model for the audience. Lao Wang's aggressive and repetitive actions (Figure 11) underscore that if the masses hope to be close to the modern city as Lao Wang is, then they should get accustomed to reading newspapers and relying on the various types of information offered by newspapers to solve their real-life personal problems.

Figure 11. Finding ways on newspapers

Another way to enter into the modern society is the military. In the film, Xiao Chen and his sworn brothers perform a shadow play for Xiao Hong in order to reassure her that she will be able to escape. The shadow play performance (Figure 12) hints at the uprisings of the

masses, more reflective of the CCP's ideology. Considering the metaphorical meaning of Xiao Hong, this performance can be interpreted as propaganda that if the ordinary Chinese people want to defend the nation-state, they should get together to appeal to the military and the revolutionary masses. However, according to Ma, this performance also can be appropriated into the KMT's ideology as the "reenactment of the revolution of the Northern Expedition."[101] This example reaffirms that leftist films do have the characteristic of equivocality. As a cultural event, leftist film texts are open to interpretations from the political perspective.

Figure 12. Shadow play performance

B. Case II: Big Road

Now I turn my eyes to Sun Yu's *Big Road* to analyze the dynamic discussion and different presentation forms. In this film, Sun Yu portrays a story about six young men--Jin Ge and his friends. Because of the abuse they receive from the capitalists in the city, they move to the countryside to join in a national road-building project, which will be used to

[101] Ibid., 106.

support the KMT's fight against their enemies. In the beautiful hinterland, they make friends with two special girls—Mo Li, a vagrant singer of the flower drum song, and Ding Xiang, the daughter of the boss in a small tavern. But their life in the rural area is not as peaceful as they think. Enemies offer a bribe to the local leader, Assistant Hu, in order to obstruct the road-building project. Since Jin and his friends refuse Hu's bribe and insist on finishing the road, Hu imprisons them. With the help of the two girls, other road workers and a general, the six young men are rescued. When the road is almost done, the enemies suddenly begin to attack the construction site attempting to destroy the new road. The six young men and Mo Li die in the attack, but the road is finally completed.

1. Another Narrative Strategy to Praise Urbanization

On the surface, this film may be interpreted as an exception to my above statement about people staying in the modern city instead of going to the countryside. For instance the protagonists claim, "Go to the countryside! Do not stay and work in the city where you are controlled by others! I agree." All of the protagonists go to the countryside. It is clear that the filmmakers try to highlight the beauty and harmony of the countryside. However, I argue that this film still cannot be seen as an exception. On the contrary, it can also be seen as following my statement that people reject the notion of going back to tradition. As director Sun Yu indicated, those young men find that "building roads for imperialists will strengthen their base undoubtedly like sharpening knives for [their] enemies. Then they leave the city and go to build a road with a military function in the hinterland. [They try to] destroy the obstacles resulting from feudal power and then create a new road for us [i.e., the Chinese people]."[102] As Sun stated, that Jin Ge and his friends journey to the countryside to build a road is a

strategic way to destroy the traditional and feudal obstacles. In the "Trailbreaker Song", the mountains—the obstacles of the road—are described as being composed of "the fossils with the history of several million years." Then the mountain as an obstacle becomes a visual symbol of tradition, which has a long history but has become stiff, outdated, and furthermore hindered the development of China. Therefore, the intention of the workers described in the lyrics that "triggering the explosive buried underground… and bombing the mountains" achieves a metaphoric function, which symbolizes destroying the feudal power. In this sense, the whole song clearly conveys the negative attitude towards tradition and feudal power.

In fact, the filmmakers still insist on their positive attitude toward constructing a Chinese modernity. Although those male protagonists struggle with serious social issues in the modern city like unemployment and capitalist exploitation, it does not mean that they are not satisfied with modernization. On the contrary, their behavior of building a road in the rural areas is a way to spread urbanization. They bring the symbols of modernity—machinery, for example—into the countryside. As the close-up map (Figure 13) reveals, China has developed roads nationwide, suggesting a new connection being forged between the countryside and the city.

[102] Sun Yun, "The Intention to Produce Big Road," (Shezhi Dalu de dongji 攝製《大路》的動機), *Time Film* (Shidai dianying 時代電影), No. 6(1934): 13.

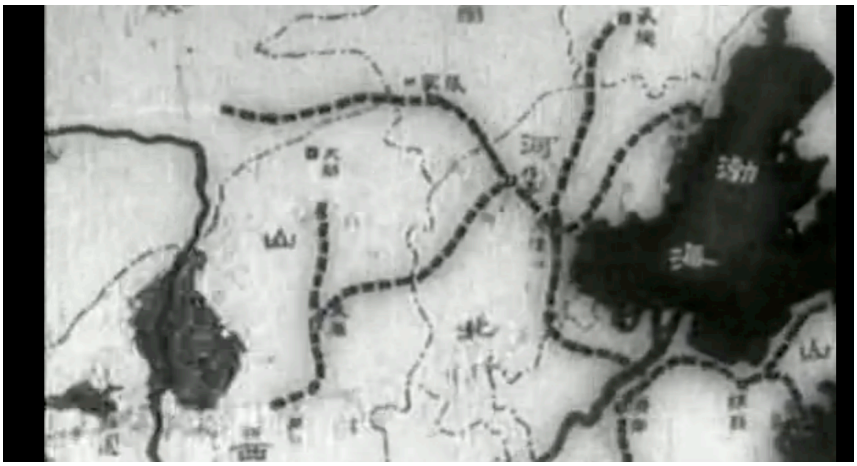

Figure 13. Map of road building project

Besides the filmmakers, ordinary audiences in the 1930s also agreed on the form of modernization shown in the film. After watching it, the intellectual Liu Yuying in the 1930s indicated that this film was "a great film, which proposes a road-building movement."[103] He believed that road building—a crucial project of modernization—was beneficial to the society and the construction of a New China. He also encouraged more and more filmmakers to produce films like this one.[104] Therefore, Sun Yu's *Big Road* and Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel* both fit in the same frame: exposing the social darkness and looking for an alternative modernity.

2. Portrayals and Functions of Mo Li: A Transcendent Character

But as I have explained in the previous chapter, the leftist film group also tolerated various discourses in the same frame. Many scholars have studied the gender relationship and the functions of males and females in *Big Road*. In Laikwan Pang's interpretation, Sun's film,

[103] Liu Yuying, "After Watching *Big Road*," (Kanle Dalu zhihou 看了《大路》之後), *Road Monthly*, (Daolu yuekan 道路月刊), No. 2, 46(1935): 127.

[104] Ibid.

similar to Hollywood films, "portray[s] the growth of an individual man [i.e., Jin Ge]."[105] In the episode in which Mo Li and Ding Xian see those men bathing in the river and they share and eat two watermelons together, Pang appropriates the meaning of a traditional term *pogua* (breaking the watermelon), which contains a sexual implication between men and women, and indicates that the female characters, especially Mo Li, "represent less female desire and viewing power that the necessary components in men's maturation processes."[106] Relying on Pang's theory, the behavior of eating watermelons functions as a ritual, which expresses that Jin Ge and his male friends have grown up as mature male subjects. But those male principals, who have finished their coming-of-age ritual, in the subsequent plots are imprisoned, which symbolizes the restriction of their masculinity, and they cannot save themselves. Again, it is women who help them. In this sense, the ritual of coming-to-age seemingly has not finished. And the men's coming-of-age process is constantly delayed. Until the end when all the male protagonists die, there is no detail to prove that they finish their maturation process. They just continue their job to build the road as they always did before the *pogua* ritual. Therefore, we need to reconsider the real relationship between the male and female characters and their particular functions.

I argue that unlike those heroic stories in Hollywood films, Sun's *Big Road* cannot be interpreted as a film portraying male subjectivity. Instead, men are objectified in this film. A peculiar phenomenon in this film is that male characters seldom possess the POV. Mostly, their charming faces and strong bodies are exhibited in close-up or medium shots. Undoubtedly, those images shock the audience and directly convey Sun Yu's idea about

[105] Pang, *Building A New China in Cinema*, 103.

[106] Ibid.

"[people] have healthy bodies and then will have healthy thoughts."[107] At the same time, their faces in close-up, as happens with the beautiful female face in Hollywood films, reduce those men to being objects. In the sequence when Mo Li states the features of every male character, the montage, in which the first shot shows Mo Li talking to Ding Xian, and then the following shot is the face of the man who is being talked about, makes those men become objects in Mo Li and Ding Xiang's views. In this sense, the film, instead of portraying the maturation process of a male hero, depicts a series of Chinese male images. Every male character represents a particular type of Chinese man in reality. The series of Chinese male images not only includes a heroic leader as Jin Ge, but also embrace small figures, who have many shortcomings like Zhang Da and Xiao Liuzi. In this sense, those male characters function as exhibits (objects) representing strong and healthy masculinity, even though they may have more or less shortcomings.

In Yuan's film, the female protagonist is an object and functions as the incarnation of China. In Sun's film, however, I argue that the female protagonist Mo Li obtains a degree of subjectivity. In both of the two films, a similar episode in which the female principal sings a song for the audience appears. Unlike Xiao Hong, Mo Li in a similar episode obtains the POV. In the present space-time, Mo Li directly faces the camera and sings her flower drum song. Her facial expression conveys the implication that she is looking at the audience (Figure 14). The following scene then turns to documentary shots of famine, flood and refugees. Since Mo Li's image never appears, those documentary scenes become impersonal. The film editing transforms the impersonal scenes into objects from Mo Li's POV.

[107] Sun Yu, "After Directing Wild Rose," (Daoyan Ye meigui zhihou 導演《野玫瑰》之後), first published in *Film Art* (dianying yishu 電影藝術) No. 1(1932), in *Leftist Film Movement*, 345.

Figure 14. Mo Li is singing facing to the camera

But Mo Li may not be the protagonist of those disasters in the documentary shots. The lyrics of her song re-confirms that the disasters portrayed in the song are not her personal story. Mo Li, in the lyrics, is portrayed as a singer who is leaving Fengyang, where there are continuous disasters. And Fengyang becomes a metonymy of China, which was also suffering in various catastrophes in the 1930s. But for Mo Li, she does not really experience those disasters. While others have to sell children for the sake of survival, she sings, "I do not have sons to sell. I take my flower drum and go to other places." In this sense, Mo Li becomes a witness and a narrator seeing the occurrence of national crises. Accordingly, Mo Li obtains a degree of subjectivity unlike Yuan's Xiao Hong. Compared with other characters, Mo Li, as the narrator, her POV is omnipresent in this sequence. Her omnipresence gives her an opportunity to have a degree of transcendence.

In addition to her omnipresence, her transcendence also shows in her idealization. Many film critics in the 1930s mentioned the portrayal of the character Mo Li, claiming it was not realistic and made her as an idealized character.[108] A critic even mentioned in 1937, "that Li Lili [i.e., the actress who portrays Mo Li] is so flirtatious, canny and brave, that is

unbelievable."[109] Moreover, this character in some sense also crosses the gender boundary. It is hard to view Mo Li as an ordinary girl, especially when compared with Ding Xiang. Like Xiao Hong in *Street Angel*, Ding Xiang's enchantment also mainly centers on her beautiful appearance, innocent heart, and dulcet song. And both girls are so weak that when she faces men's molestation, she can do nothing but wait for others to help. But Mo Li is different, in that she not only shares some of the similar female enchantments as Ding Xiang, but she also embraces some of the characteristics beyond her gender. Her appearance is also beautiful and attractive. She also knows clearly how to use her enchantment as a powerful tool to save herself and others. On the other hand, unlike Ding Xiang's weakness and shyness, Mo Li is unembarrassed and comfortable when she sees men's naked bodies. In some sense, she is even more masculine than the men in the film. She leads the workers to save the six imprisoned men and strategically uses her female enchantments to approach Assistant Hu and obtains the proof of his guilt. She is so strong and powerful that she takes Lao Zhang's place in the men's road building team after Lao Zhang dies. It is not clear that whether or not the filmmakers are trying to reveal a homosexual overtone behind Ding Xiang and Mo Li's relationship. At least, their intimate behavior, like touching one another's bodies, hugging and kissing, between the two girls blurs Mo Li's gender boundary. Her action when she picks up Ding Xiang like a man holding his lover adds a strong sense of masculinity to this

[108] Liu Yuying, "After Watching *Big Road*," 127.

[109] B Shang, "Reviewing *Big Road*," (Ping *Dalu* 評《大路》), *Annuals of Film* (Yingxi nianjian 影戲年鑑), 1934, 127.

character. In this sense, Mo Li, beyond the boundary of gender, becomes a character who embraces the virtues of both men and women.[110]

The transcendence of Mo Li contributes to the construction of an ideal self for the audience. Her transcendent gender is accessible for both male and female audiences to fix their identities. Therefore, the film, rather than portraying the development of a male hero, constructs an allegory centering on Mo Li. Her words, which reveal her attitude towards the male protagonists, like "I love all of them," and her actions, like rescuing the men and partaking in their job, become metaphors, which conveys the filmmakers' purpose to motivate the masses to imitate Mo Li's behavior—finding the beauty of men, loving them, rescuing them, releasing their restricted masculinity, and joining in their job to defend the nation. The masses should follow Mo Li in transforming their position from witnesses to participants.

The final scene, which shows Jin Ge clasping Mo Li's hand (Figure 15) before dying in some sense functions as a ritual, which confirms that Mo Li has successfully transformed from a witness into a participant. If Mo Li is a simple ordinary girl, it may be possible to claim an implication about the love behind the two principals' behavior of holding hands. However, if one considers Mo Li's transcendent gender, the meaning behind this behavior may change. In fact, Jin Ge also struggles to hold hands with his other male friends (Figure 16). It is hard to figure out the difference between Jin Ge's action towards his male friends and towards Mo Li, who has a transcendent gender.

[110] In Cai Chusheng's *New Women*, the female worker Aying also obtains the sense of masculinity. But Mo Li is still different from Aying, since Mo Li keeps her female enchantments and she can use her enchantments to solve problems. On the contrary, Aying 's female characteristics are completely cut off. The different portrayals and imaginations about new women reveal the coexistence of various discourses in leftist film texts.

Figure 15. Jin Ge holds Mo Li's hand

Figure 16. Jin Ge holds his male friend's hand

But this action does have a symbolic meaning. Although the six male principals are depicted as objects, they are also active participants in the national modernization. As the leader of the road-building team, Jin Ge's action to clasp Mo Li's hand as he does with other friends undoubtedly expresses his acknowledgement that Mo Li has become a comrade of the six men. It confirms the transformation of Mo Li's position from a witness to a participant in a career, which as intellectual Liu Yuying indicated, relates to Chinese people's livelihood and the national survival. Therefore, a significant function of the film is to show how a subject

transforms from a witness into a participant. In fact, the audience has already received their education. Liu Yuying proposed that more and more experts in the transportation field should pay attention to this topic [i.e., road-building]. He also mentioned that intellectuals in the fields of politics and economics also should take part in this road-building movement. Liu's proposal indeed shared the similar theme with the film, which appeals to the masses to transform from witnesses into participants in the process of modernization.

In conclusion, Yuan and Sun's films reveal the existence of a framework in the leftist film practice. The main content of the two films relates to social issues in either the countryside or the urban city. Although the filmmakers did not completely satisfy either of the two areas, they still showed their inclination to the "modern" and modernization. But this modernization is differentiated from the Western one. It is an alternative modernity based on personal evaluations of elements from both Chinese traditions and Western modernity. In the same framework—exposing social darkness and looking for an alternative modernity, the public space worked very well to influence intellectuals to tolerate diverse discussions. Filmmakers could employ various cinematic strategies to create their particular allegories to educate the masses how to be modern subjects. Therefore, the female object Xiao Hong, who is waiting for men's rescue in Yuan's film, works as a stimulant to inspire the awakening of Chinese masculinity. On the contrary, in Sun's film, the female protagonist Mo Li achieves a transcendent subjectivity and becomes a model subject to encourage the audience to transform from witness to participant. Those different cinematic forms and cultural attitudes made the leftist film movement become more complex, and at the same time more colorful.

V. After *Daybreak*: Postscript and Conclusion

In the previous chapters, I explain the general background of the 1930s' Chinese film field. Based on a dialogical transcendence, the film field develops its public space, in which intellectuals with different attitudes towards social issues could take part in public discussion and negotiation. In fact, according to Zhiwei Xiao, the KMT had already confirmed relatively strict film censorship in the 1930s, which was powerful and in some sense could influence the foreign concessions' film release and production.[111] Although the KMT's political leaders hoped to use film censorship to control public discourses, the public space in the film field still worked very well and left room for diverse discourses to negotiate. Unfortunately, this attempt was interrupted by the Japanese invasion. After 1937, when the Japanese military occupied Shanghai, most of the participants fled. As a result, the negotiation among various discourses and the public space in the film and printing press fields were suspended. In fact, in the early age of post-1949, the Communist Party once tried to reopen the public space for people to discuss the sustainable future. However, more and more, clear and exclusive nationalism and the single-party system emphasizing absolutism clearly defined the difference between self and others, which broke off the shared circulatory history. Therefore, the public space and dialogical transcendence disappeared.

As a component of the 1930s film practice, the leftist film movement shared the same ability to tolerate alien discourses. On the other hand, the leftist film movement had its own distinctiveness. It is tolerance to diverse discourses based on a general frame, including two main principles: exposing social darkness and looking for an alternative modernity. In this frame, film texts could show dynamic opinions to the definitions of the suitable modernity

[111] Zhiwei Xiao, "Film Censorship in China (1927-1937)", PhD Dissertation, 1994.

for China and the ways to modernize China. Moreover, in the 1930s, the leftist film movement was in a process of canonization. It means filmmakers might actively join in this movement. At the same time, some film texts, which mostly could fit in this frame, also were categorized as leftist films, even though the filmmakers did not intend to take part in. Even though some CCP members participated in this film movement and their film reviews were in some sense powerful to change some filmmakers' political stance, one still needs to pay attention to the differences between the 1930s leftist film movement, the 1930s' CCP and the CCP as the ruling party in post-1949. As a tolerant cultural phenomenon, leftist film texts absorbed influence from cultures of others and open to interpretation in different angels. The ideology of the 1930s' CCP was not the single discourse, even not the central one.

But it is not refutable that the so-called alternative road or alternative modernity which was being looked for by those participants in the leftist film group left room for the CCP's ideology—Chinese Marxism, since in the 1930s' background, Chinese Marxism could also be seen as an alternative road. In addition to the similar "alternative" characteristic, all the means which were employed to tolerate various discourse, like the cinematic strategies including open-ending, metaphors and allegories, the ambiguous solutions towards social issues, and the exposure of social darkness, which obtain an overtone of the discontented attitude towards the KMT's ruling, gave the CCP opportunities to add their ideological discourse on those film texts. After 1949, the People's Republic of China (PRC) legalized only a small group that was guided by the CCP or the pro-CCP portions of the 1930s leftist film branch as the progressives and ignored and even blamed other film branches and discourses in the same period as wrong and backward. In this sense, it is reasonable that scholars always encounter many contradictions and difficulties when they study this

historical movement based on the lists defined by the CCP after 1949. For instance, as my analysis on Fei Mu and Wu Yonggang's cases, the CCP's definition of the 1930s' leftist film movement is futile to explain those peculiar examples. In addition, in order to strengthen the close connection between the leadership of the CCP and the film movement, the interpretations and reviews of those 1930s' film texts are politicalized in the post-1949 period. In other words, the CCP's official explanations of those films guide and restrict discourses in a political direction, which is beneficial to the CCP's ideology. Therefore, the diversity and richness of the 1930s film texts are reduced. In this sense, one needs to clarify that the 1930s leftist film movement actually had a wider scope and richer cultural meanings than the leftist film movement defined by the CCP after the 1949.

The CCP's reduction of the complexity of history in the cultural field in the period of pre-1949, actually, leaves many blanks. Although the 1930s film movement was interrupted by wars and had not had a winner-loser result, the official historical book of the PRC—Cheng Jihua's *The Development History of Chinese Film*—implied and legalized the success of the leftist film branch. Actually, this historical statement leaves a blank in the period from 1937 to 1949, when Japan and the KMT occupied China. In order to make the whole history, which establishes the CCP's discourse as the unique truth, be a complete and continuous entity, the CCP employs patriotism as an effective strategy. They treat films without influence from the CCP as non-Chinese films and simply summarize the period from 1937–1949, when the CCP had no ability to support enough film production, as a period of hibernation. It means, motivated by patriotism, Chinese filmmakers refused to follow others' orders to produce non-Chinese films, but they were still there and waited for a chance to make a contribution to developing Chinese films. Those filmmakers' existence and the ambiguous concepts of *patriotism* and *China* helped to hide ruptures and build an illusion of

the continuity of the CCP's history. As a result, the dialogical transcendence germinated in the 1930s and its significant influence and benefits were ignored and forgotten.

At the same time, the new exclusive nationalism fueled Chinese people to compete with others. Although from a political and ideological perspective, the CCP is concerned with Western spiritual pollution, in other aspects, Western-style industrial capitalism attracted people's attention and occupied a powerful position. Even in the Cultural Revolution, under the surface of anti-West, most of the national projects tried to industrialize China. In a sense, competition led China to become imperceptibly Westernized, and the Open Door Policy may just have made an existing tendency of Westernization public and rapidly pushed it forward.

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Appendix

Filmography

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2. *Share the Burden of the National Crisis* (*Gongfu guonan* 共赴國難) Dir. Sun Yu, 1932.
3. *Conscienceless* (*Rendao* 人道) Dir. Bu Wancang, 1932.
4. *Pink Dream* (*Fenhongse de meng* 粉紅色的夢) Dir. Cai Chusheng, 1932.
5. *Daybreak* (*Tianming* 天明) Dir. Sun Yu, 1933.
6. *The Little Toy* (*Xiao wanyi* 小玩意) Dir. Sun Yu, 1933.
7. *Night in the City* (*Chengshi zhiye* 城市之夜) Dir. Fei Mu, 1933.
8. *Spring Silkworms* (*Chuncan* 春蠶) Dir. Cheng Bugao, 1933.
9. *Torrent* (*Kuangliu* 狂流) Dir. Cheng Bugao, 1933.
10. *Tenderness Market* (*Zhifen shichang* 脂粉市場) Dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1933.
11. *Shanghai 24 Hours* (*Shanghai ershisi xiaoshi* 上海二十四小時) Dir. Shen Xiling, 1933.
12. *Life* (*Rensheng*, 人生) Dir. Fei Mu, 1934.
13. . *A Sea of Fragrant Snow* (*Xiangxuehai* 香雪海) Dir. Fei Mu, 1934.
14. *Queen of Sports* (*Tiyu huanghou* 體育皇后) Dir. Sun Yu, 1934.
15. *Big Road* (*Dalu* 大路) Dir. Sun Yu, 1934.
16. *Goddess* (*Shennü* 神女) Dir. Wu Yonggang, 1934.

17. *New Women* (*Xin nüxing* 新女性) Dir. Cai Chusheng, 1934.

18. *Song of the Fisherman* (Yuguang qu 漁光曲) Dir. Cai Chusheng, 1934.

19. *Plunder of Peach and Plum* (*Taoli jie* 桃李劫) Dir. Ying Yunwei, 1934.

20. *National Customs* (*Guofeng* 國風) Dir. Luo Mingyou and Zhu Shilin, 1935.

21. *A Little Angel* (*Xiao tianshi* 小天使) Dir. Wu Yonggang, 1935.

22. *A Song of China* (*Tianlun* 天輪) Dir. Fei Mu, 1935.

23. *Children of Trouble Time* (*Fengyun ernü* 風雲兒女) Dir. Xu Xingzhi, 1935.

24. *Scenes of City Life* (*Dushi fengguang* 都市风光) Dir. Yuan Muzhi, 1935.

25. *Waves Washing the Sand* (*Langtaosha* 浪淘沙) Dir. Wu Yonggang, 1936.

26. *A Lamb Astray* (*Mitu de gaoyang* 迷途的羔羊) Dir. Cai Chusheng, 1936.

27. *The Wolf Hill* (*Langshan diexue ji* 狼山喋血記) Dir. Fei Mu, 1936.

28. *Tomboy* (*Huashen guniang* 化身姑娘) Dir. Fang Peilin, 1936.

29. *Map of Treasures* (*Baibao tu* 百寶圖) Dir. Yue Feng, 1936.

30. *Murder in the Wedding* (*Xinhun da xue'an* 新婚大血案) Dir. Wang Cilong, 1936.

31. *Life and Death* (*Shengsi tongxin* 生死同心) Dir. Ying Yunwei, 1936.

32. *A Mystical Flower* (*Shenmi zhihua* 神秘之花) Dir. Yue Feng, 1937.

33. *Crossroads* (*Shizi jietou* 十字街頭) Dir. Shen Xiling, 1937.

34. *Street Angel* (*Malu tianshi* 馬路天使) Dir. Yuan Muzhi, 1937.