



Research on the Formation and Transformation of Cinema Public Sphere in Shanghai, 1890s-1930s

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博士論文

Research on the Formation and Transformation of Cinema

Public Sphere in Shanghai, 1890s-1930s

(1890年代～1930年代上海における映画公共圏の形成および
変遷)

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Introduction

1. Thema and Chapter Summary

In the book *Histoire Du Cinéma Mondial: Des Origines À Nos Jours*, Georges Sadoul presents the Lumiere brothers' perspective on film history, wherein the film is viewed as a device for visual sharing among an unspecified majority of people gathered in the same place through the enlarged image projected on the screen¹. From this historical view, the film has been closely associated with such words as “plural”, “publicity” and “public space” since its birth. Shortly after the Lumière brothers' first public screening of a film on December 28, 1895, in the underground of a Parisian café, cinema made its way to Shanghai, China. Early Shanghai cinema, which has a significant place in the history of cinema, has numerous surprising public screenings, such as the open-air cinema of the 1930s.

Despite the decline of mobile open-air film projection in metropolitan areas with the rise of professional cinemas, the format was still widely used in many places. For example, the mobile film projection team, Xinan Tour Group, founded in 1935, covered 22 provinces and cities across the country and received a tremendous social response (Sun 57). From the beginning of the screenings, huge crowds gathered from all directions, almost like a kind of migration. On average, at least 40,000 people attended each film showing. Some people who came from 30 or even 50 kilometers away rode horses and donkeys, while ox carts were parked one after another. Girls in festive costumes sat on ox cars, drinking tea and waiting anxiously for darkness. The films were shown even in the distant grasslands of Inner Mongolia, where curious herdsman finally learned what the so-called “electricity” was (Sun 63). The mobile film projection team tirelessly spread the new Shanghai film culture and modern urban culture, giving people across the country a vague sense of modernity of Western origin.

Closer scrutiny, however, would reveal far more complex implications of the open-air film projection. It was not merely about the rabble's rush to modern forms of entertainment, but a provocative and self-conscious “enlightenment event”. If some poor people could not afford to buy tickets, the screening team would teach them to write and read the words “China” and “Anti-

¹ See Sadoul.

Japanese”, which became their tickets to the movie. Some children could watch films as long as they could sing a song named “Defeat Japan and save China” or shout “Down with Japanese imperialism” (Sun 62-63). The projection team also showed a large number of war documentaries and newsreels on the battlefield and the front lines. Soldiers and ordinary people enjoyed films with great enthusiasm. Even though they were just three or five kilometers away from the enemy, where the fighting was intense, the local soldiers and people still insisted on another day’s screening. It was hard to tell whether the gunfire was coming from reality or the film, while the audience was still focusing on every image and every word of dialogue, and the projection team was laboring to teach people singing and writing at the entrance (F. Zhao 1).

The success of this dramatic enlightenment was achieved not only by the effort and collaboration of projectionists and filmmakers² but also by the spontaneous response or self-reflective acts from a combustible audience. The sensory and emotional impact of these screening sites, however, went far beyond the narrow definition of self-reflexivity—the modernist’s rational meditations on language and subjectivity—to offer an alternative practice of modernity and enlightenment. In other words, situated at the crossroads of modernity enlightenment, political propaganda, mass entertainment, war enthusiasm, and patriotism, the movie screening highlighted how the public was organized by cinema practices, with the central motif of the mass enlightenment in relation to the public exhibition. Such a public space of mass enlightenment is essentially the formation of the public sphere based on sensory entertainment rather than rational debate, rooted not only in the interactive social space of filmmakers and spectators but also in the interplay on and off the screen, the perception space between the fictional film world and lived experience. It goes beyond the classic modernist gesture of enlightenment and the Habermasian notion of the public sphere based on an enlightenment model of public discourse.

The open-air films, therefore, crystallize the central issues in Chinese film history that I will

² The Xinan Tour Group was not only the first mobile film projection team in the history of Chinese cinema but also the first anti-Japanese group for children and youth in China. Their slogan was “to promote anti-Japanese movement and fight for the victory of democratic China”. Another mobile projection team, the “National Anti-Enemy Association of the Chinese Film Industry” also stated: “we must make every film a powerful weapon of resistance and national salvation. Let it reach the army, factories, and the countryside and become a basic tool for educating the public.” (Guojia guangbo dianying dianshi zongjv dianying shiye guanlijv 165). In fact, the practice of open-air cinema had previously been highly promoted as “the road of Chinese film” by left-wing intellectuals who were keen on mass enlightenment. In keeping with the open-air film movement, they departed from the praise for high-quality, long-form narrative films and demanded films that were more accessible to all people in content and form, that is shorter and simpler, with more action and less dialogue. “Everything should be easy to understand and infectious, without the use of flashbacks, symbols, and other expressions that only intellectuals could understand” (W. Chen 1).

explore in this dissertation: the alternative experiences of modernity and publicity defined by the mass medium of cinema. I refer to them as “vernacular modernity” and “the proletarian public sphere”. The open-air film was more than a single episode in the history of the film industry, rather, mass enlightenment and its public sphere had been repeatedly staged or rehearsed in various forms by different forces in Shanghai film culture in previous decades. In other words, it was no coincidence—nor was it unprecedented—that the open-air film provided the general public with an integrated and effective way of experiencing ideas and emotions. My dissertation argues that the production and reception of early cinema and related cultural practices profoundly reflected changes in everyday life and consumer culture, in knowledge dissemination and enlightenment, and even in ways of engaging with social and political issues in early-20th-century China. This new sensory mechanism and behavioral model could be understood as practices of vernacular modernity that relied on sensorial evocation and re-emphasized the importance of experience. The accessibility and universality based on intuition reinvigorated people; thus, a public sphere emerged with particular modes of participation, discursive construction, and confrontational practices. Here, the public was allowed to strive for changes in their destiny and social status quo, which enabled them to resist and criticize tenaciously rather than succumbing to the dominant discourse and institutions.

This possibility of the film public sphere, at the same time, invites us to revisit the standard Chinese film historiography. Chinese film historians believed that in the 1930s the development of left-wing cinema radically transformed cinema from a frivolous commercial “money-making machine” and a simple display of spectacles and vulgar entertainment props into a serious art of social criticism that took responsibility of enlightening and educating the audience, thus contributing to the cause of revolution and liberation³. However, even just a glimpse of the open-air film screenings reveals that the evolutionary conception of history based on the dichotomy of left-wing versus non-left-wing cinema is not appropriate. Mass enlightenment was not achieved entirely through refined culture (including its contemplative self-reflexive critique); sensory entertainment and simple and direct emotional mobilization were, in fact, ubiquitous and essential. These ideologically constructed historical narratives reduce the meaning of early Shanghai cinema and non-left cinema to negativity and decadence, ignoring their complex connotations and possibilities.

The overwhelming ideological bias in film studies needs to be qualified in order to break down

³ See Cheng Jihua et al.

the strict distinction between left-wing films and other films, as well as to update the evaluation of both. This involves more issues related to rewriting the history of cinema that will be discussed in this dissertation. The history of cinema that I would like to rewrite, therefore, is a history outside or parallel to the orthodox Shanghai film history. It is emphatically about the search for both audiences of film culture and subjects of the proletarian public sphere and about how they shaped modern experiences and public practices in a hybrid way that has not been acknowledged in previous studies of Chinese film historiography. This hybrid approach effectively harmonizes multiple positions that are considered contradictory, including enlightenment and entertainment, rational thought and sensual pleasure, elite and mass, Western modernity and vernacular experience, commerce and politics. However, it is not neutral or compromising, but rather a field that constantly spawns tension and energy, with unprecedented tolerance and fatal attraction for the general public.

This dissertation, therefore, is a rehistoricization of Shanghai film culture from the 1890s to the 1930s through the lens of the alternative public sphere and modernity. By doing so, I delineate the constitution and transformation of the film public sphere, which is a pluralistic and heterogeneous site of sensory reflexivity that generates modernity and publicity in the everyday life of the general public. My examples include the rise of the public sphere of film publishing in the context of Shanghai's literary culture (Chapter 1); the flourishing of the public sphere constituted by the moviegoing experience in relation to film production, exhibition, and consumption patterns (Chapter 2); and the expansion of the public sphere constructed by implications of the star system generated outside film texts and movie theaters (Chapter 3). As a historical project, my dissertation devotes three chapters to significant topoi of the film public sphere from the 1890s to 1930s and their articulations within selected scopes. Although the studies of these three scopes share an almost overlapping time frame, each had its own relatively independent and complete formation and development process.

Chapter 1 introduces the emerging film publishing industry in Shanghai, which intersected the traditional publishing industry, left-wing literary circles, the Neo-sensualist school, and the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school. Tracing the operation of vernacular modernity in these literary and publishing cultures, I examine their perceptual mode in producing public discourses and experience exchange through inflammatory emotions and radical behavior, novel sensual elements and material forms, and traditional values and ethnicity. Such novel interactions construct a public

sphere with a hybrid subject of Chinese bourgeois citizens, the so-called small citizens, and the masses. Film publishing, as a public vision not only for dissemination but also for the local response to modernity, highlighted the multiple functions of the public sphere, ranging from conceptual renewal to rational dialogue and the adaptive rehearsal of modern society. At the same time, I examine how this public sphere played an important role in adapting cinema as a new art form. In so doing, I situate the introduction of cinema in China between what I term the hybrid style of “bourgeois” and “mass” tastes, locating it between literary and cinematic, rational and sensual, Western modernity and indigenous traditions.

Chapter 2 follows the development of the film industry and reconstructs the history of the activities and practices that materialized the projection venue as a public sphere. I trace the transition from “exhibitionistic early films” to “films of narrative integration” and “nude films”; the changing configurations of production, exhibition, and consumption patterns; and the changing audience. Derived from various interests, the movie theater space first foregrounded the heterogeneous and contingent viewers’ bodies in relation to technology, allowing them to recognize the world beyond boundaries through various exhibitionistic and sensational spectacles. Second, it promoted a more internalized cinematic experience accompanied by the formation of a place for political enlightenment and propaganda among intellectuals and the middle class. Third, the repopularized and externalized cinematic experience embraced a composite radical discourse of feminism and patriotism, enabling the general public to deal with social and political issues. I map an “oppositional public sphere” that traversed representation and reality with a mixture of sentimentality, exhibitionist techniques, and physical sensation that broke through the shackles of expression and action. This public sphere did not emerge from the confines of a serious “political revolution” or “highbrow” culture but was embedded in entertaining film experience, as I illustrate in the previous chapter. As a “playful, mimetic machine”, cinema’s rehabilitation of numbed nerves and alienated bodies enabled the collective reflexive experience of modernity.

Chapter 3 takes the sweep of fan culture as its point of departure to analyze the production of the proletarian public sphere with a new emphasis on reality. I reconstruct historical, concrete fans as practicing a particular mode of participation, discursive construction, and experience exchange from a less psychoanalytic and systematic perspective by treating the fan as a new social role and the empirical subject of the public sphere. I first examine the impact of stars who maintained

intimate relationships with their fans in various aspects of ordinary life as both sensorial evocation and mass enlightenment for fans. Subsequently, stars gained social and cultural status, and the film industry began to exert its authority. These changes led to the rejection and criticism of affective immediacy and participatory fans. In this context, I further explore fans' interest in forming entertaining and critical organizations to, on the one hand, continue their self-enlightenment in conversation with authorities in the film industry and, on the other hand, to construct a mass discourse in relation to the supervision of these authorities and confrontation with them. Finally, as I illustrate the dialectic of revolutionary masses and entertainment fans, I outline a more radical and dramatic execution of political beliefs and revolutionary causes by fans and the general public with the emergence of movie stars as political leaders. The pioneering fans, together with the dazzling stars, acted as catalyst and amplifier, allowing a broader public to enter the scene and participate in the configuration of the public sphere.

Although discussed at different scopes, the issue of female enlightenment is one of the central themes of my dissertation. It is no exaggeration to say that the modes of participation, the formal innovation of discursive construction and action, and the often chaotic elements such as sensory immediacy and material condition that characterized this female enlightenment are precisely the core qualities of "the proletarian public sphere". These elements are also highly valued and shared by the "general masses", such as working-class men who do not qualify as bourgeois citizens. Therefore, while I consider women's enlightenment and activist practices as significant topoi in the landscape of modernity and the proletarian public sphere, I also address the practices of other ordinary people who did not become "autonomous subjects".

Examining how new collective subjectivities and identities, rather than autonomous private individuals, were constructed on and off screen, I delineate the new worldview and distinctive sociocultural and political influences produced by new semantics and practices that became part of everyday life. These forms of practice and communication broke all taboos of the classic public sphere, involving many links in the process of film production and consumption and renewing aspects of research on related matters, such as literary schools, space culture, and consumer culture. By reviewing these mass-mediated experiences and inclusive forms that traverse divergent genres and boundaries, I attempt to delineate an alternative genealogy of Chinese cinema to challenge existing unilinear versions of its evolutionary history.

2. The Film Public Sphere of Vernacular Modernity: Exchange of Experiences and Intersubjectivity

In this section, I will define my use of the terms “film public sphere” and “vernacular modernity” and clarify the investigation scope and methodology of my research. The concept of the public sphere has garnered increased interest in recent scholarship, particularly in the intersecting fields of social politics, film studies, and communication studies. Despite their distinct perspectives, these studies converge on the understanding of the public sphere as a spatial concept, a social place or realm where people connect, disagree, and negotiate, involving the assembling process and entirety as opposed to the private realm and individual.

What is the public sphere? Although a multi-defined term, the film public sphere in this dissertation is identified by its affinity with the masses and everyday life, its proximity with physiological experience, sensation, and emotion, its distance from completely rational cognition, criticalness, and autonomy, and its power to cover all social members and all experiences. The definition is given from Hansen’s path of “Shanghai films as the sensory reflexive horizon (Hansen “Fallen Women” 20)” developed from the second generation of the Frankfurt school, Negt and Kluge’s theory of the public sphere, which conceives an alternative public sphere (proletarian/oppositional public sphere) as follows:

The public sphere denotes specific institutions and practices (e.g., public authority, the press, public opinion, the public, publicity work, streets, and public places); it is, however, also a **general horizon of social experience**, the summation of everything that is, in reality or allegedly, relevant for all members of society. In this sense publicity is, on the one hand, a matter for a handful of professionals (e.g., politicians, editors, officials), on the other, something that concerns every one and realizes itself only in people’s minds, a dimension of their consciousness. (Negt and Kluge 1)

While influenced by conventional theories of the public sphere and popular cultures, such as Habermas and Adorno, Negt and Kluge redefined the public sphere as a “general horizon of social experience” from a broader perspective and expanded the scope of their discussion to include all

that “is, in reality or allegedly, relevant for all members of society” (Negt and Kluge 1), especially film, which at the time was disparaged as a “culture industry”⁴. Habermas saw the decline of the public sphere as the result of the altered mass media eroding and corrupting the free-speaking sphere of autonomous citizens. Kluge and Hansen, however, accepted that new cultural practices and material conditions, such as cinema, did not keep humans from enlightenment. Moreover, the “phenomena that must be overcome in order to reconstruct the public sphere,” as Habermas put it, such as cultural consumption, had become a pervasive reality in the modern world at all levels, and thus it was necessary to reconsider the model of the public sphere. In this context, Kluge criticized Habermas for implicitly assuming that the bearers of the public sphere are “educated and wealthy citizens,” and expanded the subject to include the masses, such as the working class and women. The public sphere was also redefined to include places of “production and consumption”, rather than places of “dialogue and discussion”⁵.

In doing so, their emphasis was placed on the representational space of the consciousness industry⁶ itself. As Negt and Kluge put it, the public sphere is, on the one hand, a real organization or domain, and on the other hand, an abstraction “in people’s minds, a dimension of their consciousness”⁷ (Negt and Kluge 1). The consciousness industry absorbs a variety of previously unrepresented life experiences and uses them as materials to create products. Within that space, people’s experiences are naturally extracted and reflected. In the consumption of these products, the act of “seeing/viewing” in the representational space is an inherently unpredictable collective reception that depends on both the mental activity of the individual and the public vision of the social context and representational space. And it is possible to construct a public sphere of consciousness in which we observe and feel the experiences of others and simultaneously mobilize our own experiences (Kluge *Bestandsaufnahme* 94-95) (these processes are discussed in more detail on pages 21-25). In the Habermasian public sphere, no linguistic interaction is self-evident and it does not take into account the psychoanalytic assumption that is penetrated by fantasies and desires,

⁴ See Takemine for an insightful analysis of the proletarian public sphere. See Gripsrud et al, for a discussion of the differences among the various public sphere concepts that preceded and followed the proletarian public sphere.

⁵ In response to this criticism, Habermas, in his preface to the new edition of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* in 1990, identified the possibility of a “mass public sphere” by referring to the public sphere theory of Negt and Kluge.

⁶ The consciousness industry is an “industry that spreads or induces consciousness”. It is a term that Kluge draws from Hans Magnus Enzensberger to avoid the negative connotations of the term “culture industry”. See Enzensberger.

⁷ The dimension of consciousness means that the subject’s interaction occurs at the unseen level of experience and brain without specific verbal or operational indications. This does not mean that the interaction is an active, conscious reflection based on an autonomous subject; rather, it is more often an unconscious sensory reflexive containing a certain passive attitude.

whereas the proletarian public sphere emphasizes the stimulus that representations and experiences provide to “mental structures” and acknowledges that physiological-psychological interaction is even more direct participation than linguistic. Moreover, such interactions include even passive attitudes, but the subject there cannot be considered merely a blindly passive being⁸. It allows for the balancing of human and machine, the interpenetration of the real and the virtual, and the exchange of unobservable dimensions of consciousness implicitly threaten public authority.

Based on them, Hansen further relates the (film) public sphere to the experience of vernacular modernity, which she names the “sensory reflexive horizon”:

By sensory-reflexive horizon I mean a discursive form in which individual experience may find expression and recognition by others, including strangers, that is, in public; and this public sphere is not limited to print media but circulates through visual and sonic media, involving sensory immediacy and affect.” (“Fallen Women” 10)

By focusing on the development and change of modernism theory in specific practices and historical contexts, Hansen frees modernism from the shackles of high modernism limited to the ideal standard institution of art and the practice of intellectuals, and extends the scope of modernist aesthetics to “encompass cultural practices that both articulated and mediated the experience of modernity, such as the mass-produced and mass-consumed phenomena of fashion, design, advertising, architecture and urban environment, of photography, radio, and cinema” (“The Mass Production” 60). Obviously, modernity in this context refers not only to the concepts of enlightenment, rationality, and introspection that have long been dominant, but also to “a wide variety of discourses that both articulated and responded to economic, political, and social processes of modernization”. Hansen is “referring to this kind of modernism as ‘vernacular’ (to avoid the ideologically overdetermined term ‘popular’) because the term vernacular combines the dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, with connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity, and translatability” (“The Mass Production” 60).

By summarizing Hansen’s interpretations, vernacular modernity can be read as a contradiction

⁸ Based on concepts such as collective innervation, mimetic faculty, and play, Hansen further illustrated the difference between the proletarian and bourgeois public sphere in people’s interaction and solidarity. See Hansen, *Cinema and Experience* 136-147.

entity, one that incorporates 1) perceptual modernity brought by the combination of material, technology, and body betraying a certain elitist paranoia; 2) reflexive modernity happening in the non-Western context (especially in semi-colonial society) in relation to Western modernity; and 3) the translated modernity emphasizing local agency in consciously negotiating forces of Western presence through myriad means of cultural translation, including the intimate connection with traditional culture. Focusing on the nexus between modernism and modernity implies a wider notion of the aesthetic, one that situates artistic practices within a larger historical context.

At the same time, detaching from the Habermasian notion of the public sphere based on the enlightenment modernity of public discourse, Hansen finds an affinity between the public sphere and this vernacular modernity. Complicating modernist formal self-reflexivity with bodily sensorial reflexivity and local reflexivity, Hansen argues that it is vernacular modernity, tripling reflexive modernity betraying a certain elitist paranoia and western centralism myth that circulates in the public sphere as experience, cultural product, and commodity, ensuring universal common interest and exchange of experience. This public sphere is hence the most suitable configured space for the “sensory reflexive horizon” of vernacular modernity, which traverses various strict distinctions such as fantasy and reality, sensual experience and rational thought, subject and object, politics and aesthetics, low and high, entertainment and enlightenment, form and content, tradition and modernity. The things/matters contained in this space are those that form the “living context”, such as sensual stimulation, memory, imagination, as well as production and consumption, which, by being categorized as private, are shut out of the field of public representation in advance. These things can provide a resistant mode that allows the masses, who are not capable of rational debate, to have modern perceptual experiences, to imagine and realize a world different from the status quo (Hansen “Early Cinema” 203).

In other words, the public sphere of vernacular modernity is fluctuating between multiple sets of poles, allowing reenacting and renegotiation of the plural experience of modernity. In the context of the modern city, the bourgeois experience expressed in high art, a specific experience, collective to only a restricted degree, and does not usually tend to solidify into a political general will that embraces the whole of society. Whereas, in the consequent rise of mass culture, new mass media reaching out deep into everyone’s daily life such as films have enabled the individual interests combined into a general horizon of modern social experience. The issue of traditional and alternative

public spheres is thus about whether and to what extent a public sphere is organized from the top down by the exclusive standards of high modernism culture, or conversely by the subjects of life and their experiences, based on their respective survival contexts in modernization. In the latter case, Hansen has explored that by providing an attractive public sphere, where viewers of different classes gather in their leisure time to exchange tangential experiences of modernity, films may constitute a proletarian public sphere resisting the idealized public sphere.

This means that the critical or countervailing power of the public sphere is directed not only against the institutions and forces imposed on “the individual”, but also the opposite of the pseudo-public sphere, that is, “a representative public sphere which is representative in so far as it involves exclusions” (Kluge “On Film” 212), that is the bourgeois public sphere itself (Negt and Kluge xliii). As Kluge suggests the term proletarian or oppositional public sphere refers to a public sphere in the authentic sense of the term, it shows the limits of a political concept based on narrowly defined communication and principles of autonomy and reasoned debate. While the bourgeois public sphere atrophied by its own exclusionary mechanisms or by the excesses of public power, an alternative public sphere, defined by the synchronicity of experiential exchange and collective innervation, is growing in a more covert and peripheral form. Experiences in such places are neither mere consumption nor negative phenomena in a general sense but generate the potential for social change and new social and political forces concerning freedom and equality.

What interests me is the shared challenge Hansen and other scholars pose to the Habermasian perspective and the way in which they illuminate the alternative public sphere with a unique scope. The public sphere has achieved universality through its proximity to the social experience, that is, the experience of vernacular modernity, and the empirical dimensions of imagination, memory, and perception that it encompasses provide an entry point to begin to make sense of the public sphere in terms of new domains. In this sense, my theoretical, as well as practical interest, is grounded in the two interconnected categories of the public sphere and vernacular modernism/modernity. Hence, we need to regard the film public sphere in relation to larger substantive historical context and textual or intertextual systems of vernacular modernity.

As mentioned above, Oskar Negt, Alexander Kluge, and Hansen memorably spelled out the category of (film) public sphere in their corpus. As they specify, the public sphere is on the one hand a real organization or realm, and on the other hand an abstraction “realized only in the dimensions

of the human psyche or consciousness”. My research scope derives from the extending of this category from the theoretical and textual analysis to a broader, specific social and historical-cultural context. I propose to introduce the film public sphere on two levels: (1) in a certain dimension, the consciousness industry such as cinema itself constitutes a public sphere in a dimension of consciousness limited by the particular relationship between representation and reception. At the same time, (2) the public sphere still relies on real-life organizations such as assemblies, groups, and institutions. In terms of films, it refers to the film experience that is projected onto social reality and leads to social and political movements, and to the places where cinema intersects and interacts with other structures of public life that are part of social and cultural history.

Firstly, I qualify the film public sphere within my scope as film representational space (including not only films, but also film publications, etc.) in keeping with Kluge’s understanding of the public sphere, that is, mass media such as cinema is an organization of collective experience by absorbing the raw materials for the practice of manufacturing and strengthening goods and consciousness in daily life, and hence cinema itself (in my opinion, it refers to the representational space of cinema) is a public sphere, the experience exchanging process occurs in a dimension of audience consciousness overlapping with film representational space; the interaction between films on the screen and the audience’s fluttering associations becomes a measure of the value of a particular film’s use of a public sphere: a film either caters to the audience’s needs, perceptions and desires, or it encourages the audience’s autonomous functioning and regulation (Kluge “On film” 209). This understanding of the public sphere, as later elaborated by Miriam Hansen, places cinema as participating in the interaction with audiences in the dimension of consciousness. Hansen follows this tradition and argues that the representation of the experience of vernacular modernity, which can largely prompt sensory reflexes and exchanges of experience in the viewer, has also become a measure of the film’s ability to construct a public sphere.

Such an existence of the public sphere of the consciousness dimension is, of course, abstract, but as Kluge says, we cannot physically experience every experience or participate in every activity of others: “If we were to make a film about farmers, the situation would be the same: we are not farmers and even if we lived like farmers for half a year, we still would not be farmers. Just because we work in factories does not make us factory workers... A public sphere can be produced professionally only when you accept the degree of abstraction which is involved in carrying one

piece of information to another place in society when you establish lines of communication. That's the only way we can create an oppositional public sphere and thus expand the existing public sphere. This is an occupation that is just as important as direct action, the immediate on-the-spot struggle (Kluge "On Film" 212).

In the public sphere of consciousness overlapping with film representational space, the concepts of film viewing and filmmaking as essential to experience exchanging have changed. The film-viewing represents a choice of a public way of life: to see, hear and feel the experiences of others, as well as to mobilize one's own experiences. This public life reduces the dependence on the organizational forms of real assemblies, groups, institutions, etc., and emphasizes the interaction of private and public experiences in consciousness and film representational space. Viewers need not have the ability to use words in newspapers and magazines to talk up (whether on political or literary topics), nor will they be excluded because they are not productive (e.g., women and the underclass masses). Films provide access to the public sphere where people are no longer tied to their level of education or social status.

It is in this respect that Kluge and Hansen characterize the concept of "viewing" as a process of organizing experience inside and outside of cinema and sensory reflexes, in contrast to the film theoretical or historical understanding of "viewing". As Hansen explains, Kluge imagines the viewer in a pluralistic sense, not as the kind of empirical viewer as socially contingent individuals, nor as a semiotic crowd determined solely by representational processes, but as a group of spectators with historically specific contours, conflicts, and possibilities. While the imagination of cinema in the viewer's mind undoubtedly contains a psychoanalytic dimension, on the other hand, it is also situated in a double context, in a specific public sphere that includes a particular social audience, a particular type of place, stage and mode of projection, as well as a public vision that is produced and reproduced, appropriated and contested in cinema, just as in other cultural mechanisms and practices. Most importantly, for Kluge, film viewing relies on both individual mental activity and an intersubjective vision and is inherently unpredictable. And this unpredictable, almost contingent structure of collective reception makes the act of "public viewing" undoubtedly capable of constructing a public sphere (Kluge "On film" 209).

Accordingly, the concept of filmmaking has also changed. It includes not only the work of the director and others in the narrow sense but also the appropriation of the film by the audience. This

is not only because the film is initiated and understood in the mind of the viewer, but also because every film production is a collaborative project: the filmmaker attempts to appeal to the psychology of most of the audience and therefore needs to assess the range of collective experience. The extent to which a film is made in a way that allows for audience participation, whether by drawing as much as possible on the collective experience to provide the audience with a public view or by striving to leave room for understanding through the blank leaving of narration, reflects the scale of “public production”. Thus, cinema (the representational space) is, in effect, a new kind of public sphere that gathers the private experiences of the viewer. This public sphere uses people’s life experiences, consumer desires, likes, dislikes, and emotions as raw materials to make products. Without even actively consuming it, people are already unwittingly drawn into the public sphere as an object of experience extraction.

The film public sphere is limited by the relationship between representation and reception. This special relationship refers to the mutual constraints between the two. In traditional film studies viewing and filmmaking are clearly distinct, whereas, in the public sphere perspective, the boundaries between spectatorship and filmmaking have been largely blurred. In this sense, the terms “public viewing” and “public filmmaking” have essentially the same meaning: They depend both on people’s different conscious reactions and the public eye, on the audience, and on the film content and filmmakers. They unify universality and plurality. More specifically, they require three conditions: 1) a cinema as a public space, 2) the participation of a plural audience, and 3) a general horizon of social experience (Hansen “Dianyng guankan” 19). In short, the extent to which a film engages with its audience—whether it gathers a more public experience, and whether it evokes the broad participation of the audience that interprets it—determines the scale of the public sphere. And for this syncretic relationship, because of its accessibility, the exploration of the film itself and its representational space becomes the primary means of studying this public sphere.

Hansen notes that certain types of films challenge the classic narrative paradigm—linear, character-based cause and effect, and closed endings. Engaging the audience in the interpretation of a film allows the viewer to understand the film from an individual’s unique perspective, one that is based on the individual’s psychological activity, rather than tying the viewer to a predetermined, assigned position of sameness. It represents a notion of alternative viewing and asks the audience to participate in the subject interaction and collective process of deciphering and interpreting the

film, projecting an expanded space of the public sphere similar to that proposed by Habermas for reading in the pre-political period. The emphasis here is on the value of film projection as a live performance, rather than in the projection of a uniform film product, thus providing the necessary condition of plurality for a public mode of viewing.

On this point, Kluge also argues that cinema needs an alternative way of expression. The unconventional audiovisual language stimulates people's imagination to reinterpret the film, and even somewhat offends the audience. These anti-cinematic elements of language leave the audience with many clues to think about and piece together instead of ready-made facts and results. As Kluge says, the more one stares, the less one sees in a film. The more the audience is able to grasp the whole picture of the film, the more he will lose his own experience, and gradually will be determined by the film:

The eyes have become the masters, so to speak. They are spiritual imperialists...you can understand it completely, nothing of the mystery remains. I do not like agitprop, even if I accept the purpose. I think the project of enlightenment has more differentiated methods to convince people. You can interpret something in a nonverbal way. It's what enlightenment needs to deal with human life. It is a second code, and you should respect it. Enlightenment should not be built into the film. It must always be active in the minds of people. (Liebman and Kluge 49)

Thus, public spectatorship and the realm of public consciousness, even if they sometimes contain enlightenment ideals, are opposed to top-down didacticism and indoctrination, and have to do with the viewer's own experience and boundless imagination. At the same time, films should also provide a general horizon of social experiences, such as those related to everyday life. In this way, the film can provide a genuine public discourse, common interest, and universality for specific social groups (such as the immigrant labor class or groups of women of all classes and generations). Only if common interests or themes are directly relevant to everyday life, can it be ensured that more people, if not all people, have personal (and public) experiences that can be mobilized to discover, understand, and engage with certain public issues. The grassroots and the toiling masses who fill the cinemas are also included in the public space. It values the experience of everyday life that is fragmented and temporarily blocked. It calls on us to pay broad attention to such experiences

and to give them legitimacy for public expression.

In summary, a public viewing cannot be formed without the presence of a plural audience and a certain public vision, both of which are highly overlapping with the process of filmmaking. This is why Kluge and Hansen focus in particular on the perception and analysis of individual film texts⁹. And to Hansen, the content and form of expression of vernacular modernity precisely meet the requirement of providing public vision while allowing diversity of understanding. In this sense, the public sphere is associated with a set of imagery that represents vernacular modernity and is hence a public sphere associated with exhibition, imagination, and viewing. Thus, the public sphere of representational space overlapping with a dimension of audience consciousness is first and foremost about a question of how films (or other mass media) are publicly made and viewed. Such investigations will challenge the predominance of the understanding of viewing and filmmaking in psychoanalytic film theory and film history and compel us to examine the dynamic relationship between films and the audience and to consider how the film makes people see, what it makes people perceive, and who it makes them see. In this sense, research on the film public sphere will broaden, rather than diminish, not only our understanding of particular films (by genre, theme, plot, ideology, director or studio, and so on) but will also facilitate our interpretation of historically conditioned textual systems and spectatorship. My inquiry into the film public sphere hence is an attempt to study film ontology.

Secondly, however, extrapolating the range, number, and even response of the audience through the various imagery of representational space may leave my research to stop at some textual evidence, making the question of how the public sphere of representational space can become real a much-needed topic. Further research is needed on the relationship between cultural undertakings and social activities and political rights and institutions. Indeed, sensory reflexes in representational space are likely to extend to the social realm and reality. I would like to examine the public sphere's reality and historicity, not simply in terms of its consciousness dimension but also the physical space and social dimension of the public sphere on a more corporeal level. This resonant with Kluge and Hansen's redefinition of the public sphere in a more common sense. In this sense, cinema exerts its

⁹ See Kluge, "On Film"; Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, "Cooperative Auteur Cinema", "Early Cinema, Late Cinema", "Early Silent Cinema"; Negt and Kluge; Negt. As a film director, Kluge even led a New German Cinema Movement known for its criticism of traditional films. He rejects that the author of the film would get too involved in the film text, and explicitly objected to Eisenstein's "intentional paths".

media nature to connect with other public lives, generating a shared experience horizon and collective subjectivity in the social realm that transcends the space of cinematic representation.

In contrast to the first definition, this definition essentially more inherits than challenges Habermas's definition of the scope of the public sphere: the public sphere needs to occupy some kind of physical space or some part of the social realm and is dependent on real-life organizations. For example, the audience can assemble in the cinema; they can exchange their views on films with others or write a review article; and that people come together to create magazines, make films, recruit actors, start film societies, companies, and other group activities in related to the film industry are all involved the film public sphere. Encompassing film production, exhibition, reception, and other sectors such as distribution and censorship, a public sphere of playwrights, directors, actors, film critics, producers, theaters, state censors, and audiences has formed. Although this public sphere is formed around films, it can even extend far beyond cinematic works into the sociopolitical criticism, inevitably reflecting and existing in social reality.

The practical utility of the cinematic public sphere, in reality, is also covered in Kluge and Hansen's research. For example, Kluge argues that films' negative effects—as Theodor W. Adorno called mass deception—must be defeated through itself. The only thing that can defeat fantasy, Kluge argues, is fantasy (by making it a reality), and the only thing that can defeat the product that includes the whole package of human desires, feelings, and perceptions, is the anti-product. The cultural criticism's rejection of fantasy and the ideals and autonomy of high art are bourgeois solutions that are vulnerable because they can never gain the mass audience. We will never be able to unite and organize the human experience, through political or ideological criticism in the bourgeois public sphere that lies outside the horizon of everyday experience (Negt and Kluge 143-174; Kluge "On Film" 211-214). While the film will take on this task, it has the function of creating a fantasy, generating material sensory experience, and breaking the language barrier, and it has the infinite cognitive potential to mobilize society, stimulate "autonomous enlightenment" of the audience, develop an "emancipatory" potential, and create a new political culture with unique organizational forms and behavior patterns (Negt and Kluge 143-174; Kluge "On Film" 211-214).

On this point also, as Hansen points out, the new way of life, the new aesthetics, and modern technology brought about by the Shanghai Film and the modern cityscapes it shows, as well as the images of "new body" and "painted lady" not only provide the modernity of materials and senses,

but also “have allowed its viewers to come away from the film and imagine their own strategies of survival, performance, and sociality, to make sense of living in the interstices of radically un-equal times, places, and condition” (Hansen “Fallen Women” 20). As a result, Hansen argues, the film “was not only part and promoter of technological, industrial-capitalist modernity; it was also the single most inclusive, public horizon in which both the liberating impulses and the pathologies of modernity were reflected, rejected, or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated, and it made this new proletarian public visible to itself and to society” (Hansen “Fallen Women” 12). In other words, this public sphere is not just about the representation of modernity, but also about its realization. Films should not only deal with the modernity brought about by cosmetic creation and material sensory stimulation but should also offer modernity that is enlightening and reflective. In this respect, same as Kluge, Hansen’s cinematic public sphere delves into the specific dimensions of the social sphere, dealing with the “enlightenment” and “emancipation” functions of the classical public sphere, and connecting them to dimensions such as communication of lived experience and the initiative of the general public under the industrialization of mass media (cinema).

For the above reasons, my analysis will shift from the ontological study to the broader social realm known as, filmdom. The practice of the real-life public sphere remains a central focus of my endeavor, and the cultural landscape of vernacular modernity I delineate along the way should be treated as experiences, cultural objects, or commodities that trigger these historical practices. The challenge then is to take into account the public sphere as a dimension of consciousness, while considering the public sphere as a place that is part of social and cultural history and dependent on real-life organizations. While the public sphere is always subject to discursive constructions, the representational space occurring in people’s minds and consciousness pushes the limits of discursive representations. On the other hand, if the reception and production of films enable the construction of a public sphere as a social space, its organizational power is put in dialogue with different classes, genders, cultural interests, and political forces.

Drawing on the revisionist approaches to the public sphere, my study is grounded in the larger context of vernacular modernity. It is in this sense that I choose the compound of “mass/oppositional public sphere of vernacular modernity,” so as to capture the concentric and dialectical relationships between internal perception and the external world, communicative sensibility and rationality, physical immediacy of experience and translatability, reflexivity. Therefore, although the discussion

in this dissertation follows a timeline, it is not a history that follows a linear progression. There will inevitably be interpenetration between the old and new, cinema and other cultural forms, the related public space and categories of modernity, and the experiences and behavioral patterns of different groups. Some elements may be temporarily suppressed while the whole exhibits a certain prominence, but they will always recur, and pop and vernacular styles will always have a place.

3. Literature Review

In the following introduction, I begin with a literature review of the shared interest of the public sphere across the disciplines of political sociology, new media, and film studies, which highlights many hitherto neglected areas of investigation that are important references for the project of rewriting film history.

The idea of the “public sphere” has been discussed by various schools of social and political thought, such as Hannah Arendt and John Dewey. It has also received attention in recent years in the study of mass media and consumer culture. This is mainly because Habermas’s work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) provides the most detailed theoretical framework on this topic to date. Therefore, except for Kluge and Negt, who have defined the public sphere based on Habermas’s theory in a relatively new way, many researchers have chosen to apply Habermas’s theory more directly to the subject of this dissertation, the study of Shanghai cinema. They argue that applying Habermas’s concept of the public sphere to film studies is important and operational, especially when cinema is seen as a sociocultural institution in a particular historical context. In the respect of revising and reinterpreting Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, their research echoes to some extent the direction of Kluge and Hansen’s research.

Of course, the application of Habermas’ theory is urgently needed to address the temporal and spatial transition between Western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries and China in the 1930s. On this issue, first of all, in Habermas’s later correspondence with a Chinese scholar, he did not deny the possibility of applying his theory to the Chinese context. He argued that further liberalization of the economy and further democratization of the political system would ultimately promote and require some kind of equivalence in what we call the political public sphere and that

democratic forms of public opinion must take root there (Habermas “Guanyu gonggong lingyu de” 35). And later, in the revised preface of the 1900 edition, Habermas acknowledged that there would be a “bourgeois public sphere without the social presuppositions of a bourgeois public sphere (i.e., civil society)” in a given social context (*The Structural Transformation* 6). This stems from his recognition of the potential of mass culture—that the civic class is not a necessary precondition for a public sphere, and that mass culture has the potential to form its own public sphere equivalent to the bourgeois public sphere. Admitting that he had underestimated the inner dynamics of mass culture, Habermas realized that mass culture was not merely a “background”, a negative framework for mainstream culture, but a periodically emerging subversive force against the hierarchical world, with its own formal celebrations and daily norms (*The Structural Transformation* 6).

Habermas himself offers no further explanation, but the problem of temporal transitions faced when using his theory to study Chinese society continues to be addressed by social historians and sinologists such as G. William Skinner, William Rowe, Mary Backus Rankin, David Strand, Frederic Wakeman, JR, Philip C. C. Huang¹⁰, to name a few. These scholars coincidentally applied Habermas’s theory of the public sphere to late Qing and early-mid Republican China and, of course, Shanghai in the 1890s-1930s. Their provocative works, in consciously reshaping the discipline of the public sphere by moving beyond concerns on the rhetorical framework of civil society¹¹ and the opposition between society and state, draw particular attention to some restrictive middle-level judgment¹², social management function, etc., as a substitute for civil society. With the emergence of these alternatives, political functions similar to those of the bourgeois public sphere will also be developed. As William Rowe observes: “Indeed, it might be expected that Habermas would view the expanding application of public to managerial or proprietary concerns (in the sense of public utilities) as not only extraneous but injurious to the proper development of the public sphere, diluting it and robbing it of its normative-critical punch. And yet, the historical record seems to provide ample justification for Chinese historians not only to have moved along these two distinct lines of

¹⁰ See Skinner; Rowe; Rankin; Strand; Wakeman; P. Huang.

¹¹ Rowe argues that if civil society is not a physical existence, a contemporary discourse, nor an established political system (like kingship), then it can only be a rhetorical framework constructed by some later scholars based on their own purposes of analysis. And the validity of this analytical framework is questionable. See Rowe, “The Problem of” 143.

¹² Such as, capitalism, the institutionalization of public funds, public utilities and public management, civil law and legal guaranteed “hard” property rights, literacy, publishing and the printing culture, urbanization and sites for collective discussion of “public affairs”, autonomous organizations, social contract, natural rights, proprietorship theory, individualism, civility, public opinion, etc. See Rowe, “The Problem of”.

inquiry but also to see the two as intimately related (“The Public Sphere in Modern China” 324)”.

Then, Habermas’s theory of the public sphere was further applied by Harvard professor Leo Ou-fan Lee to Shanghai modernity and film studies. In his study of Shanghai modernity, Leo Ou-fan Lee points out that cinemas, film magazines, films, and audiences are all related to the formation of the public sphere¹³. Leo’s interest in the public sphere invokes the inspiration for Chinese film researchers to introduce the public sphere theory into Shanghai film studies and cultural criticism. Interestingly, Leo claims to have deliberately “misread” Habermas’s theory of the public sphere in order to circumvent the stringent conditions associated with the temporal-spatial constraints of civil society, while at the same time, he retains the core function of Habermas’s public sphere. As Leo argues, Habermas’s fundamental intention is to “discuss politics rationally”. The so-called public space, hence, first refers to an area of our social life, in this field, “engaging in rational and critical discussion” and “making public power the subject of criticism” may be its core intentions. Extending this to the cinematic realm, “discussing films rationally” has become the yardstick of the film public sphere/space, which has led to much of the pre-eminent research in the film public sphere focusing on the study of film criticism. Leo Ou-fan Lee’s “misreading”, however, may also open up another way to assess the film public sphere, namely “discussing politics rationally mediated by films”, the study of the film public sphere hence never limited to the space of film criticism, but will expand to a wider range of film social, cultural and political fields. In this sense, my discussion on two spatial dimensions of the public sphere could cover this significantly broadened research horizon of films.

In addition, the book by Ma Ning, *From Allegorical Nation to Generic Republic: the Formation and Transformation of Chinese Film Melodrama 1897-1937*, discusses the core problem which is how to analyze and interpret the role of Chinese modern popular literature, drama and film played in the origin and development of the late Qing dynasty and China’s modernization process and nation-state construction in the context of the globalization process in the 21st century by applying various theories of modernity and subjectivity as well as the new viewpoints of western academic circles that popular drama embodies a cross-cultural form of democracy and a social imagination model with the function of the alternative public sphere. This book has a broad and deep theoretical foundation. Based on Foucault’s third space theory, it rewrites the early Chinese

¹³ See Lee, *Shanghai Modeng*.

film history and mentions the connection between Third Space and Negt and Kluge's alternative public sphere, which has important reference value for this dissertation. This book covers a great deal of theoretical research but is weak in its integration of theory and early film practice in Shanghai¹⁴.

Beyond that, the handful of essays on film and the public sphere tend to analyze films made during the people's Republican period since 1949. Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, for example, in *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China*, studies the civility and publicity of Chinese films from the perspective of gender and with a cross-cultural approach. The book, spanning several generations of film-making in China, is a series of investigations into the processes by which these individual and social fantasies and desires are made public in various contexts, including national cinema, transnational cinema, independent cinema, urban cinema, and cinema of the socialist era. This work has a great reference value for this thesis, but because it focuses on the film production of the third generation of Chinese directors (artists who came to the film industry after the founding of the People's Republic of China) to the sixth generation of directors (directors who started to be active in the 1990s), it is still a tendency to take "auteurism" as the theoretical basis of film history. Moreover, this work is based on the theory of Habermas' public sphere and publicity, it fails to comprehensively apply the theoretical knowledge of the public sphere¹⁵.

In addition, Chinese film researcher Ren Ming's doctoral dissertation *Film, City and Publicity—Centered on the Production and Consumption of Shanghai City Movies* investigated the changing publicity of the People's Republic of China from 1949 to 2009 in terms of the development and changes of Shanghai city movies. It is an attempt to investigate the cultural mechanism and cultural content as interactive content and successfully connected cinema with urban culture from this perspective. It is worth noting that this paper is not only based on Habermas' classic concept of the public sphere, but also refers to Negt, Kluge, and Hansen's theoretical research on film and the public sphere, so it has a relatively complete theoretical perspective.¹⁶

Among the many prior studies, the one most closely related to the public sphere of early Shanghai cinema, the subject of this dissertation, remains Hansen's research. Having reviewed Hansen's theoretical elaboration of the public sphere in the previous section, here I would like to

¹⁴ See N. Ma. *From Allegorical Nation*

¹⁵ See Donald.

¹⁶ See Ren.

briefly introduce the specific studies attempted by Hansen and her students, such as Zhang Zhen and Bao Weihong. This is not only because their research has been very important in recent years; more importantly, a review, and comparison of these studies, which are more closely related to the theoretical framework and object of this dissertation, can better clarify the differences between this dissertation and the earlier studies.

First, Hansen notes that her study on the film public sphere aims to break away from a set of complementary dualisms in film study: one pertaining to the rupture between the spectator as a term in the dominant psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory since the 1970s and the empirical movie-goer with its demographic randomness in film history; the other is the issue of placing the theory of modernism in a specific historical context to solve the opposition between film (mass) culture and modernism, and the unfortunate polarization of the terms modernist and classical in approaches to American cinema; and thus the attempt to transcend the polarized labels of either a benign spreading of the American Dream or systematic cultural imperialism, to reinterpret the international and global hegemony and the generalized appeal of Hollywood cinema¹⁷.

Hansen believes that by the increasing specialization of film theory and film history, a division has emerged between film theory, which treats the audience as a term within film discourse (to be precise, psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory views the audience as a discourse, a product of ideographic structures, and a somewhat abstract and essentially passive entity) and film history, which situates the empirical viewer within his or her demographic randomness (the unstructured groups that we identify as moviegoers are constantly being formed, dissolved, and reconstituted with each viewing experience), and the question is whether the two levels of research can be reconciled and whether these methods and insights can promote each other. There is no doubt that the theoretical concept of viewing needs to be historicized to include the empirical dimension of acceptance. For the same reason, a film history with reception as its core cannot be written without a theoretical framework that can conceptualize the possible relationship between the film and the audience. Hansen argues the concept of the film public sphere, as “the social horizon of experience”, i.e., “sensory reflexive horizon” provides a theoretical matrix around different levels of inquiry and methodology to uncover the blind spot caused by the fracture between theory and history, offering

¹⁷ See Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, “Cooperative Auteur Cinema”, “Early Cinema, Late Cinema”, “Early Silent Cinema”, “The Mass Production”.

new conceptions of spectatorship and filmmaking¹⁸.

Subjects in the film public sphere are different from the audience determined by the film text or life reality, they have the specific moment when reception gains initiative in the entanglement of the urban environment, everyday life, the balance between personal consciousness and experience exchange (sensuous and rational communication), the interface between subjective experience and objective world, and the interaction with the silver screen and other spectators, which all interweave with both the expression and response of vernacular modernism/modernity. For example, in the context of this actual history of the Soviet Union, that is, in the context of local social audiences, particular screening sites, stages and modes, the local public vision and culture of the time, Hansen discusses how Hollywood films, considered as the classical cinema in the United States, has brought multiple experiences of modernity to Soviet to demonstrate that films could successfully cross the distinction between local and global, popular culture and modernism, modernism and classicism, and to explain the global appeal of Hollywood films. She argues that “the worldwide hegemony of classical Hollywood cinema, much as it was supported by aggressive industrial strategies backed by government pressure, had less to do with the classical—timeless, universal—quality of the films than with their ability to provide, to mass audiences both at home and abroad, a sensory-reflexive horizon for the experience of modernization and modernity” (Hansen “Fallen Women” 10; “The Mass Production” 59-77).

Hansen soon applied the concept of “vernacular modernism/modernity” and “sensory reflexive horizon” elaborated for American cinema of the so-called classical period to Shanghai cinema of the 1920s and 1930s:

If my claim that the cinema, a certain kind of cinema, offered a sensory-reflexive horizon for the contradictory experience of modernity has any merit, it should be the case that parallel, yet distinct, forms of vernacular modernism emerged in other modernizing, metropolitan centers as well, and not just in the West...I would argue that Shanghai cinema of the 1920s and 30s represents a distinct brand of vernacular modernism, one that evolved in a complex relation to American—and other foreign—models while drawing on and transforming Chinese traditions in theater, literature, graphic and print culture, both modernist and popular. (Hansen “Fallen

¹⁸ See Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*.

Women” 13)

Hansen’s research extended from spanning the theoretical and historical division to more practical aspects, such as bridging the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, the national and global, etc., and the film public sphere of vernacular modernity provides a point of convergence for this process. However, the limitation of Hansen’s studies is that the handful of essays is not enough to support the wide applicability and interculturality of the concept, as well as the lack of adequate historical research. On the roots of sensitive perception and analysis of the film text, the processes of “collective perception and response to modernity” that the audience carries out in her work mostly reside in the film representational space.

Meanwhile, Hansen’s study is complemented by more historically informed studies of Zhang Zhen and Bao Weihong, who studied under her. Zhang Zhen focuses on the question of early Shanghai cinema and the vernacular experience of modernity¹⁹. By studying the non-preserved films through film derivatives, she has devoted herself to giving a detailed interpretation of the early Shanghai film texts in the social and cultural context of vernacular modernity. On the other hand, Bao takes films as an affective medium and captures the trope of “fire” to construct the connection between metaphors of film aesthetic consciousness and the social significance or political tendency²⁰. She pays more attention to the interaction between cinema and other cultural discourses (drama, architecture, etc.) and focuses on revealing the connections between pre-war and wartime cinema, Shanghai-Hong Kong and Chongqing film cultures.

Although Bao’s temporal divisions and spatial scope are larger than Zhang’s, their approaches are to some extent similar. They similarly use film as visual texts for socially thematic reading, exploring issues of modernity, urban culture, and political collectives, and yet they pay little attention to the actual role of the cinematic medium in concrete socio-historical context. Although they illustrate cinema’s interaction with other cultural forms, they do not explore cinema’s connection to genuine sociopolitical public life. Although they examine the aesthetic metaphors of film texts to demonstrate their possible expressions, implications, and resonances to sociocultural phenomena or political orientations, their historical expositions from the perspective of cultural

¹⁹ See Z. Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*.

²⁰ See W. Bao.

production fail to explore the social practices and specific political expression of cultural recipients.

Moreover, while both studies remain provocative in challenging the comprehensive rejection of early cinema or non-left cinema in existing, their treatment of the various oppositions involving left-wing cinema—topics central to their projects—is flawed by the use of certain ill-defined. Zhang circumvents the specificity of left-wing films through an expanded field of urban commercial culture. Her concept of “competing moderns” is intended to generalize competing cinematic representations and practices, which also include issues of left-wing and non-left-wing cinema. Bao, on the other hand, denies the view that left-wing films are “freak of political propaganda” through the notion of “affective medium” and classifies them as “films in general”. However, some of their explanations for the convergence of classifications and the disappearance of divisions are not convincing enough²¹.

The interest of Western scholars in early Chinese cinema has aroused an interest in “rewriting the history of cinema” in Eastern film studies. In 2015, the “Chinese Film History Project” was officially launched, hosted by film historians Rao Shuguang and Ding Yaping and supported by the China Literature and Art Foundation²². With a total of 20 books (some of which have not yet been published), this project attempts to re-explore the development of Chinese film history from various perspectives, such as film publications, animated films, film communication, image modeling, film audience, gender studies, film policy. By doing so, it hopes to form a systematic, objective, and scientific system of Chinese film history.

These endeavors have uncovered neglected research areas, and the newly published research on historical materials provides an unprecedented opportunity and a new horizon for the research on early Shanghai films. However, many domestic studies have failed to notice the connectedness between these new areas. In other words, due attention to the diversity and fluctuation of film history

²¹ In terms of Zhang’s notion of “competing moderns,” the competing cinematic representations and practices may indeed can arouse the audience’s diverse movie-watching experience, but these competing elements are not necessarily all related to the representation and reception of modernity. See Y. Zhang, “Yuedu zaoqi dianying lilun” 31. On the other hand, cinema as an “affective medium”, as Bao puts it, combines technological wonder, sensory stimulation, and instant physical and mental arousal, and works in melodrama mode, leading to the disappearance of various distinctions, such as left-wing and non-left-wing, rational and sensual, politics and commerce have disappeared. However, such boundaries may disappear only because all features may be swallowed up by an ambiguous term of “affect”. For example, Bao argues that, just as the word “propaganda” itself has the dual semantic meaning of “instilling information” and “increasing exposure,” political propaganda films as “affective medium”, not only function to disseminate information, but also construct a potential public sphere. Bao does not specifically explain the issue of the public sphere here, but her argument obviously runs the risk of whitewashing political propaganda.

²² See Rao and Ding.

is undercut by their difficulty in connecting and integrating various divisions. The internal division between left-wing and non-left-wing films, and the tendency to explore the uniqueness or “Chineseness” of films caused by the hegemony of left-wing films in relation to the ethnicity, national consciousness, and ideology, have not been completely reversed.

On the other hand, Japanese scholar Shirai Keisuke’s work, *The Introduction of Chinese Cinema to Shanghai and the Development of the Shanghai Screening Business* aims to overturn the “established theory” of the reception and development of cinema in China. By moving away from the dominant descriptions of Chinese film studies as “progressive” and “left-wing”, Keisuke attempts to demonstrate a true picture of film history and to review it from different perspectives²³. Film scholar Sugawara Yoshino’s book *Modernity in the Cinema: A History of Moviegoers in Shanghai* focuses more on the recipients of cinema and the political roles they assume than on the producers. She explores how these audiences move from being “substandard viewers” to “civilized viewers” and further to becoming “better citizens” from the perspective of cinema-going etiquette. She argues that this is a typical vernacular modernist reception of cinema and challenges the historical view of evolution in Chinese cinema²⁴.

However, the common limitations of Japanese studies lie in the lack of primary sources, the inadequacy of empirical research, and the narrowness of their perspectives. Some of the film practices and examples described in the two books have been repeatedly mentioned in Chinese film studies. At the same time, although both books claim to challenge the long-standing “history of progress” and “history of evolution,” the narrative of cinematic practice and experience remains confined to it. In particular, the latter’s central point of considering the “civilized audience” formed through cultural discipline as “the birth of a progressive social class that supports nationalism” and equating it with what Hansen calls the practice of vernacular modernism is open to question. Moreover, the mere description of cinema viewing and cinema audiences while ignoring the interaction with other cultural forms does not seem to be a complete account of the modernity and “new history” of cinema.

Thus, despite recent significant revisions in early Chinese film studies by prior research, the dilemma of rewriting film history remains unresolved. My overview of recent explorations of the

²³ See Shirai.

²⁴ See Sugawara.

public sphere in film studies has prepared us to explore the revisionist history of Chinese cinema from the 1890s to the 1930s in terms of the connection between modernity and publicity. The theoretical framework of the public sphere provides more clearly defined terminology and more informed empirical methodology to approach film culture and deal more convincingly with the subject of film history. By uncovering new first-hand materials, I will focus on areas not covered by prior research, such as the specific practices of film readers, viewers, and fans in actual social realms of film publishing, cinema, and stardom. As a more challenging project, I will pay more attention to the mass subject of film culture and film history, crossing various internal divisions and turning the history of the film into a dialectical narrative rather than some kind of bias and evolutionary theory. In this sense, I am willing to take upon the challenge of continuing the careers of Hansen and Kluge, and in this way contribute to the rewriting of film history.

4. Shanghai from the 1890s to the 1930s

The theoretical framework and literature review suggest that revisiting the synchronic and dialectical relationship between the public sphere and vernacular modernity is a feasible way to rewrite film history from a dynamic and hybrid perspective. This, however, has to be placed in a larger historical and social framework. Now, let us spread our temporal and spatial span to Shanghai from the late 1890s to the 1930s, with a brief review of the historically and locally grounded context.

Shanghai officially opened on November 17, 1843. As a trading port, Shanghai attracted many merchants from the very beginning. And as a commercial metropolis, Shanghai had a high population turnover rate as caravans migrate. The social structure of Shanghai during this period was also known as “five-party miscellaneous”. A sufficient number of people is a prerequisite for a large public sphere. If these movements of people from their original places to Shanghai represent horizontal movements within the same cultural circle, then the migration of Western lifestyle and material civilization to Shanghai with the influx of foreign capital and the immigration of Western expatriates is a cross-cultural movement. The Shanghai people faced these changes from the West with a feeling of complete novelty and bewilderment. At first, the concessions inhabited by Westerners were called “Yi field (夷场)”. “Yi” is a derogatory term containing the meaning of

“barbarian”, which later changed to “Yang field (洋场)” meaning “foreign field”. In addition to highlighting exotic customs, “Yang” also connotes grandeur, fashion, and prosperity, easily reminiscent of the old phrase of “Yang Yang Da Guan (洋洋大观)” (Grand and numerous appearance; a rich and colorful scene) (Xiong *Shanghai Tongshi* 33). The change in the designation of the concession reflects the gradual acceptance of modern Western civilization in Shanghai.

When Shanghai first opened, Chinese and foreigners were separated, and only foreigners were allowed to live in the concession. Despite this, there were frequent contacts between the concession and the Chinese community, both in terms of business contacts and connections in all walks of life. Since then, the pattern of the separation of the Chinese and the foreigners gradually changed to the mixed residence of the Chinese and the foreigners, and the concession had more and more influence on Shanghai society. The rapid expansion of the population in the concessions after the mixing of Chinese and foreigners provided sufficient capital and labor for the development of the concessions. The size of the concessions grew, such as the British concessions, which started with 137 mu in 1846 and were merged and expanded with the American concessions to reach 5,289 mu by 1900 (Xiong *Shanghai Tongshi* 33). In addition to the expansion of the concessions themselves, a number of new towns emerged at the borders of the old city. The expansion of the concessions and the emergence of new towns represented an expansion of urban space and meant that the modernity of the city would benefit a larger number of people. The mix of Chinese and foreigners gives birth to the transmutation and integration of the urban environment. The diverse social values and cultural heterogeneity are important conditions for the formation of the public sphere.

The existence of the concession constituted a delicate political situation. The highest administrative body in the concession was the “Municipal Council”, which in effect acted as a parliament and a municipality, as well as a consulate of the consular jurisdictions. The founding principles of the Municipal Council were “self-government, rule of law, security, and freedom” (Xiong *Shanghai Tongshi* 33). The parliamentary politics of the concession had brought about a renewal of the residents’ moral concept, the consciousness and regulation of group behavior, which allowed for the discussion of many issues that belonged to the individual life field of the residents. Different systems could both stimulate public discussion and create a gap effect, providing living space for public space. For example, Chinese who broke the law in the concession were tried in a court of law, which was supposed to be a guarantee of extraterritoriality. But later, when the Chinese

broke the law in the concession, the British consul also came to the trial. Even cases were tried in Shanghai courts and then transferred to the consular hall for trial (Cao 44). This is seen as cowardly incompetence of Qing officials to hand over the extraterritoriality, but at the same time, it also provides a generous political space for the public sphere.

The concession was also the most advanced area of capitalist development. Economic development fostered the construction of public space. For example, the tax system and the formation of “Shanghai Wall Street” both contributed to the expansion of public investment and the growth of public funds. In the mid-1870s, the tax system of the Municipal Council was standardized. These included land tax, commodity tax, license tax, etc. The Municipal Council budgeted its expenditures each year, and bonds were issued for major special expenditures that exceeded the budget. This system of fiscal and tax management was in effect the emergence of a government-led economic organization that included all civic activities under the guidance of law or policy. During the Republican period, it was common for Shanghai residents to invest their money in the capital market, and in 1920 and 1921, the establishment of the Stock Exchange and the Gold Exchange attracted a large amount of investment. This sense of investment and opportunity requires them to step out from their daily lives and intimate worlds and to keep an eye on the changes taking place in the wider world. In her analysis of Shanghai’s modernity, Zhang Zhen once suggested that it was more like “New York, a multi-cultural seaside metropolis in the age of global capitalism” (Z. Zhang *Yinmu Yanshi* 58). Just as New York had Wall Street, there were banks, old-style Chinese private banks, money changers, trust companies, and stock exchanges on Jiujiang Road, Beijing Road, Ningbo Road, and Henan Road, known as Shanghai’s “Wall Street”. The birth of cinema was also incidentally related to such economic factors, such as Zhang Shichuan, one of the earliest leading figures in the Chinese film industry, who originally ran the Datong Exchange.

To a great extent, the political autonomy and economic prosperity of the concession drove the process of modernization and urbanization, including the development of urban lighting, water and sewerage works, gas, public transportation, public health, and other social and public utilities. Thus, the “ten-mile foreign field” was more than a mere display, it became a reality on a larger scale, and Shanghainese were not merely onlookers, but were wrapped up in this reality. As the urban society formed and evolved, Shanghai had its own public space and civic culture. The founding of various newspapers and magazines, the invitation and frequent exchanges of famous foreign scholars such

as Dewey, Russell, Monroe, Tagore, and Einstein, the influx of returning international students, the opening of private gardens, and the construction of public facilities have all made Shanghai itself, on a sociocultural level, inevitably a public sphere full of heterogeneity and evolution. In such an environment, the Shanghai people completed the transformation from “villagers” focused on their own interests to “citizens” focused on public and public spiritedness, and began to face the world. Shanghai’s civic culture is known as “Shanghai School Culture”, and Shanghai’s citizen class is called “Kele”. “Kele” is a mixture of class, color, classic, and club (Cao 2). This mix of Chinese and English, like “Pidgin English”, represents the germ of “vernacular modernity (Z. Zhang *Yinmu Yanshi* 99)”. It could be seen that, although Shanghai gentlemen had a special identity, the Western civic culture and local mass culture had never really been separated. “Hybridity” was the keyword of Shanghai. It had been rooted in the society, history, and culture of Shanghai since the appearance of the concession. Shanghai had a diverse and open personality and great development potential, and this is precisely why Shanghai, known as the “Paris of the east” and the “Wall Street of the east”, had the essential qualities indispensable to construct its unique public sphere.

When many events were taking place at a head-spinning speed, and Western modernity and local context intertwined, new collective subjectivity and public sphere were born, it was also the moment when the Chinese film industry, concentrated in Shanghai since the early 1890s from 1930s, was seized by an urgency to reflect the real world on the screen, as though propelled by a desire to place itself in a collection of life experiences. On January 3, 1922, *Jingpao*, a famous Shanghai tabloid, published an interesting article entitled “The Cinematized China”. It called the changes taking place in Chinese society “the cinematization of society”: fashionable women wearing European high heels and hats reflected the cinematized society of women; men and women openly communicating and giving social kisses were the cinematizations of social intercourse; house decoration and furnishings imitating the magnificent palaces in films was the cinematization of high society. This may only be an exaggeration, but it is undeniably an accurate metaphor for what is going on in society at that time. Cinema hence becomes an important allegorical structure, a system used to understand and explain social, cultural, and political phenomena. In this dissertation, these phenomena are encapsulated within the notion of vernacular modernity, and a new study field of film public sphere in this larger context demonstrates the breadth and depth of film culture that extend far beyond the silver screen and exhibition space.

Chapter 1 The Emerging Film Publishing Industry in the Cultural Landscape of Traditional Publishing and Literary Schools

When it comes to the public sphere, Wangping Street in Shanghai is an area that should not be overlooked. In 1910, newspapers were set up in Wangping Street for publication. The first were *Tianfeng Bao*, *Minli Bao*, and *Minqiang Bao*, and later there were *Taipingyang Bao*, *Zhonghua Minbao*, *Minguo Xinwen*, *Shishi Xinbao*, *Dagonghe Ribao*, *Shenzhou Ribao*, *Jing Bao*, *Huimin Ribao*, *Shanghai Huabao* and other newspapers. The three most influential newspapers in Shanghai and even in China were all located on Wangping Street, at the intersection of Wangping Street and Sanlu (now Hankou Road); on the west side was the newspaper office of *Sheng Bao*, on the East side was the office of *Xinwen Bao*, and on the south side of Wangping Street (now Fuzhou Road) was the newspaper office of *Shi Bao*. On this short street, early in the morning, newspaper vendors swarmed to deliver bundles of newspapers from the press, some on carts, some on their shoulders. Many newspaper boys carried the newspapers to all districts of Shanghai, and people who came here to inquire about the news stood all over the street.

“The history of Wangping Street is the history of the Chinese newspaper industry” (Cao 125). Wangping Street, stretched from Fuzhou Road in the south to Nanjing Road in the north, represented the history of Chinese newspapers and literature (most of the new literary works were serialized in newspapers at that time), as well as the history of the public communication media and the paper media-centered public sphere. With reference to Habermas’s public sphere theory, many studies have been conducted on the public sphere in Shanghai, targeting newspapers, magazines, literary works, and literary communities, all of which are inseparable from the Wangping Street area²⁵. According to Xu Jilin, an authoritative researcher of the public sphere in Shanghai, Wangping Street in modern Shanghai gradually became a larger public sphere with a stronger cultural and political critical capacity as newspapers, magazines, and offices congregated there (J. Xu “Jindai zhongguo de” 83).

Meanwhile, the activities of the literati are considered to be closely related to the establishment

²⁵ See P. Fang; Y. Hong; Y. Wu; J. Xu “Jindai zhongguo gonggong lingyu”.

of the film industry. For this reason, Shanghai cinema is famous for its “literariness” and is considered different from other regions. The prevalent view of Chinese film historians is that “literati film” began to take over the film world in the early 1930s, establishing the Chinese film industry in the true sense of the word, and that the emergence of excellent domestic films transformed cinema from frivolous entertainment into a serious art with social criticism, thus advancing the revolutionary cause (Cheng et al. ch.3). And before the literati and intellectuals wrote film scripts and made films by themselves, in early 1920s they had entered the film circle through publishing numerous film reviews in newspaper film supplements and founded several independent film magazines. In other words, they influenced the development of the film industry by deliberately manipulating the existing “publishing public sphere”.

The construction of the film public sphere may have begun with the gradual occupation of the traditional literary public sphere (publishing, literary federations, societies, cafes, cinemas, etc.), which eventually led to the formation of its own unique public sociocultural landscape. We might interpret these local receptions and responses as evidence of the “sinicization” of cinema, but the role of particular literary media in these contexts needs further examination. What does it mean to talk about the film public sphere in the context of the traditional publishing industry? Is there any connection between the film public sphere and the public sphere originally formed in Wangping Street? As a combination of two media, for example, can film publications form a unique public sphere? How, if at all, does the new public sphere of film publications differ from the traditional literati public sphere based on written words and rational dialogues? Where can we locate it in a broad cultural landscape of vernacular modernity, particularly with regard to the literati’s place in it when the object of the review changes from literary works to films?

The literati associated with the film industry came from the three main literary schools of Shanghai Regional Culture: Left-wing literati, Neo-sensualist literati, and the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literati. The latter two are the specific objects of the non-left-wing films I have mentioned in the preface and are denigrated and construed as inferior in the evolutionary chain of film culture and social and political history in standard Chinese film historiography that contains some prevalent ideological assumptions. I regard, however, within the reference frame of the public sphere and modernity, the interplay in and out the film publications between representational space and lived experience, the intertwining between various modernity and different literary schools, and the

symbiotic relationship between vernacular modernity and public sphere of experience exchanging, lend important insights to the reevaluation of the political and cultural status of film practices of literary schools, and the understanding of how the public sphere of the film (publication) has developed and differed from the traditional literary public sphere. Some contemporary Chinese scholars have involved this reference frame to some extent. Some refer to Habermas' public sphere theory to painstakingly prove that film practices of Neo-Sensualism and the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies also have the potential of criticality, rationality, and enlightenment modernity to change their image of "vulgar" or "low brow"²⁶, but it is difficult to say that the significance of entertainment and popularity itself has been fully recognized. The positive aesthetic and cultural significance of Neo-Sensualism and the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literati to the film industry have been ignored, or purposely omitted by Chinese film historians for their superstition on the preeminence of the left-wing literati and the classic modernist gesture of enlightenment and the Habermasian notion of the public sphere based on an enlightenment model of public discourse.

More recently, research takes the publication of *Diansheng* and *Qingqing Dianying* as examples to illustrate that as the audience base continues to expand, and under the condition of economic independence, film publications are becoming mature enough to be independent of film companies, cinemas, government agencies, and other social organizations, to operate on a completely market-oriented basis, survive independently, be self-supporting, and to report and express views on the film industry in a relatively fair and open manner. Moreover, it is believed that what *Diansheng* constructs is a "critical public film publication" that corresponds to the elitist discourse system of "the modernism of enlightenment", while the "entertainment public film publication" of the *Qingqing Dianying* corresponds to the practice of what Miriam Hansen names "vernacular modernism" (Ding 146). The limitation of the aforementioned study is that it fails to accurately understand the complex connotations of vernacular modernism and its symbiotic relationship with the public sphere, and thus still adheres to the dualistic perspectives of the so-called enlightenment and entertainment, high modernism and popular culture, fails to re-examine the interaction between verbal and visual culture in a broader scene; as reviewed in the introduction, the public sphere of vernacular modernism aims to refer to a more complete experience of modernity and a general horizon of social experience to cross various strict boundaries.

²⁶ See Xue.

This chapter explores the germination of the film public sphere in China not as an isolated phenomenon but in the context of Shanghai's literary culture. I chronologically investigate that the film publishing synchronic to the promotion of vernacular modernity has evolved from its limited initial state to the formation of a vast space including the mass, which can be called the "public sphere". In 1.1, I discuss the emergence of a public sphere of film publishing, which has been deeply influenced by the traditional publishing industry and in which industry experts are the main actors, to translate and distribute information. 1.2 discusses how, as a result of the efforts of left-wing literature, more public discourse about cinema is accompanied by the formation of a public sphere dealing with a broader social dimension, such as political issues. Left-wing film magazines that emphasize rational discussion and criticism have limitations in terms of audience. But the price of exclusion from the masses paid for the enrichment of public issues brought about by rational discussion is compensated for by re-sensitization through inflammatory emotions and radical behavior. 1.3 discusses that as the activism of the left-wing literati unconsciously contributed to the development of the Neo-sensualist school and the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school, this resulted in the formation of public spheres that involves the broader public. I consider the Neo-sensualist school and the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school as exemplary cases whose novelty in both sensual and emotional elements and material format conveyed by the physiological experience of visual stimulation, along with the nonverbal discourse construction, and perceptual experience exchange through traditional values, ethnicity, intimacy, reflect and shape a major transformation in the experience of modernity. And through this intensive experience with vernacular modernity, they further widen the public sphere in which the masses can also participate.

In so doing, I hope to bring out the diverse public discourses in the public sphere of film publications, registered and actively shaped by vernacular modernity, which provides the context for the early establishment of the film industry in China. By analyzing a range of different discursive construction processes regarding shared concerns, modes of communication, and the people involved, I explore how the public sphere of film publishing bridges various complex elements in its practice of vernacular modernity. Specifically, I examine how this public sphere framed the introduction of cinema in China between literary and cinematic, rational and sensual, serious and popular, Western modernity and indigenous traditions, and how it contributed to the production of a heterogeneous and fluctuating public sphere in early film exhibitions and productions and

addressed the spectators in multiple notions of spectatorship.

On the one hand, the information dissemination based on traditional Chinese texts, the discursive space with the tenet of “discussing cinema rationally” and “discussing politics rationally with cinema” can be considered as the heritage of the Chinese bourgeois public sphere due to its solemnity, quasi-objectivity, and criticality. On the other hand, the emotional incitement and the social activism, the sensory material spiritual pleasure of exhibitionist and physicality brought by portraits, film stills, and advertisements, etc., the traditional ethical system’s effect of “touching people’s heart” and the emotional support of “human relations” and “national characteristics”, can be regarded as mass discourse due to their radicality, amusement, popularity, and the exchange of perceptual experiences. To some extent, we can distinguish between “bourgeois” and “mass” tastes, but such tastes and discourses abound and are often mixed in the public sphere of film publication and the subordinate public spheres of various literary genres. The public sphere fluctuates on a sort of continuum mediated by various types of modernity and political and cultural contexts, with the vernacular styles always occupying a place.

Compared with the traditional literary public sphere, this public sphere has undergone structural changes: its population includes Chinese bourgeois citizens, the so-called “small citizens”, and the masses. It is organized not only for the needs and common concerns of knowledge, enlightenment, rational dialogue, and political discussion, but also for the needs of the daily life experience and sensory material modernity, and for the common anxiety about the various realities brought about by the influx of Western modernity into China, which leads to their common need for a more acceptable localized, and “familiar” modernity experience in the interstice of tradition and trend, so as to obtain a sense of security, adaptability to modernity and living strategies in modern society. People who gather are not only thinkers and changers seeking spiritual independence, but also perceivers and consumers immersed in a fantastical and exotic world and those who are lost and nostalgic in modern cities. The different ways and reasons for its organizing mean that its functions are also diverse: it is not only a public sphere for the perception and dissemination of modernity but also a public vision for local response to modernity. The public sphere of film publications plays a vital role in the adaptive process of film as a new thing, it chronicles the process of how Chinese values understand, consider, and discuss films in various ways, and bridges the differences between the “exoticness” and the viewing habit of local readers and viewers.

1.1 The Introduction of Cinema in Traditional Publishing

From 1921 to 1925, since the beginning of the development of film publications, more than 30 early film publications have been published (W. Zhang 212-234; 289-344). In the form of publications, there are texts, pictorials text-picture combinations, and so on; in terms of periodicals, there are weekly, semimonthly, monthly and occasional ones. Reading film magazines may be understood as an extension of the film-watching experience, but it is also a process of acquiring information.

In the early stage of its development, most of the film publications were in the category of film news reports, such as the *Yingxi Congbao*, *Yingxi Zazhi*, *Dianying Zhoubao*, *Dianying Zazhi*, *Yingxi Shijie* and so on. Moreover, the first independent film publication in China, the *Yingxi Congbao*, was published by Shanghai Shen Bao, the most influential newspaper in Shanghai and nationwide. The first combination of the two cultural types, the newspaper industry, and the film industry, has set the tone of the public opinion field of film publication: It will occupy the existing mechanism of “publishing public space”, and continue the information dissemination function of the traditional publishing industry.

The *Yingxi Congbao*'s main content was about American films and film industry news, and it had a column on personalities, which contains biographies of more than ten Hollywood stars such as Chaplin and their shooting feature. Several other publications also followed the same path, publishing news about the film industry and introducing film content and actors. Some of them, such as *Yingxi Shijie*, also opened columns such as “the voice of readers”, which made the publication livelier and widely circulated. In December 1921, the publication of *Yingxi Zazhi*, which was founded a little later than the *Yingxi Congbao*, became the model for many film publications to follow, as well as the most important magazine in this period. This was mainly due to its advanced objectives: “1. to promote the value of films in literature and art, 2. to introduce valuable films to readers, 3. to prevent the popularity of harmful films, 4. to fight for the personality of Chinese people in the film and theater industry” (Gu 10). On the one hand, this idea embodies a kind of artistic and theoretical periodical management idea and establishes the status of cinema as an independent art and the necessity of establishing film publication; on the other hand, it represents the beginning of conveying information to the film industry and movie fans through the mass media. Continuing this

style, there are “small news in the film industry”, “small telegram in the film industry” and other columns in *Dianying Zhoubao*, with a real-time broadcast of the film industry news, the opening and marketing status of movie theaters, etc. In addition to the film news reports, *Dianying Zazhi* published a lot of papers on the overall summary and theoretical improvement of the characteristics of film art. For example, Ge Gongzhen’s “Shadow Play and News Career”, Xu Gongmei’s “costume problems of Shadow Play”, Ma Er’s “Essential Features of Shadow Play Script”, Zheng Zhengqiu’s “Writing Experience”, Cheng Bugao’s “Film Cinematography”, Xu Gongmei’s “Action Technique of Film and Drama”, and so on.

In this space, readers could learn about the operation mode of the film institutions, understand the dynamics of the Chinese and foreign film worlds, including film technology and film expertise, regular newsletters, film descriptions, life stories of Chinese and foreign movie stars, directors, scriptwriters, and even cinematographers, shooting sidelights, as well as know in advance which films were being shot, which films were about to be released, and what the plots of the films that were being released were. In short, the early film magazines met the needs of a community of film fans for information, and as Zhang Zhen said they served “as a public sphere for disseminating information about the films that were being shown in the city” (Z. Zhang *Yinmu Yanshi* 135).

Since it seems abstract and broad to regard film publications themselves as a kind of public sphere for information dissemination, I will continue to explore which people are the subjects of the public sphere formed in society with these early film publications as an opportunity. I begin with the shortcomings of the early film press: like the gap between possibility and reality facing the public sphere of traditional publishing, it retained the principles of accessibility, publicity, and openness to all people, but in reality, only a small industrial community was initially formed around it.

The most obvious limitation of the early film magazines is that the contents of these magazines were “emphasis outside over inside”. In the initial period of Chinese film publication, when Chinese film was still in its infancy, the main function of film magazines was to act as “cultural translators”, that was, to promote foreign films and the introduction of advanced technological means, and to disseminate real-time information. This was a common and inevitable phenomenon at the time. In the *Spring and Autumn of the Republic of China*, Jiang Shangou mentioned that many of the early film publications found their material in the “press book” of foreign films, which were a kind of

non-public offering publications for theaters to reference and to advertise (1).

For example, from the catalog of *Yingxi Zazhi*, foreign films accounted for about 75% of the total number of articles, and many of these films were newly released. Examples include *Ruth of The Rockies* (29 August 1920), *Pirate Gold* (15 August 1920), *The Money Changers* (31 October 1920), *The Third Eye* (23 May 1920), etc. As for these films, the magazine not only introduces the director, writers, actors, and cinematographers but also includes biographies of each actor or director, as well as a detailed 10,000-word synopsis. The writing style is purely on the classical fiction side, such as the introduction of *Pirate Gold*, which divides the film into 10 episodes, is very similar to the pattern of the traditional “zhanghai (structure) novels”, with extensive use of idioms and classical Chinese style exclamatory vocabulary and phrases, recording the plot in vivid detail, including the character’s demeanor, actions, language, and even mental activities:

第五集 咖啡中之迷藥。

在此千鈞一髮之際。水而忽冒出一人。衣履盡濕。遍體淋漓。攀船舷而上。伊何人乎。呼安是矣。初呼安在水中。覺氣漸窒。知其父必為人所脅。遂解其衣出水。面時。碎字忒與凱迨方以冷語譏奧斯汀。大怒。目眦幾裂。與之出船。已復入水。取賒金既上。搥機而船。勿行視之。機已損矣。乃自修理之。是時。煙突現於海平線上。一商輪自遠而至。船主曰。林克願渡奧斯汀至岸。呼安大喜。偕其父登。詎知碎字忒亦在是。見林克允之渡。遂招林克而語之曰。汝何德渡我之仇人。汝負我銀尚未償。則汝須從余命以撲殺此獠。林客被脅不得以允之。陽為欸待而陰置迷藥於咖啡。奧斯汀父子不知也。誤飲之。覺盡失。

劇中人：呼安—Ivanhoe “Hoey” Tuttle 凱迨—Kard 碎字忒—Siebert 奧斯汀—Aust’n Tutte

(Episode 5: the overpowering drug in coffee).

(At this very moment, a man suddenly emerged from the water, his clothes and feet wet, and water dripping from his body. He climbed up from the side of the boat. Who was it? It was Hoey. Hoey was in the water at first and knew that his father must have been threatened. Then he took off his clothes and came out of the water. When faced, Siebert and Kardy sneered at Aust’n with a cold voice. Hoey was furious that his eyes almost cracked. He was out of the

ship with his father and they have reentered the water again.... At that moment, smoke burst on the sea level. A merchant ship arrived from a distance. The owner said: Link was willing to cross Aust'n to the shore. Hoey was overjoyed and took his father aboard. He did not expect that Siebert was also there. When Siebert saw that Link had also carried Hoey, he said to Link "Why do you ferry my enemies? The money you owe me hasn't been paid yet. You must do as I say and kill them". Link was threatened and had to agree to his demand. He pretended to serve Aust'n and Hoey, but secretly put the overpowering drug into the coffee. Aust'n and his son did not know it. They drank it by mistake and lost consciousness.) (Xin 46)

If it were not for the exotic transliterated names that often appeared in the text, the reader might not immediately realize that it was an introduction to a foreign film but might mistake it for a new short story by literati. The information dissemination of the early film magazines underwent "double translation", which first processed visual information into textual information, and then transformed the modern western style into the classical Chinese style. Such a film magazine serves as a sort of "film manual", which is not merely a metaphor. "Film manuals" were real and were usually distributed in movie theaters to help moviegoers to understand the film. These booklets, in English and Chinese, were always taken home by audiences as a "collection of novels" (D. Wang 14). The practice of distributing film manuals to audiences who already had the opportunity to experience films through direct visual stimulation indicates that at that time, written words to understand the content of the film was a "rigid demand" in line with the Chinese audience's habit, rather than a kind of auxiliary means. Early film magazines played a similar, if not more authoritative and professional role than film manuals: film magazines usually informed readers and viewers advance notice of the film's content, backstory, character analysis, and even each line of dialogue, giving them enough time to digest and understand the content. This reveals an important phenomenon: in the early stages, people may prefer to "read films" rather than "watch films". Beyond the superficial combination of the film magazine, this tendency implies the deeper connection between the publishing culture and films, that is, the "film audience" must be a well-educated group in the first place. They are "film readers" who tend to read films as traditional literary works.

This is also evident in the Chinese translations of film titles, for example, *Ruth of The Rockies* (1920) is translated as "宝石奇案" (the case of the precious stone), *Pirate Gold* (1920) is translated

as “海底黄金” (undersea gold), and *The Right to Happiness* (1919) is translated as “同胞异命” (siblings with different lives).” [Fig. 1.1] (*Yingxi Zazhi* 19; 41; 59). Regardless of whether the meaning of these translations is appropriate or not, these four-character names are very reminiscent of Chinese idiomatic forms and linguistic conventions, with considerable classical literary overtones and classical Chinese flavor. This is certainly a naming convention that will be familiar to Chinese audiences, a familiarity cultivated by traditional publishing industries such as literature. It can eliminate the strangeness of foreign films and make them more popular, and especially meet the taste of Chinese audiences who have a certain cultural foundation.



Fig. 1.1 *Ruth of the Rockies* and *Pirate Gold* in *Yingxi Zazhi* (1921)

The content (foreign film news or modern film techniques) and how the early film magazines disseminated information (mainly literary texts) allow us to speculate that the founders and audiences of the film magazines are, to some extent, elitist cliques. We can analyze and verify this feature by comparing the authors of several of the most important magazines of the time, such as *Yingxi Chunqiu*, *Dianying Zazhi*, and *Yingxi Zazhi*.²⁷

<i>Yingxi Chunqiu</i>		<i>Dianying Zazhi</i>		<i>Yingxi Zazhi</i>	
周世勋	25	程步高	22	锄非子	6
敏荪	16	任矜苹	17	顾肯夫	3
汤笔花	12	卢伯	10	不浊(陆洁)	2

²⁷ Data from National Newspaper Index. Red font represents the duplicate authors.

程步高	11	K.K.K.	9	寿芝	2
世勋	9	怀麟	8	张光宇	2
味辛（何公超）	9	剑云	6	心造	2
KKK	6	陆洁	6	柏荫	2
福莘	6	周世勋	5	欣夫	2
忆兰室主	5	漱玉	5	絮	2
步高	5	白谷	4	Bert Green	1
陈寿荫	5	郑正秋	4	冯心造	1
朱菊影	4	陈寿荫	4	刘豁公	1
K.K.K.	5	KKK	3	君健	1
影探	3	伯长	3	周剑云	1
笔花	3	凤昔醉	3	大别	1
菊影	3	宗贤	3	夫肯	1
观影阁主	3	徐公美	3	庆月	1
韦	3	昔醉	3	张志芳	1
刘笑溪	2	晓白	3	徐欣夫	1
易翰如	2	曹元恺	3	志伊	1
琳	2	汤笔花	3	志芳	1
胡亚光	2	文火之	3	普及影片公司	1
胡仇湘	2	肯夫	3	硫磺	1
胡同光	2	记者	3	裴君健	1
蒋雄	2	郑鹪鸪	3	锄	1
迪先	2	顾肯夫	3	陈人杰	1
邃仙	2	鲍振青	3		
陆	2	B.K	2		

Tbl. 1.1 The Contributors of Film Magazines

As shown in the table above, the editors and contributors of different magazines are heavily duplicated. The major film magazines are all self-funded by the same “coterie”, that is to say, it is a platform for peer-to-peer information exchange and consultation. For example, Gu Kenfu and Lu Jie, the founders of *Yingxi Zazhi*, continued to be active in the film industry after the magazine ceased publication. Gu Kenfu was later involved in the founding of *Dianying Zazhi*, *Shenzhou Tekan*, and was also a writer for *Yinxing* and other magazines. Lu Jie also founded *Yingxi Banzhoukan*,

Dazhonghua Baihe Tekan, and others. As for Cheng Bugao, the contributor of *Yingxi Zazhi*, not only co-founded *Chenxing*, *Dianyng Zazhi*, and *Yingxi Chunqiu* but also contributed to *YoulianTekan*, *Yingxi Shenghuo*, and *Mingxing Yuebao*. At that time, not many people engaged in the work of film publications, and the founders and contributors of early film publications were the same people moving laterally. It was a small group of people who belonged to the literary world but were drawn into the film world. They were the earliest moviegoers and the backbone of the film press, which later became the mainstay of the film industry. So, the early film publications founded by literati might be a kind of “coterie film publications, i.e., fanzine”. Moreover, according to previous research, people who were able to consume foreign films at that time, read classical Chinese, and understand articles at a certain professional level, should be the intellectual class with a higher level of education (Z. Wang 40), which means that the production and consumption groups formed around these film magazines probably overlapped to a large extent: at this time, the film magazines hardly reach the wider population, that is, the imaginary, infinite group of the film audience.

In *Dianyng Zazhi*, the writer who signed his name “Mr. Ma Er” deplored the smallness of the film community, and the disadvantages of film magazine of “favoring the outside over the inside”:

The figures who study films are no more than two hundred. Imagine, how such a narrow Chinese film industry can satisfy the need for film magazines to explore and discuss. Besides that, many of the authors, due to their relationship with various companies and friendship with actors, for those films that are not very appropriate, can only say its benefits and dare not or unable to speak freely, and the scope of film publications has been narrowed down to a lower level. Then when it comes to technical research, of the ten people, there may not be one or two experienced people. Occasionally, some experienced people appear, but they are not willing to share it with others. In order not to appear superficial, some people have to pretend to be experts, choose a few special terms, and write an article perfunctorily. Readers may think they are keeping people guessing, but in fact, they merely can't talk about it more deeply. However, couldn't Chinese film magazines be modeled on foreign film magazines? This is not acceptable. Why? Because if the main business of a Chinese film magazine is translation, they are bound to be an advertisement for a foreign company. It's unworthy to abandon oneself to work for others. (E. Ma 1-2)

According to “Mr. Ma Er”, the narrowness of the Chinese film industry has resulted in a scarcity of subjects for film magazines to discuss, i.e., topics related to domestic films. Besides, because of the narrow space, the anonymity of film critics is not well guaranteed, and they cannot speak freely. Experienced and knowledgeable people are reluctant to present their views to others, while non-professionals who do not know anything about films prefer to pose as experts and make superficial comments. The narrowness of the Chinese film industry and the current situation of blindly translating and distributing foreign film industry news are mutually causal. Due to the objective conditions for the development of the Chinese film industry and the narrowness of the film industry, the early film magazines were inclined to disseminate news of the foreign film industry and used a classical literary style of translation and introduction method. But this, in turn, has exacerbated the inability of the film industry to expand rapidly, so that only a small number of people, well-educated Chinese Western intellectuals and international students, have the ability and interest to enter this public sphere of information exchange. In 1926, the book *Zhongguo Yingxi Dagan* recorded precious data on the circulation of the relatively long-lived and successful *Dianying Zazhi* in early film publications: according to records, the film magazine sold about 3000 copies of each issue. (Xu, Chihen 143).

Translating foreign film magazines does nothing more than promote foreign films and spread real-time news of the foreign film scene—which, of course, makes sense, as it at the very least allows the film magazines to serve as a medium to communicate and bring together the film community (albeit a community of perhaps 200 people), enabling them to disseminate information, communicate and interact. However, in his article, Mr. Ma was neither satisfied with the narrow status quo of the film industry, nor with the fact that film magazines only disseminated foreign information, which was a common concern among the founders of film magazines at that time. For example, in the Preface of *Yingxi Zazhi*, Zhou Jianyun emphasized that he only wished for two things: “first, to correct the wrong observation of Chinese people made by foreign films imported into China; second, to advocate Chinese people make their own noble films that can promote the national glory (6-7)”. This dissatisfaction with and resistance to the “west wind to the east” prompted the founders of the film publication to consciously expand its audience, introduce audience participation in the expression of opinions, and thus indirectly uphold the most basic principle of the public sphere, namely, the principle of openness.

For example, although the authors of literati-founded film journals overlapped a great deal, their use of a variety of pseudonyms at the time served to some extent to widen the space of public opinion. These pseudonyms objectively have the function of avoiding obvious individual and group traces. The left-wing writer Xia Yan, for example, had 120 pseudonyms (B. Xiao 55). Lu Jie also adopted a number of pen names, including “Jie Fu”, “Bu Zhuo”, and “Sansan”; Cheng Bugao also adopted the pseudonym “KKK”; Gu Kenfu’s pseudonyms included “Ken Fu”, “Fu Ken” and so on. Secondly, starting with one of the earliest film publications in China, *Yingxi Zazhi*, all kinds of film publications have attempted to introduce public participation. The attitude of welcoming submissions as expressed in the “contribution brief” of *Yingxi Zazhi* Volume 1, Issue 1, and the establishment of columns such as “film comment” and “film miscellaneous talk”, in which the author’s name is concealed, have realized a form of expression with the “public sphere” nature for audience participates in the discussion.

A case in point is the letter a student sent to *Dianying Zhoubao*, following the launch of a new, revised edition of the magazine in April 1925, expressing his appreciation for the new edition in fairly vernacular terms compared to the published article, while also making a number of comments:

我是一个很爱观看电影的学生。而且尤其是爱观看中国的影片。所以一见国产影片出映。就像磁针见铁一般。必定要去看了。方纔快意。不过看了之后。时常使我失望、因为没有辨别公正的电影出版物。来指导我们呀。自从贵出版社出版了电影杂志。好像黑暗的地方。见了一线光明似的...现在对于贵报。尚有几件讨论的事情。写在下面。(一)对于封面和插图。多选我国影片。以符提倡国粹的宗旨。对于欧美插图。参加什之三四。(二)言论公正。切勿存偏见之弊。多载本事和短评。以及公司与各明星的消息。(三)辟讨论一栏。使读者得以研究。(四)抱远大的眼光。对于国产影片。力谋改良。篇幅的中间。切勿夹杂广告。以碍读者的眼力。以上四条。想诸君必能实行。或者反笑我是杞人之忧吗。再者。贵社对于郑君鹧鸪。可否出以特号。示知。感甚。良钺。

(I am a student who is very fond of going to the movies and especially loves watching Chinese films. As soon as there is a Chinese film showing somewhere, I’m definitely going to see it like a magnet attracted to iron. Yet, I often found myself disappointed afterward because there were no adequate film publications to guide viewers like me. Since you published a film

magazine. I feel like I've seen a light in the darkness... Now for your newspaper, there may be a few things to discuss. Write them down as follows. (1) Cover and illustration. Please choose more Chinese films to promote the national essence. As for European and American illustrations, please choose three or four out of ten. (2) Fairness of speech. Don't be prejudiced. The magazine should have lots of source materials and short reviews and news about the companies and the stars. (3) Please set a discussion column to enable the reader to study. (4) Be forward-looking and strive to improve the standard of domestic films. No advertising in the middle of the page so as not to blind the readers' eyes. I think you can do all of the above, or maybe you will laugh at me for an alarmist's worrying? Besides, as for Zheng Zhegu, might you publish a special issue of him? Thank you very much. Liangyue.) (Zhu 15)

The editor quickly responded to the student's comments and made revisits accordingly:

盛意敬谢。兹将先生之所提出的几个问题。谨复如下。(一)嗣后当遵尊命。(二)本报英明《礼拜六银幕消息》。对于消息自然十分注意。不过多载本事似乎缺少兴味。本报每期或选登一篇。并将剧中扮演者。以及导演的姓名。介绍与读者。不知先生以为如何。(三)自第四期起。即辟讨论一栏。惟愿读者加以辅助。常惠鸿文乃荷。(四)此本本报之宗旨也。至于篇幅的中间。或可不加入广告。至于郑君专号。拟在开追悼会时出之。总而言之。本报颇欢迎读者之指教。以上所答。皆以忠诚出之。所以对于良钺先生之盛意。谨表感谢。

(Thank you very much for your valuable questions. I would like to reply as follows. (1) As your wish. (2) This newspaper is called "Saturday Screen News". Of course, we attach great importance to our sources. However, it seems that it will be a lack of interest in publishing more source materials. We may choose to publish one story per issue and introduce the names of the actors and directors to the readers. What's your opinion? (3) Starting with the fourth issue, a discussion column will be created. We hope readers will help and contribute more articles. (4) This is the purpose of this newspaper. As for the middle of the page, it can be left unadvertised. As for the special issue of Zheng Zhegu, it is planned to be published during the memorial service. In a nutshell, this newspaper welcomes suggestions from readers. The above

answers are all my faithful thoughts. I would like to thank Mr. Liangyue for his kindness. Thank you very much.) (Zhu 15-16)

I give this example mainly to illustrate that although the public sphere, with the early film publications as an opportunity, is actually a relatively small (200 to thousands of people), specialized public sphere, used only for the dissemination and exchange of cutting-edge film information from the West, the more ordinary “reader” who is clearly not part of the “film industry”, has also joined the public sphere with a more colloquial and popular discourse. This is evident from the writing style of the two letters. The student’s letter-writing style is very close to modern Chinese, which is simple and easy to understand, while the magazine editor’s reply is consistent with the semi-classical style of writing, a more professional discourse that is fostered and trained out by literary works, newspapers and other traditional publishing industry. What is remarkable, however, is that the professional discourse has responded positively to this comparatively vernacular and the mass discourse, showing a gesture of tolerance and modesty. In fact, when the student offered his opinion, he had worried about being ridiculed as an alarmist and perhaps did not realize that almost all of his ideas would be taken up. For this reason, I think this imperfect space of communication can be called the initial state of the public sphere because in principle it is open to anyone: any audience with access to these mass media influences is potentially the public participating in the discussion. The film magazines at this time can be said to have taken on the shape of the public sphere. With the further development of the film business and the expansion of the film industry, film publications will evolve, as their creators expect, from a public platform for the dissemination of information by a few industry insiders to a place for the formation of a “public voice” in the society.

1.2 The Left-Wing Literati: Rational Discussion versus Inflammatory Emotions and Radical Behavior

With the growth of the film industry and the expansion of the film community, film publications from 1925 onwards gradually showed a trend toward inclusiveness. Most of the film publications not only retained columns for film news reports, film stills, sidelights, and translations

of film theory but also a large number of articles on film criticism. For example, *Yingxi Chunqiu* Yinmu Pinglun, *Zhongguo Dianying Zazhi*, *Dianying Yuebao*, etc., all of these publications focus commentary, such as *Yingxi Chunqiu*, which was edited by Cheng Bugao and Tang Bihua and first published in March 1925, pointed out in its preface “our manifesto” that “the producers are aware of the evils of their works, but they are contemptuously resorting to the god of money to bribe one or two so-called critics to support them and deceive the public”. It mercilessly castigated the imports of insulting films, such as *Yikuaiqian* (A Dollar, 1925), *Shenseng* (Monk, 1925), and severely criticized some other domestic inferiors like *Biehou* (After the Parting, 1924). Compared to the situation of looking for material in “press books” abroad, film publications at this stage began to take a more active role in forming and expressing opinions. However, not all magazines take a neutral and public stance in this process. A famous major film publication in Shanghai at that time, *Qingqing Dianying*, summed up for us “the nature of the categories of film publications in Shanghai”. In my opinion, this classification has actually introduced the evaluation criteria of “publicity”:

...The following is a classification of the nature of Shanghai film publications so that readers can make some reference when purchasing and reading them. First, as for film publications belonging to the company authority, all news reports are based on the propaganda strategy of the film company or theater, just as the political parties call it ‘official news’. Except for the *Jincheng Yuekan*, which features photos and news about Xinhua, because the Jincheng Theater also shows Xinhua’s films, the rest, such as *Yihua* and *Xinhua*, are purely propaganda publications (the entertainment publications of Shanghai’s two major newspapers *Shen Bao* and *Xin Bao* is classified under the first category due to advertising). Second, providing reports based on the readers’ needs, and spending based on operating income, this kind of magazine has a purified position in which each filmmaker’s actions, good or bad, are disclosed as much as possible, sometimes as a mirror for them, and also publish much interesting information that readers need to know. This magazine and other fanzines are in this category. Thirdly, private journals. The *Yisheng* which Pan Yousheng founded for Hudie is a representative of this kind. And now there is also the magazine *XX Life*, in line with Pan Yousheng’s style—the husband makes his wife famous—which has quietly taken a place among film publications. This kind

of publication does not have a long life after all, and the death of *Yisheng* after the seven issues is rather pathetic. Both the official and the reader's magazines are fine, but the private magazines using deception as a means, making readers puppets, are nearly shameless and should be classified as inferior. Does the reader think so? (Liu, Long 1)

In a sense, an "official film publication" can also be considered a public film publication, yet clearly the "official" here is not official in the true sense, but rather the "pseudo-officialdom" of film companies determined by the economic discourse. There are many examples of this type of publication. After 1925, it became fashionable for film companies and cinemas to create affiliated "Tekan" (special issues). For example, *Mingxing Tekan*, *Shenzhou Tekan*, *Changcheng Tekan*, *Dazhonghua Baihe Tekan*, *Kaixin Tekan*, *YouLian Tekan*, *Huaju Tekan* and more than a dozen other publications directly titled "special issue", all of which affiliated with a film company and use that company's name as the title of the publication. They all pretty much follow the same publication model. Whenever a company produces a new film, it publishes an issue of "XX film extra", or "XX film special issue". For example, *Shenzhou Tekan* is the propaganda publication of the Shenzhou Film Company, introducing a new film per issue, such as the first issue of *Huahaoyueyuan* (Blooming flowers and full moon, 1925), the second issue of *Daoyizhijiao* (A moral obligation, 1926), the third issue of *Nanweile Meimei* (Difficult for sisters, 1926).

The contents were divided into two parts: the first part focused on the new films, including the personal information of directors and actors, the storyline of the films, the shooting process and feature, the cast and crew list, and so on, with some stills; the second part published reviews of the new films and even creative views by the writers and directors. The purpose of the special issue is straightforward: to publicize the company's new films, expand their influence, and attract audiences, in order to generate significant box office revenues. One of the principals of Mingxing Yingpian Gongsì (Star Company), Zhou Jianyun, said bluntly that the purpose of *Chenxing* was to spread the news of new films as an opportunity to generate advertising effects. Due to its affiliation with a film company, the special issues are effective in providing timely information to the film industry, widening the scope of dissemination, and attracting more viewers; however, due to its limited self-interest in the film's introduction and promotion, some of the articles are inevitably exaggerated. Many writers are employees of the company, and for reasons of work and personal relationships,

they are unlikely to give an objective assessment of the company's film. As a result, when a film is released, it is not uncommon for the special issues to be abuzz with praise and the audience to be misled (W. Zhang 3).

By means of a modified classification of the nature of film publications of the time, the scope of public film publications can be tentatively defined: they are neither "official" publications affiliated with political organizations or film companies and other branches, nor the "private" publications that deceive the audience to promote a star for the personal benefit. These publications are completely independent and self-financing through market-oriented operations and are able to report and clearly express their positions and opinions on the film industry. This type of film publication is between "official" and "private" and is free from the control of institutions and private individuals. It is an independent discourse space with more conscious value pursuit and stronger social, cultural, and political consciousness.

Most of these film publications were founded by literati, who always had the belief that "Tian Xia Wei Gong (天下为公)" (the world is for the public)²⁸, and a strong sense of social responsibility. They intended to use written words, films, and the combination of verbal and visual culture to influence the film world and even the whole society. In this case, film criticism is often not only about the evaluation of a particular film, but also about the film ontology, film and education, film and politics, and other public issues. In this section, I turn to central concerns of this atmosphere of "discussing films rationally" and even "discussing politics rationally mediated by films", as well as the emergence of "dialogue and public voice", which depends upon and is obviously embodied by the practice of left-wing film publications. Some scholars have argued that left-wing cultural movements are inextricably linked to the development of the democratic system²⁹, which is a broad issue that cannot be discussed in detail here, but a case study of the left-wing film publications

²⁸ "Tian Xia Wei Gong" originally meant that the throne of the emperor was passed on to the virtuous rather than his own son, and then became a correct social and political ideal. This sentence originated from the Confucian classic book *Li Ji (Book of Rites)*. Confucianism not only has a strong spirit and feelings of participating in public affairs and governing the country, but also is always committed to building an ideal society. *Li Ji* recorded the ideal society and its scene that Confucius yearned for, that is, the Datong society of "When the Great Tao prevailed, the whole world was one community for the public. The most fundamental characteristic of Datong society is "public". Everyone is no longer covered by his own desires but has public consciousness and selflessness. The society presents a good order of political harmony, the country is stable, and the people are happy. The thoughts founded by Confucius gradually formed a complete and multi school system of Confucianism. For thousands of years, Confucianism has been revered by the Confucians, the ruling class, and the intellectual class. It is not only the most influential school of thought in China, but also the mainstream consciousness of China from ancient times to the present, which has a profound impact on the Chinese intellectual class.

²⁹ See Mao and Cui; Y. Lu.

allows us to examine their contribution to the film public sphere.

In the 1930s, left-wing writers had begun to dominate the film supplements and magazines of Shanghai's major newspapers. In March and June of 1930, the left-wing literati, Xia Yan, published the literary and art criticism magazines of *Yishu* and *Shalun* one after another; since May 1932, major Shanghai newspapers have started to publish left-wing film supplements. The emergence of left-wing film publications is associated with a series of social chain reactions: The harsh control by the Central National Government of the Republic of China, the defeat of the Revolutionary Movement (Shanghai massacre of 1927), and enemy aggression (1931 Mukden Incident) led to the rise in popularity of left-wing film publications that advocated realism and the creation of films for the masses. The popularity serves not only for commercial gain (which ensures the financial resources and the pure position of the left-wing publications) but also fosters dialogue and opinion formation on an ideological and cultural level.

Dianying Yishu (Film Art), a left-wing professional film magazine published in July 1932, provides an illustrative example. The launch statement clearly stated the purpose of the publication:

Our responsibilities in running this publication are: (1) to improve the film knowledge of our audience, (2) to promote the people engaged in the film industry on the right path, and (3) to highlight the close relationship between film and society. Our actions are: (1) the need for correct criticism, (2) the introduction to new knowledge of films from various countries, and (3) the introduction of the ABC of film scholarship, as well as other discussions about the progress of cinema. (Ling "Daifakan ci" 1)

First, as the advocate of the Vernacular Movement, the writing style of left-wing writers has completely departed from the colors of classical Chinese. Left-wing magazines, at the very least, are no longer entirely oriented to the traditional "scholar-bureaucrat" class. Implicit in this article is dissatisfaction with the status quo of the film industry; whether it is to popularize new knowledge of the film or to "instill the ABC of film scholarship", which shows an intention to enlighten film audiences and readers from scratch. The pursuit of "correctness" and "criticism" is not only for the sake of film art and career itself; they seek to "highlight the close relationship between film and society, with the ultimate goal to influence society. This discourse underscores the concern with the

new public sphere of “society”³⁰, and has itself already created a new space; just as this magazine claims to be the only theoretical magazine in China, “a space for open struggle, theoretical research, objective criticism, and academic introduction” (*Dianying Yishu* Cover page). Almost from the outset, the left-wing film press itself illuminates what is necessary to build a higher-quality public sphere, namely openness and criticality. The editor of the first issue of the *Dianying Yishu* magazine makes the following declaration:

I hope you will criticize the writing in this magazine. Everything must be in a positive and negative theoretical debate before a correct conclusion can be reached... We earnestly hope that readers and practitioners of the film industry will contribute their great work to this completely open and objective publication. (“Bianji houji” 12; no. 1)

This philosophy has been carried through to the very end of the magazine, with each issue bearing the bold words, “please criticize this magazine text”. If the publication is, as the editor says, “completely open and objective” and is intended to “reach correct conclusions through dialectical and rational debate”, then the publication at the very least provides society with a forum for open expression and discussion through rational dialogue. Almost every issue of the publication contains many articles in the form of dialogues that discuss the film business, as well as a collection and response to the sentiments of the general readership, to name but a few. For example, the first issue of *Dianying Yishu* published a long letter in which a film practitioner named Li Pingqian recalled “in detail and faithfully” his ups and downs in the film industry. At the end of the article, the editor added four notes in response to this letter:

1. In Mr. Li’s manuscript, we understand that there is no way out for art for art’s sake.
2. Mr. Li is still in a state of depression despite his changes.
3. We hope that in the future, Mr. Li will spare no effort to pay attention to all the social contradictions and use films to cry for the oppressed people.
4. We hope that those who are engaged in Chinese films like Mr. Li will also express their opinions faithfully. (P. Li 10)

³⁰ Society is a new concept induced by Japanese roughly from the late Qing dynasty. See Lee, *Xiandaixing*. p. 240.

This space for “rational discussion of the film” is not only aimed at “film industry practitioners”, but also attempts to reach out to a broader readership. Each issue actively asks readers to criticize it, “intending to make it a publication for all readers!” [Fig. 1.3]. (“Qingpipan: duzhezhu jun” 10). In the second issue of *Dianying Yishu*, the editor also expressed his excitement at receiving letters from readers:

In this issue, we have a sincere and faithful letter from Zong Xingmin. This is the first time that a direct relationship has been established between this magazine and its readers. We hope that all of our readers will be willing to point out the mistakes of this publication without any hesitation so that it can become the publication that readers themselves need. Dear readers, may you march with us! (“Bianji houji” 12; no. 2)

Moreover, *Dianying Yishu* magazine also launched two voting campaigns, allowing the audience to select the “Three Representative Works of Domestic Films—Three Films You’re Satisfied with” and “Our Film Publications— the Film Publication You’re Satisfied with.” [Fig. 1.2] (“Benkan liangda toupiao” 12). To encourage readers to participate, ten people will be selected to receive a full year’s issue of the magazine. The picture on the right is the style of the ballot attached to the last page of the magazine.

Since then, *Dianying Yishu* has been more direct in its attention to “mass discourse”. For example, in the fourth issue, an open “Call for Papers” was published: “solicit of mass reading materials: we need, we welcome the theories of struggle, the reports of exposing the truth! the faithful narration, the rigorous criticism—and other mass manuscripts.” [Fig. 1.3] (“Dazhongdi duwu” 8). And the magazine previews that “Ms. Li Lili’s critique of this magazine” will be published in the fifth issue (“Dazhongdi duwu” 8).

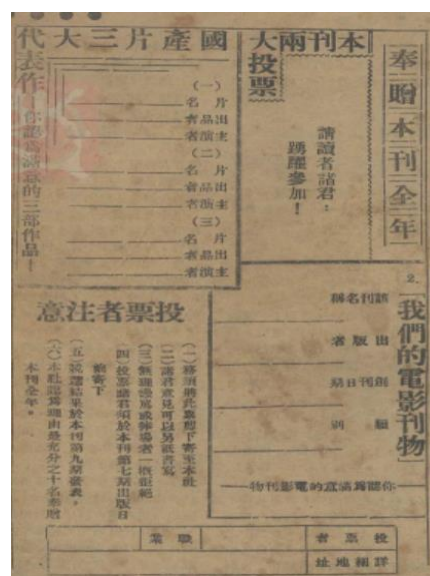


Fig. 1.2 Ballots of *Dianying Yishu*



Fig. 1.3 “Call for Papers” and “Readers, Please Criticize!”

In the “completely open and rational dialogues and discussions on the film”, there are also a large number of articles that actively advocate “discussing politics with the film”, that is, taking film as an opportunity to criticize current politics. When it comes to political events, left-wing literati more explicitly display their usual radical positions, including inciting the masses and advocating radical behavior. For example, on the front page of the second issue of *Dianying Yishu*, right in the middle of an article on montage technique, in the form of breaking news and an emotionally provocative stroke, the following is written:

The Imperial Army! The Imperial Army?

“Japan-China Conflict! The Shanghai incident!”

In the concession why (*The 19th Route Army’s Bloody Battle History*) (*Bloody Battle History in Songhu*) cannot be shown? Why can the Japanese cinema in the concession show films like that?

?????????

On what grounds? Surrender??

The shame of the Chinese film industry!!

[Fig. 1.4] (“Huangjun! Huangjun?” 14)

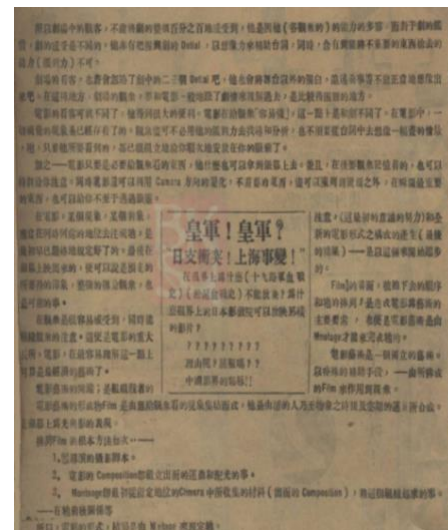


Fig. 1.4 “The Imperial Army”

Then came the news that the Central Propaganda Department had banned the production of “war and revolutionary” films. The short news report-like message occupied less than a fifth of the page, with the rest of the page floating with a few big, bold, punctuated words [Fig. 1.5]:

Incite! Peace! War? Forbidden! A pact? Advocacy!

The following appeal was made to this short message:

Readers: The Chinese and Japanese authorities are on opposite sides of the fence when it comes to using the Shanghai war as a backdrop for film production: one side is advocating it, and the other is forbidding it! Readers, for this, please comment as much as you can!! The submission should be accompanied by a full address, indicating the real name (to be changed at the time of publication if necessary). (“Duzhe zhujun” 15)



Fig. 1.5 The Correspondence Sent by the Central Propaganda Department to the Film Companies

The above-mentioned articles embody an important feature of left-wing film publication: in terms of content, it calls for open and free dialogue and debate on film, with a maximum introduction of mass discourse in the form of vernacular texts under the premise of a “critical and rational textual communication.” On this basis, they strived to introduce political topics into the scope of dialogue and expression. As these rational discussions of film extended to political events, the words, and positions of left-wing writers became more radical: although the form of breaking news retains the consistent quasi-objective nature of rational communication to some extent, the use of a large number of question marks and exclamation marks, as well as the substitution of a single word with strong emotional evocative effects for a coherent and complete narrative, are more intuitive manifestations of the mass nature. Therefore, in the form of expression, although the forms of dialogue advocated by the left-wing writers, including rational argument, critical expression of opinion, and “one positive and one negative dialectics”, are typical bourgeois discourse, if we consider their fundamental purpose, including the advocacy of radical actions and the incitement and emotional support of the masses, then this space for free speech can be seen as having a proletarian tone. As they put it, “our words should strive to be popular (“Benkan de dafu” 21)”.

For example, to express support for “the mass of proletariat”, some articles expressed expectations for “nasty films”:

The so-called “nasty” is of course “nasty” as determined from the moral standpoint of the bourgeoisie. The toiling masses do illegal (?) acts for the sake of a full stomach; the unemployed become robbers and bandits for want of food, who stand on Fourth Avenue importuning passers-by... Undoubtedly, these are what they consider “nasty”. Mr. Chu wants to make a “nasty” film, and I wonder how he will decide what “nasty” means. In my mind, perhaps he has gradually changed, and in his so-called “nasty” work, he at least will portray a large number of lower-class life while exposing the inevitability of “nastiness”. Otherwise, it must be a tool for the bourgeois rulers to deceive and anesthetize the masses! Mr. Chu is a young man, and I always hope he can soon walk on the right path, stop dreaming of the artists’ dreams! We look forward to the arrival of this young director’s “nasty” work!

On June 27, 1932

(“Xialiu” 12)

The public sphere of hybrid discourses formed by film publications echoes Ma Ning’s brilliant exposition of left-wing cinema: she argues that the left-wing model merges two different discourses, namely journalistic discourse and popular discourse, representing respectively the product of the Chinese bourgeoisie with its quasi-objective nature and the emphasis on individual rights and the supremacy of law, and representing the product of the Chinese proletariat with its popularity and the advocacy of radical behavior (N. Ma “The Textual” 23). With regard to the public sphere of “discussing films rationally” and “discussing politics radically mediated by films” formed by left-wing film publications, it is more natural to consider this discursive space as an attempt to use a Chinese bourgeois-type public sphere to represent and advocate the interests of proletarian discourse. For example, in the “Function of Film Criticism—One of the Evening Talks of Film Criticism”, Xia Yan emphasizes: “Film critics not only serve as an interpreter, an anatomist, a warner, a torchbearer to the audience so as to create the audience who understands art for film writers, but also as the owner of a progressive worldview and the comprehendor of the actual production process, be a helpful friend and guide to film writers and audience” (Wei “Dianying piping” 213); in “Film Critics, Playwrights, and Audiences: the Second Evening Talk on Film Criticism,” Xia Yan points out the malicious opposition between playwrights and film critics, and the mutual disregard or contempt of film critics and audiences; thus, according to Xia Yan, “what we film critics lack is: sincere learning

and good-natured patience, while what we have in excess is: unnecessary metaphysics and a shameful ‘instructor’s stance!’ (Wei “Yingpingren” 36-37). Xia Yan expects film criticism to take up the responsibility of the times and act as an “enlightener” for the audience, while at the same time hoping to bridge the gap between film critics, playwrights, and audience, and becoming their “friend”. In other words, left-wing writers hope that the interaction with readers or audiences can be maintained not only through intellectual enlightenment and critical arguments but also through a kind of intimate and friend-like gesture. This form of using intimacy as a medium of communication goes beyond the scope of rational communication.

The left-wing writers strive to expand the discursive space of film publications into a public sphere capable of accommodating the masses because they realize the essence and potential of cinema are precisely its mass and public nature, and try to use the public sphere of film publications to expose social reality and social laws, emphasize class nature and liberate the toiling masses. For example, the cover article of the first issue of *Dianying Yishu* reads³¹:

The film is made in the 20th century...the triumph of modern science, and the beloved beautiful maid of arts. It is not like painting... on a plane, with atemporality... or like poetry, without space or concretization. It is more like a novel, but more than a novel... It does not need to use words as a medium, but can be directly visualized and embodied... in the nerve center of people’s brains. At the same time, it is like the theater... but it exceeds all the restrictions of the theater, such as being only in one place or on one stage, etc., ...it integrates the characteristics of other arts, which cannot be compared with it in terms of dissemination and stimulation. To put it briefly, it is the most in touch with and has the potential to break the status quo of society, hence also the epitome of life. It can make people laugh and make them cry. It is the most attractive (artistic) thing, and hence the most suitable for conveying people’s feelings, reason and wills to each other. Therefore, the greatest of all the arts is film.

Since art is the instrument of mutual communication of people’s feelings, reason, and will, societal conditions and people’s sorrow and happiness will be truly revealed in it. So, art must be a reflection of a certain society in a certain era. Works that do not reflect society are not true art—here, those supermen who seek art first and pure art may feel insulted.

³¹ There are some omissions in the citation due to the destruction of the material.

However, art is more than a mirror of society. We can clearly see that in society when the productive forces are increasing and the old external political formations become shackles, new forces must rise up. The development of this “inter contradiction” must be reflected in the cultural movement. The rise of these new forces in the cultural movement will then ‘interact’ to promote a better transformation of society. —Art is more than a mirror of society. It has a mission to advance society, and the film is no exception. Therefore, all those who work in the film industry should remember this statement clearly: art is a reflection of reality, but not only a description of reality; at the same time, it is also an indication of why reality (the present society) has to be like this. In other words, art (cinema) is a reflection of how real society is moving and progressing.

We have already understood how great the mission of the film is. So, let’s review the Chinese film industry...In the international arena, is not China’s current situation a piece of meat on the chopping block? Is it not a colony that has been most noticed and trampled on by the world powers? Internally, on the one hand, there is imperialist aggression: so that a calendar is lined with humiliating anniversaries. On the other hand, there is the senseless struggles over the rights and interests of a small number of big men. As a result, the people are groaning, struggling, dragging out an ignoble existence, and living in an abyss of misery. In such a situation, is the whole society not a society of oppressed people?

With such an international status and a social composition, what about the cultural movement it reflects —the cinema—should be? A clear-minded reader will surely realize that the current Chinese films must be the cry of the oppressed. But it must be more than a scalpel to analyze the present society, it must be a compass, responsible for guiding the people’s way out... (Ling “Zhongguo dianying” 1-3)

The above-mentioned left-wing writers’ understanding of cinema is perhaps slightly exaggerated; for example, they may claim that cinema is the greatest of all arts in order to establish the necessity of publishing their own film magazine. However, the left-wing writers do offer a relatively comprehensive understanding of the potential of film to construct a public sphere: with the modernization of society, cultural modernity will facilitate better social transformation. Cinema and the modernity it contains, for example, allow people to communicate their feelings, reason, and

will to each other. It is precisely the perceptual communication besides rational communication and its extremely attractive forms of expression that lead the left-wing writers to believe that the most essential role of film is to organize the masses at the bottom, to build a public sphere to expose the tragic realities of their lives, and to lead them to liberation. This is also the aim of their film magazines, which embodies the mechanism and function of the public sphere of vernacular modernity.

Judging from objective data, the circulation and influence of left-wing film publications are incomparable to those of early film publications and are bound to touch a wider audience and the public. According to the memories of filmmakers at that time, besides *Dianying Yishu*, *Shalong*, and other left-wing film magazines, the important left-wing film discussion places in the 1930s were mainly the “Dianying Xindi” and “Yinzuo” of *Zhonghua Ribao*, the local supplement “Dianying Zhuankan” of *Shen Bao*, the “Dianying Shibao” of *Shi Bao*, and the “Meiri Dianying” of *Chen Bao*, “Yingtian”, the supplement of *Min Bao*, the “Xiju yu Dianying” of *Dagong Bao*, “Yi Hai” of *Xinwen Bao*, the film column of *Shishi Xinbao*, “Meiri Yingtian” and “Jianying” of *Dawan Bao*, etc. (S. Lu *Yingping Yijiu* 135-144). In the case of *Shen Bao*, it was founded in Shanghai on April 30, 1872, and ceased publication on May 27, 1949. It is the symbol of the beginning of modern Chinese newspapers and the newspaper with the longest circulation and widest social influence in modern China. It ran for 77 years and published more than 27000 issues through three periods: the late Qing Dynasty, the Northern Government, and the National Government. The representative offices and branches of *Shen Bao* were all over the country. According to the data of 1934, the total circulation of *Shen Bao* had reached 155,900 copies in 28 regions in China and abroad. 36% of the newspapers were sold locally in Shanghai; in the area of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Anhui, the total circulation reached 61,650 copies, accounting for 39.5% of the total circulation (“Benbao gedi xiaoshou tongji” 26).

However, more and more readers who are personally involved in the enlarged public sphere are not necessarily the masses, but the intellectuals who actively run and shout for the masses. In the actual situation, attempts to be both an “enlightener” and “friend” may not be entirely successful. No matter how many left-wing filmmakers’ discussions about films spread throughout the city with newspapers and their film magazines; no matter how much they stress the importance of speaking for the public and how they actively introduce the participation of the mass discourse, as long as

they still emphasize the superiority of traditional communication methods such as rationality and debate, or believe that cinema “is a noble tool of entertainment and a cultural tool of education”, which means their ultimate goal is enlightenment and liberation rather than simple entertainment and attention to the details of everyday life, their actual impact on the masses may never be as broad and far-reaching as they hope. It is difficult for left-wing writers to understand what the “real masses” look like and to introduce a real mass discourse. The superficial “view of the masses” is related to the author’s understanding level as a bourgeois (intellectual). As Tian Han, a left-wing writer who made the film *Daominjianqu* (Go to the people, 1926) summed it up, “We all want to do our best in the ‘mass theater movement’, but we don’t know what the masses are, and how to really approach them. We know about abstract theories, but they don’t turn into vivid experiences (Tian “Women de ziji pipan” 1)”. The left-wing writers did not really “go to the people”, but with the mentality of bourgeois intellectuals, they fabricate a “people and proletarian masses” according to the mirror image of their own lives.

Left-wing film publications have fought the freedom for a public sphere of “free speech, rational dialogue and discussing politics with films”, opening up a higher quality public sphere with the overtones of a traditional bourgeois public sphere. It is still essentially a place for rational dialogue through the written word, but they have begun to actively engage in downward compatibility, attempting to “shout for the masses and the proletariat”. Due to the limitations of dialogue forms, the demand for rational and critical communication, and the bourgeois nature of left-wing writers themselves, they are unable to fully integrate the mass discourse. But the public sphere, which originates in left-wing publications, then expands and grows rapidly amidst the various literary schools’ debates around the cinema. This process of mutual stimulation involves the famous “soft-hard film debate” between the left-wing writers and the neo-sensationalists in the history of Chinese films. And it also touches on the positive effect of the Vernacular Movement initiated by the left-wing intellectuals on the popularization of true mass culture, namely, that they have inadvertently strengthened the popular literature of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school and the popular film industry. This result displeased the radical left-wing writers and made them determined to develop their own film industry, which once again confirmed the incompleteness of the popularization of left-wing writers: they could not accept the genuine mass culture and considered it insufficiently progressive and lacking in thoughtfulness and enlightenment.

1.3 The Neo-sensualist School and the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School: The Rise of Mass Discourse

Similar to the traditional literary public sphere, film publications seem to be a typical communication space dominated by textual and rational dialogue. What has complicated the situation of the public sphere of film publications is the intense interaction between text and screen—when the object of the review shifts from literary works to films, the public sphere undergoes a structural change: even publications founded by left-wing writers, the kind that raises the banner of “rational enlightenment,” struggle to engage mass discourse. This is because the forces of sensual consumption and indigenous traditional morality of films always show tenaciously at any time, which is also reflected in the public sphere formed by film publications. The following will take film publications created by the Neo-Sensualism literati and the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school literati as examples to explore the rise of mass discourse in the true sense of the public sphere of film publications.

While the left-wing film publications depend on the needs of knowledge and the common concern of political events to build the public sphere, the Neo-Sensualism writers and the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies writers respectively construct the public sphere through the remaining aspects of vernacular modernism: sensory material modernity and localized modernity. They provide pastimes, the spiritual pleasure, daily life experience, and secularized, popularized nostalgic traditions and moral persuasions that are adapted to modern society to attract and organize people and develop a public sphere closer to the masses, and thus obtain the adaptability to modernity and the living strategies in modern society. This public sphere may rarely involve public political topics such as film policy and film censorship and may not produce an atmosphere of “rational discuss on films and politics” and “drawing correct conclusions through dialectical argumentation”, but because of the common concerns closer to daily life, ordinary people can be absorbed into this space of experience exchange in a more approachable way.

1.3.1 Novel Sensual Elements and Material Forms

Like the situation in Japan, China in the 1930s had two schools of literature: neo-sensationalist

literature and left-wing literature. The divergence of these two major trends extended to the realm of cinema. While the former emphasized the class struggle and enlightenment functions of cinema, the latter opposed the introduction of ideology into film, arguing that cinema should not be an instrument for preaching, but should function as pure art, as “ice cream for the eyes, a couch for the mind” (Jia 3). In other words, as mass entertainment. Initially, the controversy focused on film, but it gradually deepened and brought criticism to a series of issues, including the nature of art, the relationship between content and form, aesthetic and social values, and aesthetics and politics. This debate about “hard film” and “soft film” lasted for three years and became the most impressive event in the history of early Chinese cinema.

However, despite their active presence in the film world, there was a decades-long gap in the appreciation of the Neo-sensualists’ film practices. There were multiple possible reasons for this. First, the representatives of the Neo-sensualist school, Liu Naou and Mu Shiyong, joined the state-sponsored film company China Film Corporation, which was established by the Nanjing government under the Wang Jing-Wei regime, and both of whom were treated as “traitors” and then were assassinated. Given this background, it was not surprising that the film practice of the Neo-sensualist school had been shunned. Another reason was, as mentioned in the Introduction, the mainstream film historiography in China consistently advocated an evolutionary view of history. While the leftist cinema was seen as progressive, rational, solemn, and enlightened, and was defended as the maturation of Chinese cinema or the endpoint of the evolutionary process, the Neo-sensualists were often associated by leftist intellectuals of the time and current film historians with cultural decadence and social degradation (vulgarity, indulgence in pleasure), and political and social institutions such as Western capitalism and imperialism. The blind faith in leftist cinema and the dominance of enlightenment modernity were probably also reasons for the delay in the study of Neo-Sensualism (Cheng et al. 395-410).

In recent years, relying on the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, some studies have viewed the debate between neo-sensualists and left-wing literati as a contribution to the rational and intellectual public sphere (Xue 2-5), but the positive significance of neo-sensualist film practices and aesthetics with its insistence on popularity and sensibility/materiality, has yet to be fully acknowledged. However, given the tendency to extend the realizing possibilities of modernity and the public sphere from reason, autonomy, and enlightenment to new spheres such as everyday

life, sensing and feeling, and popularization, a number of issues that need to be pursued emerge, including a reassessment of the political and cultural status of Neo-Sensationalist film practice, an exploration of the heterogeneity of film history, and a breakdown of standard film historiography accounts. This section will hence explore the formation of a proletarian public sphere of film publications and update the accounts of the significance of Neo-Sensationalist film aesthetics by the example of *Xiandai Dianyng* (Modern Screen)³², which was greatly influenced by Liu's views on cinema.

Liu Naou was a Neo-sensualist writer, filmmaker, and critic who was active in Shanghai in the 1930s. Born in Taiwan and raised in Japan, he graduated from the Faculty of Literature at Keio University. In 1925, he returned to China to study French at Aurora University while contributing numerous literary and artistic critiques to newspapers and founding the representative Neo-sensualist literary magazine, the *Wireless Train* in 1928. In 1933, he founded *Modern Screen*, in which he published numerous articles on literature, art, and cinema, as well as translations that introduced Soviet and Japanese literary theory. Liu's representative articles discussing film include "The Depth of Chinese Film Depiction" (N. Liu "Zhongguo Dianyng Miaoxie" 2-3) and "The Theory of Film Rhythm" (N. Liu "Dianyng Jiezou" 1-2). Liu resonated with the Japanese New Sensualism, which pursued sensual and formalistic modernist art. Liu's adherence to sensuality and formalism and his longing for modernity may have contributed to the formation of a proletarian public sphere in Shanghai at that time, which will be discussed in this section.

Liu Naou's essays on film aesthetics exhibit astonishing modernity. He attaches great importance to the form of film performance and the use of audio-visual languages, such as the use of montage, camera position and angle, the grasp of the rhythm, and pure film aesthetics. He values the perception of the lines and colors in the spatial category of cinema, and the sense of the velocity and rhythm in the temporal category. He believes that the core of the film lies in "movement", in "the change of speed, direction, and energy, thus creating rhythm" (N. Liu "Dianyng Jiezou" 1), which is "the expression of vitality" (N. Liu "Zhongguo Dianyng Miaoxie" 2). In arguing that "it's the form that counts" and "it is the form that makes art be art, and the content of art exists only in the form of art" (N. Liu "Dianyng Xingshimei" 36), Liu's argument also relates to contemporary

³² *Xiandai Dianyng* (Modern Screen) was a monthly magazine published from March 1933 to June 1934 in Shanghai by the Modern Screen Magazine Publisher, whose editor was Liu Naou. Each issue had approximately 32 to 44 pages, with a circulation of approximately 8,000 to 10,000 copies.

film theory, such as “the cinema of attraction” (Gunning 63-70) and “cinema as vernacular modernism” which emphasizes “the ability to show something,” and exhibitionism rather than “narrative”: such as the “external appearance”, “the sensual, material surface”, “the focus on action and thrills”, the “physical stunts and attractions”, the “tempo, directness, and flatness”, and the “eccentricity and excess of situations over plot” (Hansen “The Mass Production” 244). For example, Liu discusses the basic characteristics of cinema as a modernist art form as follows.

With the development of science, modern life is constantly speeding up...But what matters is not the acquisition of speed, but the emotions that arise from it. The temptation of the Roadster is not so much the luxury that comes with ownership, but rather the pleasure that speed provides. The human spirit is hungry for speed, action, tremors, and impulses. Art reflects the times, not only in terms of content but also in terms of form...Among the many problems it overcomes, it is precise because cinema transcends time that the “cinematic form” replaces all the “static forms” while occupying an absolutely dominant position. (N. Liu “Dianying jiezou” 1)

Liu Naou’s pursuit of speed and rhythm undoubtedly stems from his fascination with Western modernity, especially sensual and material modernity. For him, speed and time are at the heart of modern life. “With the rapid development of modern science, modern life is always changing at speed. At the same time, the form of high-order capitalism has gradually made the thing of ‘time’ a very big role...” (N. Liu “Dianying jiezou” 1). The dramatic changes in speed and time of Western modernity have brought material comfort and sensory pleasures and evoked human desires and emotions, in Liu Naou’s words, the “pleasant sensation”, and he is wholeheartedly excited by them. The aestheticism of pleasant sensation has influenced Liu Naou in the philosophy of modernity, modernist art, film aesthetics, and over-emphasized art formalities. For example, he has described the “most attractive sensory stimulating beauty” in cinema, as the beautiful images of women appearing on the flickering screen: “the screen is the discoverer of female beauty and the dissecting table of female beauty. From Caucasian beauties to Parisian women, from Spanish women dancing the passionate tango to American modern girls jumping on the pavement, films “stretch their previously buried beauty—physical beauty, spiritual beauty, still beauty, athletic beauty—in front of people all over the world” (Ge “Dianying he nuxingmei” 207).

Liu's sensitivity to the events of modern life, and the tendency to view the fragmented experience of the ever-changing city as a common generalization of modernity, can be related to the currents of discussion of modernity by Baudelaire and Benjamin. In fact, Liu's ontological understanding of cinema also echoes Benjamin's theory of reproduction technology in that he regards cinema as a hybrid of technology and art (N. Liu "Zhongguo dianying miaoxie" 2), and that it is its mechanical nature that distinguishes it from literature, painting, sculpture, music, and theater (Ge "Dianying he nuxingmei" 207). For Liu, it is cinema as a modern mechanical form of art that captures the speed, psychedelia, and information of modern urban life:

In this machine-oriented twentieth century, without the help of machines, arts will lag behind human development and become like an antique, detached from reality. One only has to look at the movie theaters that seduce the masses to understand this. Now the public first sees movies and then gets to know the literature. Instead of saying, "I took three or four days to finish reading *The Lady of the Camellias*", they say: "I went to see *The Lady of the Camellias* at noon today". Mechanical art is now in its cradle, and we are waiting for the coming age. (Ge "Yingxi manxiang" 205-206)

More importantly, the "pleasant sensation" can attract audiences, make the metropolitan crowd the public, and is closely tied to the construction of proletarian public sphere. Cinema engages directly with the world of the public audience by facilitating widespread reception and response. In this regard, Liu states:

Cinema is a popular art form. Its motility is suggestive and yet easily understood... It is an internationalist and world language. Audiences can watch films regardless of class or education level as if the film is a combination with everyone. If the word "publicity" is used in this sense, then there is no need for the film industry to label it, since cinema is innately public (N. Liu "Zhongguo dianying miaoxie" 2)

The "publicity" to which Liu refers here is not strictly defined, and he was still caught up in the dichotomy between entertainment and enlightenment, etc., which the proletarian public sphere

was trying to dismantle. However, the kinship between his view of cinema's ability to connect the masses through the formation of emotional and sensory networks and the proletarian public sphere is clearly reflected in Liu's philosophy of cinema, which is consistent with his practice of the film publications and will be examined in the following discussion.

In order to determine the character of *Modern Screen*, I first discuss the Preface of the magazine when it was first published. From the very first issue, *Modern Screen* consistently emphasized the principle of "openness and publicness", stating that it was necessary to build a "forum of open discussion", and "become a public reading book for domestic film enthusiasts and a hub where the ideas of male and female audiences and film practitioners blend (J. Huang 1)":

This magazine is founded by a group of film art enthusiasts. This magazine is maintained completely by the efforts of colleagues. So, it by no means belongs to any organization or individual, nor is it started up by accepting roubles from the Soviet Union or dollars from the United States. Therefore, this magazine does not represent any color or prepare to be a propaganda agency for any particular party. We hope to be credible to the world for the innocence of our position and the brightness of our attitude... this magazine is not the private property of colleagues, but an open field for readers at home. We hope that readers will not hesitate to contribute... (J. Huang 1)

As the basic principles of openness and publicity are established, the first thing that should be noted is the composition of the *Modern Screen*. From the very first issue of *Modern Screen*, the predominance of various images over text was recognized. In terms of titles, the first issue had 76 titles, of which only 11 were textual descriptions and discussion articles, while the rest were mostly photos of film stars and stills of movies, interspersed with pictures of theaters and advertisements for various commodities. In terms of layout, the first issue of the 36-page magazine had 24 full-page pictures, accounting for two-thirds of the total space. If you counted a large number of arguably unnecessary or distracting photographs interspersed in what were supposed to be text-oriented articles and essays, then the communication in words was even less, not even a third. Such a ratio of pictures to text continued almost throughout *Modern Screen* magazine (1933-1934).

In addition, the photographs and images that occupied much of the magazine were somewhat

abrupt or at least unrelated to the text. For example, the symbolic essay “Morning Sunlight” written by Cai Chusheng with passionate brushstrokes was followed by a series of full-page stills of actresses Clara Bao, Hu Die and Gong Jianong in *Kuangliu* (Frenzy, 1933), Liming Hui in *Zhuiqiu* (Pursuit, 1933), and Joan Crawford in the *Rain* (1932). The essay “New Discovery in the Film Industry—Restoration of Damaged Films” was followed by Li Lili in *Tianming* (Daybreak, 1933), Wang Ying in *Nuxing de nahan* (Women’s Scream, 1933), the kissing scene in *A Bill of Divorcement* (1932), and sexy full-body pictures of Dorothy Lee, Sarl Maritza, Lillian Harve, and other actresses. (*Xiandai Dianying*; vol.1 no.1) This means that not only the excessive presence of images but also the sense of dissonance brought about by the appearance of photographs is a remarkable problem. This visual information is thus not an auxiliary means of textual expression, but a deliberately adopted and independent form of expression, in a similar vein to Liu’s cinematic aesthetics and the tendency of early cinema to place relative importance on “exhibition and forms” rather than “narrative and content”. For the less educated and illiterate masses (including women and children), such representational techniques are of great significance in displaying and reproducing modern urban and sensual material modernity, and thus in constructing a mass-oriented public sphere related to daily life experience.



Fig. 1.6 Female Faces in *Modern Screen*

Of all this visual information, the most numerous and prominent are first and foremost the female face and body [Fig. 1.6; 1.7]. The heavily made-up faces, boldly naked bodies, and fashionable high heels of these “dreamy and modern” women from Hollywood, without exception, demonstrate fanatical worship of the body. This magazine portrays a “new woman” image and injects novel meanings and values into the traditional female body. The women in the photos do not look like typical Chinese “dutiful wives and loving mothers”, nor do they look like people of modest economic status or educational background. When they appear in public (whether in photographs or film



Fig. 1.7 Female Bodies in *Modern Screen*

scenes or in film publications), they embody completely different way of behaviors, lifestyles, and ethical values than the average Chinese woman of the time. For example, *Modern Screen* published a special collection of pictures of women kissing, which contained almost no text description other than a single English word “kisses”. The reappearance of erotic scenes depicts women who are free, bold and even seen as “casual” in terms of traditional values, and their behaviors and desires that were once not allowed.

Another example is the difference between the images of women in *Modern Screen* and other print media³³: Although publications such as the *Liangyou pictorial* also depict images of women with certain modern characteristics, including women wearing stylish housecoats or women in “modern living rooms”, the female images in *Modern Screen* are no longer frequently associated with the private realm of domestic space. They no longer stay with their children or husbands, but with their “colleagues”, both male and female; but in most cases, it is a lot of women getting together, talking about the world, and a new social circle of women. The absence of photographs of domestic space is a sign of women’s new social roles, suggesting that they are breaking away from the domestic scene and into a more public one. These public scenes include balls, amusement parks,

³³ This is also evident in the comparison of the images of women in film magazines of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school that will be discussed in 1.3.2.

movie theaters, department stores, and other scenes that often appear in films. This visual information inviting interest in urban life and fashion has encouraged female readers to step into, or at least witness and imagine, the modern and public spaces in wider real lives.

On the other hand, given the traditional Chinese value system that celebrates “implicit beauty,” it is not surprising that women’s confident faces, naked bodies, bold behaviors, and tendency to separate themselves from the private domestic sphere can naturally cause social anxiety. Unlike Western artworks that celebrate the physical beauty of toned bodies, such as nude sculptures, in the Chinese context, nudity, heavy makeup, and public intimacy are often associated with vulgar erotic paintings and prostitutes. At that time, Chiang Kai-shek’s speech in 1934, referring to the German movement for a return to nature and improvement of life, announced the beginning of the “New Life Movement” advocating “saving money, simplicity, and the use of domestic products” (Qin 58). Under such state regulation of women’s bodies and control of national morality, the pursuit of fashion (perfume, hair dye, perms, makeup, bare feet, nude photos, high heels, men and women seating together, etc.) has been despised as wasteful and immoral behavior and “another form of decadence” brought about by “false modern women” (J. Jiang 140).

Much of this social anxiety and misunderstanding of the “new woman” can be attributed to the male gaze and male desire. Seductive magazines full of modern landscapes make their female readers themselves objects of desire. Given this danger, the view of modern feminists who take the exhibition of the body as a form of disdain for women makes sense. It should be noted, however, that the desire and delusion of men toward women aroused by pornographic sensual expressions which, on the other hand, has forced men into a passive position and upset their subjectivity, is also an important subject of the Neo-sensualists (S. Shi 342-354). As indicated in the Neo-Sensationalist novels, the object of men’s desire is the colonial ruler, the Western woman, and their desire is interrupted by the conditions of the metropolis, which is dominated by the Western state (Z. Shi 161-186). The political difficulties and rapid changes faced by semi-colonial China have eroded men’s sense of superiority and spiritual power. Women, on the other hand, were visualized as incarnations of modernity and symbols of beauty and became part of the overwhelming urban landscape (Z. Zhang *Yinmu Yanshi* 68-90; 410). Because these are not total exaggerations or deviations from reality but rather are developed in the context of Shanghai, a metropolis under the control of the West, the unfulfilled desires of men, as depicted in the Neo-Sensationalist novels that

incorporate realist techniques, become a kind of class oppression that haunts Chinese men. For this reason, both the numerous white female figures on *Modern Screen* and the female figures that imitate them are clearly incomplete as objects of male desire. For many men, the Modern Woman, like the city, is an unknown, seductive presence, a threat they cannot compete with. The above-mentioned policy of purging “new women” is, in turn, an indication that the number of modern women has increased to such an extent that male desire has reached the limits of sexual and psychological suppression, and that the patriarchy is threatened.

In this context, the emergence of the Modern Woman suggests that the existing gender order is being challenged, if not completely overturned, by new and stronger forces. Because it provides a public space in which women are made visible and aestheticized as representations of modernity, *Modern Screen* has provided unprecedented momentum for transforming the image and status of women.

Moreover, there were not only women who embodied modernity, but also women on the side who viewed modernity through *Modern Cinema*. Speaking of the female gaze, it is noteworthy that a female director appeared in China as early as 1925³⁴. Thus, if some (or even many) of the readers were women; if women became subjects of the gaze, not objects of the gaze; then it is possible that “new women” in the magazines were not simply commodities intended to arouse male desire nor an accomplice to the objectification of women’s bodies or the degradation of female image and civic morality. On the other hand, women’s self-expression through their bodies and faces could serve as a guide to becoming an attractive modern woman and a guide to modern life, inducing women to enter the public sphere of sensory communication, and encouraging self-reference. They encountered sensory and material modernity, imagined a different self and world, and tried to change their way of life and their space of existence.

In fact, the magazine’s readership certainly seems to be predominantly female. This speculation is the result of my analysis of the types of advertisements published in the magazine. *Modern Screen* published a large number of advertisements targeting female groups, and even many unisex products and services were intentionally associated with modern women. Even automobile manufacturers, whose consumer base was mainly male at the time, placed advertisements in *Modern Screen* stating

³⁴ The first female director in the history of Chinese cinema was Xie Caicheng, who directed and starred in the feature film *Guchu Beisheng* (An Orphan’s Cry, 1925) for Nanxing Film Company. For more information, see G. Cheng.

that “Buick is the most popular car among ladies of all walks of life” (*Xiandai Dianying* 18; vol. 1 no. 6), which confirmed the existence of female readers. These advertisements themselves reiterate the contours of a material and sensual world, ensuring a public discourse that is open to women, related to modernity, and organized by the exchange of sensual experiences. In the following, I will look specifically at the advertisements on *Modern Screen*.

First of all, *Modern Screen* published many advertisements for photo studios that have a closer relationship with cinema. For example, an advertisement for Hujiang Photo Studio, which appeared in almost every issue, reads, “Hujiang Photo Studio is the real palace of art for Miss Modern, a treasure trove of gathering photos of modern stars”. To make the advertisement more credible, a small line attached to it reads, “A part of the photos used in *Modern Screen* is supplied by our studio”. In this way, the large number of beautiful female faces and energetic bodies mentioned above become the most attractive symbols. This advertisement allows (female) readers of this film magazine to practice or at least imagine being glamorous modern women like film stars.

Another watch advertisement is more straightforward: it lists the names of different actresses in each issue, with their photos attached, and explains that “Our watches are the favorite watches of XX movie actresses and their best companions”. For example, as the ad explains, “About Leyushi watch, movie star Xu Lai has said it is low price, good product and fashionable (*Xiandai Dianying* 14; 23; vol. 1 no. 2)”, the picture of movie actress Xu Lai occupies a large space and is more eye-catching than the picture of the watch [Fig. 1.8]. The interesting thing is there is no watch on Xu Lai’s wrist, which may mean that it is not the custom at the time for movie stars to take advertisements specifically for a particular business, and the photo of Xu Lai is probably from a still of one of her movies. The ad continues, “Leyushi self-opening watch is the leader of the watch and a good companion for ladies” (*Xiandai Dianying* 14; 23; vol. 1 no. 2). Xu Lai’s glamorous face and the description of the few words imply that young, wealthy, attractive movie stars with social status are the “leaders” of readers



Fig. 1.8 The Advertisement for Leyushi Watch

and what they say has great credibility. And since various products are “good friends” of these female stars, they are also “good friends” of readers. Companies hope to use the image of movie stars to maintain the reputation of their products and make their products become close companions of their readers in their daily lives.

Of course, since wristwatches were luxury items at the time, one would have to assume that there would be men buying them for women. The problem here, however, was not simply one of consumption, since these visuals and the frequent use of the expression “good friend” implied a new cultural context created by the advertisement. Put simply, if the traditional public sphere satisfied the need for new knowledge and ideas, then the editors of *Modern Screen* were sensitive to the fact that the public (especially women, who had previously been excluded) were seeking new ways of living and means of socializing at the level of everyday life. The forerunner of media popularization also meant the popularization of the public sphere. Thus, in the atmosphere of “mentors and helpful friends” created by movie stars and advertising products, the female readers became pseudo-sisters in solidarity and entered into a new social space. In other words, we could observe the formation of a public sphere based on economic motivation, intimate relationships, and the star effect in daily life, which was different from the Habermasian public sphere associated with intellectual enlightenment and rational dialogue.

If we continue to focus on the mobility and gender characteristics of this public social space, then we can argue that reading film magazines stimulate a similar experience of “window shopping” as a “female Flaneur” that parallels the viewing experience of early cinema. Film scholar Giuliana Bruno extends Benjamin’s description of Flaneur to the moviegoer. She argues that the wandering posture of Flaneur is reminiscent of filmgoers. As the Flaneur is historically overridden by metropolitan life, they are transformed, remade, or parasitized into the film spectator. She also points out that while the traditional image of Flaneur is male, going to the cinema has contributed to the emergence of female Flaneur and the “liberation movement of women viewing”, and that there is a similarity between going to the movies and window shopping, as the cinema is like a department store, providing a form of access to the public sphere, a chance to socialize, and a reason to go out so that the audience can rebalance private and public in a new zone of subject interaction (Bruno 48-51).

This experience of “window shopping” and “female Flaneur”, and the overlapping film-

viewing experience with these, could even be more easily achieved by reading film magazines. Miriam Hansen has pointed out that in order to create a public sphere that bridges the gap between highbrow culture and consumerism, the Hollywood film industry has adapted to the tastes of female consumers by using various devices such as pictures of movie stars, glittering objects, gossip, and all kinds of fashion that fascinate women, which can be found not in the text of film but in many film magazines (*Babel and Babylon* 123). Thus, a large number of advertisements in movie magazines involve products such as nail polish, high-heels, cigarettes, beverages, toothpaste, shampoo, gymnasiums, cafeterias, etc., forming a practical “hand-held department store”, which at the same time, are off-screen cinematic experiences associated with sensory material modernity [Fig. 1.9]. For example, the cream named “Die cream” makes it very easy to associate the name of the movie star Hu Die, although its advertisement is accompanied by a picture of another movie star, Ruan Lingyu. A nail polish called “Kou Dan” is advertised with pictures of different movie stars in each issue. There is also a new “delicious, thirst-quenching and refreshing” drink called “Sister Dew” (*Xiandai Dianying* 2; vol. 1 no. 3). Even the gymnasium ads are accompanied by photos of the movie stars Wang Renmei, Li Lili, and Hu Die. The slogan of “Beautiful Cigarette” is accompanied by the photo of Hu Die, saying “Cigarette king of 1933, film queen of 1933”. These advertisements contribute directly to the myth of the star effect and the consequent rapid expansion of the “female Flaneur” group.

Judging from the editor’s post-editorial note, which reads, “writers of this magazine fascinate female film buffs,” (*Xiandai Dianying* 31; vol. 1 no. 2), it can be said that the appearance of “female Flaneur” was expected by the editors. In addition to advertisements that catered to the female gaze, the magazine carried a number of appeals to women that could be described as immature feminism. For example, an article in *Modern Screen* stated: “Modern women should not at any time huddle under traditional thought, fall into its traps, or bow down to the creed of romantic supremacy. Women should be free from all shackles, be bodacious, absolutely free, and overflow with the vitality of youth.” (*Xiandai Dianying* 36; vol. 1 no. 4). On the other hand, the existence of women who actively participated in discourse construction was also confirmed (*Xiandai Dianying* 28-29; vol. 1 no. 7). Of course, it was an undeniable fact that women who expressed themselves through writing were rare, given the low level of education at that time. However, it was precisely because women generally lacked the ability to participate in verbal interactions at that time so nonverbal

discourse construction based on sensations and reactions was particularly important. Experiential exchange through sensory and emotional elements such as materiality and physicality pushed the limits of linguistic communication.

The “female Flaneur” who ventures into public spaces has stepped out of the Confucian patriarchal framework, which idealizes the wife and mother confined to the home. Given the foot-binding tradition of Chinese women, this symbolic step is assigned a more practical meaning. Interestingly, for the neo-sensualists, exposed feet represented sensual and material modernity, while the left-wing intellectuals referred to feet free from bondage as “civilized feet” and associated them with revolutionary and enlightenment modernity. This coincidence leads us to speculate that neo-sensationalist practices unconsciously promoted the women’s liberation movement, even though their agenda was never radical social reform. The “female Flaneur” is supposed to be a more abstract and limited subject of experience than the subject of the classical public sphere, but as Kluge points out, no one can personally try every experience or engage in every activity, and “... a public sphere can be produced professionally only when you accept the degree of abstraction which is involved in carrying one piece of information to another place in society when you establish lines of communication. That’s the only way we can create an oppositional public sphere and thus expand the existing public sphere. This is an occupation which is just as important as direct action, the immediate on-the-spot struggle.” (Kluge “On Film” 212). His words precisely indicate the possibility of the proletarian public sphere being realized on the *Modern Screen*.

Here I summarize my previous explanations: *Modern Screen* consistently pursues material sensory modernity, contributing to the construction of a proletarian public sphere through exhibitionism and physicality, the presentation and guidance of desire and action, and the imagination and expansion of consumption and social space. These images and simple textual information greatly enhance the trendiness of film publications, popularizing modern culture through emotional and sensory networks via film, and presenting and discussing with the metropolitan crowd how Western modernity, so closely tied to everyday life, is taking root and growing healthily in China. In particular, the film publication’s catering to female consumers has especially contributed to the emergence of the “female Flaneur”, liberating women from the “misreading” of the “modern woman” by male-centered gazes and desires, social anxieties, and the private sphere of the home. This “liberation movement of women viewing”, leads to a change in the

public sphere, from a place of enlightenment and rational exchange of knowledge and ideas through reading, discussion, and writing, to a proletarian public sphere where people could take an interest in daily life and form a collective subjectivity through consumption, intimate relationships and star effect. What is important is neither the content of the sensory material modernity nor the stimulating urban landscape, but the fact that these images and landscapes can organize communication and interaction among the general public, providing a key to the door of the public sphere.

I would like to emphasize that even though the public life of women or other ordinary public is not quite the same as that of intellectuals, the public sphere organized by the basic needs of daily life and the form of emotional communication is of far-reaching significance. While the opportunity for women to enter the public sphere is a manicure and high heels, it is not only accompanied by a broader organizational capacity (for the way more accessible) but sooner or later it may be expanded to a deeper level of freedom and liberation. Film publications are disseminated in the city to gain acceptance, feedback, and participation from a wider audience. Its public sphere is broad in its social function because it is directly related to the world of the masses, whose world is exactly the world that the texts and cultural images of film publications are intended to show.


貨品美備：式樣新奇，
精製革履：都下無比！



大江百貨商店


號四一五路中 路平大

胡蝶 主演



蔻丹
指甲紅豔如火齊！

常用蔻丹描染指甲
愈增手部之美動人愛憐



店品概化場樂大各
售經有均
號七二二路中四路十
理經行洋厘噠

請飲新出的
姊妹露



美味解渴提神之飲品

上海民生汽水公司出品

每大瓶一元八角
每小瓶二角

高而富香煙



富而高香煙
但配他們的香煙才高
富運含料高貴香味醇
富思有多而易得的贈品



中國大東南煙公司

體育救國
要使國家及個人走上
健康之路，
祇有提倡體育獲得
成功！



電影明星
王人美，
黎莉莉，
胡茄，在
黃克體育
館之晨操

黃克體育館

館址：上海威海衛路八八號（西陝路）
電話：三四六零七號

Fig. 1.9 Advertisements in Modern Screen

1.3.2 Traditional Ethical Values and National Characteristics

If we say the left-wing literati have organized the part of the “new youth” through ideological enlightenment and political discussion, then the neo-sensationalist literati have gathered a part of the masses more through sensory material modernity and the experience of daily life. Although the ways of organizing differed greatly, both the public attracted by the enlightened modernity and the sensual material modernity essentially built a public sphere that is organized by the common concern and demand for modernity.

However, people building the public sphere are not only those audiences who are sensitive to modernity; people that gathered are not just those thinkers and change-makers who seek spiritual independence or the perceivers and consumers who are immersed in the fantasy exotic world. It should be noted that film publications, the emerging combination of traditional publishing culture and cinema, do not replicate the culture of the developed capitalist era in the West in its entirety, meaning that there is a category of film publications whose public sphere is organized not because of the wholesale acceptance of modernity, but in response to it. More specifically, this public sphere is organized by the public common anxiety about the various practical problems caused by the influx of Western modernity into China, which leads to their inability to accept the replicated Western modernity. No matter how popular, understandable, and vivid the experience of modernity is, there will always be people who cannot immediately accept the great changes brought about by the new. Thus, their common need is to make a soft landing of the modernity experience, to gain a sense of security, an adaptation to modernity and a living strategy in modern society, by transferring Western discourse to local discourse and inheriting traditional culture into modern society. This public sphere is still constructed in the relevant with vernacular modernism, which refers to the localized and translated modernity, that is, the harmony of local traditional value systems, culture, and modernity, and it is precisely such a public sphere that the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literati have constructed.

The name of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school comes from the traditional symbols of the pair of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies in the late Qing-erotic novel *Huayuehen (The Flower and the Moon)*, which are used to symbolize the emotional entanglements between literati and prostitutes. This somehow implies that Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school has always represented a

vernacular and popular position. Some researchers in literary scholarship believe that before the beginning of the Vernacular Movement, in the public sphere consisting of literary magazines, supplements, and tabloids, there were two major influencing literature trends. One was the literary enlightenment movement initiated by Liang Qichao and others in the late Qing dynasty, with the aim of “enlightening the people” and “improving the governance of the masses”, while the other was a backlash to the former’s strong political connotation, namely, the rise of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school in the early Republic of China, and the resulting vernacular literary creation and translation activities (Xiu 30). “The literati interest was replaced by the civic taste, and those cultural forms that used to be non-traditional, non-canonical, folk, and non-office holding gradually became the most noticeable things in society. This reversal of elegance and vulgarity was a challenge and betrayal of orthodoxy and was taken seriously by intellectuals” (M. Xu 2).

The subsequent Vernacular Movement of left-wing intellectuals built on this foundation and inadvertently amplified the popularity of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school: in the 1910s, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school was still writing in the semi-literate language and translating a large number of foreign novels, including romance novels, fairy tale fables, and detective novels, such as Sherlock Holmes’ detective stories. Their audience was the urban middle class relative to the “scholar-officials class”. And yet, in the 1920s, with the rise of the Vernacular Movement, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literati transformed and updated the old vernacular style, creating more original stories. The later novels and translations were written in vernacular, with some works beginning to use new punctuation. Their audience changed again from the urban middle class to a large number of people closer to the bottom. All in all, no matter which period, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school represents a relatively popular and vernacular position. However, the expansion of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school literature market caused dissatisfaction among left-wing literati: they considered that the rebellion and challenge of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literati to tradition is insufficient. It was not serious, modern nor realistic, or critical, and was suspected of being kitsch. The works of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies indeed had a vulgar side, but this is the original face of mass culture. Therefore, to a certain extent, the gameplay and pastime of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school can be said to represent the vernacular literature in the true sense. In the 1920s, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school stories reached hundreds of thousands of readers, and even millions, through

various media, including films (Link 11-12).

Most of the discussions of the film by the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies were published in their literary publications or newspapers that published their literary works. Their readers would inevitably be exposed to the text and pictures of films mixed with the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies stories. The public sphere of film publications was inseparable from their literary public sphere. Prior research shows that with the help of these “vernacular literature” publishing positions, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literati have already developed a public sphere to allow the masses to participate in the discussion of films as early as the 1920s (Xue 21; 30). Since the 1910s, when Zhou Shoujuan published a series of “shadow plays discussions” in the *Free Talk* of *Shen Bao*, film publications, and film novels written by the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school have been wandering the streets of modern Chinese cities along with various literary magazines and newspapers. These publications, like the above-mentioned publications, are also public publications between “official” and “private”, with reader clubs and other columns, open to all, especially a large number of “mass audience” of the popular literature of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies. For example, before the publication of *Ziluolan Dianying Hao (Violet Film extra)*, the editorial department once openly solicited the material: “The No. 12th *Violet* plans to publish a film special issue, which is dedicated to all the pictures and words related to film if your colleagues and readers have related novels, essays, and film photos, etc., anything is welcome, please send it to Ximen Nei Penglai Road Lujia Rongguifang No.5” (“Bianjishi dengxia” 7).

After establishing the basic elements of the public sphere, openness, and universality, the previous research, mainly based on Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, argued that Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies writers’ active speech contributed to the construction of a bourgeois public sphere of rational argument (Xue 28), however, my dissertation will argue that the most significant contribution of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies lies in their close connection to mass discourse, especially representing a different kind of mass discourse from the neo-sensualism. In this discourse, the masses are brought together by the commonality and emotional connection of traditional ethical systems and ethnicity.

First of all, in everyday life, the most hotly debated film topic in mass discourse continues to be the movie actress. However, a striking difference in terms of the pictorial message of the female figure is that the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school seems not to praise the kind of confident

faces, naked and energetic bodies, bold and sexy behaviors, public social spaces, etc., of Hollywood actresses. From the examples in their publications *Ziluolan Dianying Hao* (*Violet Film extra*) and *Ziluolan Dianying Mingxing Hao* (*Violet Film Star extra*), the “popular femininity” displayed in the same large number of female photos is dignified, ladylike, and even conservative. The body of the cover girl’s picture as a guide message is completely hidden under the long robe, with no close-ups of her face in heavy makeup or lively expressions. This fundamentally reflects a different feminine aesthetic [Fig. 1. 10] (*Ziluolan* Cover page; vol. 1 no. 12; *Ziluolan* Cover Page vol. 3 no. 6).



Fig. 1.10 Covers of *Ziluolan*

For example, the photographs of film stars Li Minghui and Ding Ziming give us the impression that they are traditional images of women with sentimental overtones: this is not just because they are wearing the traditional cheongsam with only their forearms showing, which can of course also be sexy, but because their facial expressions, body movements, and single words accompanying these photos, which makes clear the image they are meant to represent: “supplication” and “benediction” [Fig. 1. 11] (*Ziluolan* 1; vol. 1 no. 12). This public image of traditional women may also be closely related to the film character they play, as the character image



Fig. 1.11 “Supplication” and “Benediction”

in the film will greatly influence the audience’s perception of the film star herself. For example, in *Bukan Huishou* (Unbearable Memories, 1925), *Jiaqi* (Wedding Day, 1925), and *Daoyizhijiao* (A Moral Obligation, 1926), Ding Ziming takes the tragic route. After she joined the Star Company, she starred in nine silent films, including *Aiqing Yu Huangjin* (Love and Gold, 1926) and *Erba Jiaren* (A Beauty of 16, 1927), laying her status of “chief of the tragic female role”. What is more convincing is that Ding Ziming herself seems to be a woman of “excellent morality and skill.” “Her private life is clean. She works hard and lives a simple life outside of work. She doesn’t smoke, drink, dance, or socialize. She wears low-key clothes, and unlike some actresses, she doesn’t go in and out in luxury cars and gorgeous clothes” (Yong 3). Same as Ruan Lingyu, the famous film star in Shanghai, she also committed suicide for love, which may deepen her traditional female image. *Li Bao* in 1938 wrote: “Dear sisters in the film industry, you should start to learn from Ding Ziming’s private life. First, you can reduce expenditure, second, you can develop purer rationality and personality, and have a healthy body. The person with a simple private life at least is less in danger of degeneration than a woman of romantic nature” (Yong 3).

Of course, this written discipline can be regarded as a conservative consciousness deliberately instilled in the reader by the manufacturers of commercial culture, but the visual information in the aforementioned Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school does convey an equally popular “public image of women” with a different temperament; their bodies are permeated with a certain spiritual core, which makes them conform to the demands of traditional values for women, i.e., “rich in virtue”.

Besides, the world of women shown in the pictures is still at home with their husbands or children, although this home sometimes has certain modern elements [Fig. 1. 12] (*Ziluolan* 14; vol. 1 no. 12). Zhou Shoujuan even described the ballroom, one of the most important places for women to display their bodies and to socialize, as the place where urban sin occurred along with urban civilization, “the hell of degradation”:

Paradise is a blessed land. So, the earthly



Fig. 1.12 Women with Husbands and Children

blessed land can also be compared to paradise...as for the Paradise of Jiangsu Province, it must be the prosperous Shanghai. High buildings and large mansions; indulging in luxury and voluptuous life. All the clothes, food, housing, and transportation are extremely extravagant, the best of the best. In some places, money can't buy everything. But in Shanghai, as long as you have money, you can buy anything even people's souls. For this reason, Shanghai has become one of the most famous metropolises in the world, known as Little Paris and Little New York.

However, although Shanghai is a place of happiness, it is also a city of sin. The more civilized the city is, the more rapidly the sin of the city develops. The local news of Shanghai's major newspapers is a criminal history of Shanghai Society. Hardly a day goes by without murders, arson, home invasion, kidnapping, adultery, divorce, suicide, etc. There are too many institutions for making crime, so all kinds of crimes are made like goods and the ballroom is one of the institutions that create evil. In the minds of most people, it has been almost determined that dancing is not a bad thing. In the high society of Europe and America, dancing is a social necessity. At national ceremonies, dancing is always necessary and very dignified. Unfortunately, when it comes to Shanghai, it is considered a sin. This is because most of the dance venues in Shanghai that are generally for commercial purposes are dominated by Don Juan and sirens, showing the four cardinal vices of "wine, women, avarice, and pride" as much as possible. At the risk of universal condemnation, they commit crimes and often stir up society, providing evidence that dancing is a sin. So, the place of dancing becomes the cave of depravity and the capital of sin.

Minzhong Company's second sound blockbuster *Rucitiantang* (Such Paradise, 1931) takes the dance venue in Shanghai as the background and tries to describe the darkness of the ballroom, the suffering of the dancing girl, and the depravity of the youth. With the help of the silver screen, as a pulpit to guide the youth, this film with words of exhortation and kind sentiments is thought-provoking. In fact, it not only depicts the ballroom but also the entire Shanghai. The so-called Paradise is actually a disguise of hell. May the ordinary people in Paradise try their best to extricate themselves quickly, not lead a befuddled life as if drunk or in a dream, and fall into a real painful hell. (S. Zhou "Farensheixing" 55-56)

This essay bluntly expresses anxiety about modern civilization. Meanwhile, Zhou Shoujuan recognizes that modern civilization activities, such as dancing itself, are not evil, but rather it is the fact that Shanghainese discard traditional virtues when they are exposed to these things that make people believe that these modern lives are sinful. Therefore, they believe that in order to promote modernity in China, one cannot completely copy the Western experience of modernity, but must wrap it with traditional values in order to gain wide public understanding, acceptance, and general support and attention.

The reinterpretation of the female figure and their social space is precisely one of their measures, is an act of nostalgia and revival of traditional culture implemented to dissipate this anxiety, and to sugarcoat modernity. The underlying purpose of their demands on the female body is never to discipline women, but rather to improve the environment for women's survival and to strive for their exalted status. If women engage in modern activities while maintaining some traditional moral values that can be adapted to modern society, then these modern activities and the people who engage in them will be considered worthy of respect. In other words, the construction of a benign and healthy traditional cultural atmosphere is not merely conservative but is meant to in turn correct and improve everyday social perceptions so that the urban masses can better coexist with modernity and modern civilization. The tendency of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literati to associate the physicality and exhibitionism of women with the revival of certain traditional moral concepts dictates that their approach to translating modernity and constructing the public sphere remains somewhat dependent on sensual communication (of course traditional moral concepts themselves have always contained much emotional underpinning). The above view is more clearly reflected in the article "Correcting the Social View of Female Stars" by Bao Tianxiao as follows:

Film actresses can bring out the inherent beauty and artistic genius of women, which is a legitimate and noble cause, but in the general concept, as soon as the word "female stars" is mentioned, there is a sense of contempt. This is, of course, related to the lack of self-respect of some actresses. Nowadays, the general perception and public opinion in society treat actresses as if they are a debauched profession as if a young woman who has become a movie actress is depraved and immoral. So much so that people sent these actresses emblems, calling them "female stars", not really advocating for them, rewarding them, but they used to promote roles

and actresses to attach themselves to a romantic affair, or even equivalent to dally with prostitutes. Not only in society, but also in the film industry, where is the respect for women? In the film, actresses have to make all kinds of unnecessary lewd and scandalous appearances and have to bear the kisses with the actors in the scene where kissing is not necessary, and there are also strange advertisements with female stars as the call to action so that these actresses have no place to stand. (T. Bao “Jiaozheng” 33)

After exposing and flogging, Bao Tianxiao solemnly puts forward the suggestions to correct daily social outlook:

First, of course, relying on the actress’ self-love, they need to know that the film actress is a noble profession, not a dirty profession, and is a beautiful career, not a degenerate career. For themselves, do not dissolve; for others, not tempted by them, and personal reputation is the reputation of the whole industry. Second, the film companies, as well as staffs and actors must respect the actresses, so that the reputation of the industry and individuals will not be degraded. If women who are interested in the film business are deterred from doing so because of the social disdain and denigration of actresses, this will be a major obstacle to the future of the film business and a major obstacle to the future of women’s livelihood. (T. Bao “Jiaozheng” 34)

Despite the demands they make, their consideration of the livelihood and dignity of working women can be considered very modern and progressive. They support professional women who have entered the film industry, while looking for a way to make a soft landing for these modern concepts.

According to Stuart Hall, good popular culture can re-establish the harmonious relationship between creators and audiences that has been lost with the advent of industrialization and urbanization (Hall and Warner 88). He believes that popular culture (art) is in fact traditional culture (art), which recounts the values and perspectives that people have known; it measures and reiterates them while containing the surprise of art and the impact of appreciation, which allows a real contact and connection between audiences and the creators (Hall and Warner 88). The public sphere constructed by the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school literati can be said to be a place where

such a harmonious relationship occurs. They popularized traditional popular culture while subtly retaining some impact and excitement of modernity. Thus, the popular literati centered on the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school is the closest to the urban civilian class and most aware of the voice of the masses, namely, the folk contempt and criticism of the “degenerate” actresses of modern society. This is a manifestation of anxiety about modernity, which was noted by Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literati, who prescribed a prescription that by properly reversing the female image to build a benign and healthy traditional cultural atmosphere and localize modernity and adapt modern daily life. The physicality and exhibitionism of women, along with the vernacular and popular traditional ethical system, can reach the bottom of the readership, instantly resonating with and organizing them more smoothly.

The efforts to dissipate the common anxiety of modernity and reconstruct the harmonious atmosphere between traditional culture and modernity are not only reflected in the emphasis on “female morality”, but also in the overall rejuvenation of “public morality”, which itself contains a dimension of the public sphere³⁵. In the essay “On Ethic Films”, Zhou Shoujuan proposes the traditional Chinese morality of “loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness” and the possible effects of punishing evil and persuading the good embodied in the ideology of films, to reflect on the “pan-liberalism” in life attitude caused by the influx of Western liberalism into China. What is important is that Zhou Shoujuan does not intend to act as a guardian of the traditional “old morality”, instead, he analyzes the adaptability of “loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness” in modern society. For example, because the political system has changed from autocracy to a republic, Zhou advocates changing “loyalty to the king” into “loyalty to the country”. Regardless of whether this change and interpretation are appropriate, the vision of trying to integrate the spirit of traditional culture into a modern democratic society and the modern national state through transformation is commendable. Zhou also proposes “filial piety” for discussion, and points out that “filial piety” should be distinguished from “foolish filial piety”, His advice to the people of modern society is not “Wang

³⁵ The term “moral publicity” or “moral orientation in the public sphere” is taken from the analysis of Habermas theory by Richard Madsen. He noted that “Habermas’s lifelong academic research focuses on understanding the moral and cultural dimensions of modern society, and if we quote the use of the public sphere and civil society from Habermas and hope that our use is consistent with this origin, we should highlight the moral and cultural dimensions most prominently. See P. Huang, “Public Sphere” 226. Habermas did repeatedly trace and emphasize a key phenomenon in the formation of the public sphere in his treatise: three generations of “moral weekly” in Europe have been influenced since the British coffee shop magazine in the 18th century. In the 18th century, there were 187 such magazines in Germany, 227 in Britain and 31 in France. See Habermas. *The Structural Transformation*.

Xiang Wo Bing (王祥卧冰)³⁶, but “to keep parents well clothed and fed and enjoy their old age in peace (S. Zhou “Shuo lunli yingpian” 31)”. In line with the modern trend, Zhou combines the spirit of Chinese tradition with Western writing, Western behavior, and Western films. He points out that the word “Xiao (孝)” (filial) is also found in Western characters, and cites many foreign films shown in Chinese cinemas to prove that Westerners are also filial to their parents. For example, two foreign films, *Over the Hill* (1931) and *Where is My Wandering Boy Tonight* (1922), depict parents loving their children, and the stark contrast between filial piety and unfilial piety in these films made him cry a lot (S. Zhou “Shuo lunli yingpian” 30; 32).

Zhou’s emphasis on “traditional public morality” remains true to its efficacy in modern society. There is no longer a “monarch” in Chinese society, and the relationship with parents has also changed a lot. In response to these problems brought about by modern civilization, Zhou wants to provide a safe and nostalgic public space for the anxious and overwhelmed public by tapping into the inherent traditional cultural nutrients and using the unique cultural forms of modern society to guide a larger area of the general public to obtain survival strategies in the modern urban atmosphere, thus stabilizing the public psychological structure. In contrast to the grand narrative of reform and modernization of elite intellectuals, Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies literati have focused on the other side of modern civilization, embodying the concern for the individual in the daily life culture of common people with the spirit of traditional culture.

In this process, traditional moral values are combined with Western modernity. Such vernacular modernity is not exactly the same progress as Western modernity, but it is still progress in general because these traditional discourses must be integrated with modernity in order to continue to take root in modern society. This process of transforming and continuing itself into modern society, of adapting and localizing modernity can be understood as Hansen’s “translation”, which is an important process of forming vernacular modernism. It is this demand for vernacular modernity rather than classical modernity, as well as the extensive emotional basis and popularity of traditional value systems and other vernacular forms and contents that allows for the construction of the public sphere. More importantly, this process relies on the identification and persistence of “human

³⁶ An old folk legend tells the story of Wang Xiang, who to catch fish for his stepmother in winter, lay on the ice and used his body heat to melt the ice. It’s regarded as the classic story of filial piety.

relations³⁷” and the emotional support of “touching hearts” (S. Zhou “Shuo lunli yingpian” 32). In other words, just as “female virtue” relies on the popularization of physicality and exhibition, this idea of appealing to traditional values and ideas to emotions and intimacy, of grounding certain basic ideas in emotional psychology, and of basing the popularization and dissemination of ideas on emotional resonance, is still essentially dependent on sensual communication. For example, in “On Ethic Films”, Zhou Shoujuan continues to write:

Grief novels account for seven or eight out of ten of my novels. Although sometimes people are moved by the sadness in the text, they are not as orthodox as ethical novels that have a stronger moving power. So seven or eight years ago, I preferred to write ethics novels, especially those about the love between parents and children. There were several works, such as *The Mother*, *A Mother in Sickness*, *Father and Son*, etc. When I wrote about the emotional part, I also shed tears unconsciously, and the performance on the screen was more real and emotional than the description of words. Among them, *The Mother* was performed by talented students such as Tao Yang at the 20th anniversary of Minli middle school. In the play renamed *Gratitude and Resentment*, the actor playing the filial son, Ma Shaner, even more ably impressed the audience through his resentful words and sincere tears, and even now it has received rave reviews. As effective as the ethical dramas on stage are, the ethical dramas on screen can naturally move the hearts of people (S. Zhou “Shuo lunli yingpian” 32)

Not surprisingly, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school literati have further applied this idea to practical filmmaking:

My old friend Shoujuan is eager to use the screen to “touch people’s hearts”. So he filmed a *Majiefu* (1926) to persuade the good and punish the evil and compiled a new masterpiece *Ersunfu* (Mother’s Happiness, 1926) ... Mr. Shi’s directing skills have an artistic foundation, which is beyond the reach of the average person. From this *Mother’s Happiness*, we can also see that his directorial approach is still premised on art. Although the plot of the film is nothing

³⁷ The relationship between monarch and minister, father and son, husband and wife, and all kinds of relations of Filial Piety and Seniority Rules in the traditional feudal society of China.

more than household chores, it manages to analyze the psychology of parents and children thoroughly and present it on the screen in a simple way, making the audience feel that these phenomena do exist in their own families. From Mr. Shih's serious study of art, it is clear that the achievement of *Mother's Happiness* must be quite great (S. Zhou "Shuo lunli yingpian" 32)

According to Paul Pickwick, Chinese cinema embodies a tradition of popular drama that includes rhetorical transitions, exaggerated performances, and moral emphasis. It attempts to bring a group of audiences with multi-values into the basic conflict of good and evil, which occurs just below the surface of everyday life. Thus, during the period of confusion, the popular drama performance is particularly appealing to non-intellectual consumers of popular culture with lower interest because it provides clear answers to some very difficult questions (Pickwick "Melodramatic Representation" 301-303). My discussion of the ability of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school to organize the public and form a public sphere is close to Pickwick's view on Chinese films. The materials cited earlier illustrate not only the tradition of popular drama in films but also the tradition of popular literature in film publications. Whether it is "female moral" or "public moral", these "basic conflicts of good and evil" in daily life, forms of emotional identity, and harmony of interpersonal relationships brought by the emphasis on morality can be a powerful way to organize the masses.

Both the various moral and emotional experiences attached to traditional culture, and the simple love of traditional culture itself, are related to the anxiety and avoidance of modernity. Jay Leyda, a renowned film historian, argues that "Chinese audiences love tradition and all the security and serenity it has represented. These old themes were so popular with moviegoers at that time that we are all forced to pay attention to what lay beneath the surface of escapism...for the wishes of ticket-buyers, we had to forget for two hours the big political issues and the great changes that had befallen Shanghai." (Leyda 49-50). Compared with the way in which the public sphere is organized in film publications of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school, we seem to be able to observe the same feature: readers of film publications may have gathered not out of concern for major political issues (like the public sphere constructed by left-wing writers), or out of concern for the huge changes that befell Shanghai (these changes should include the sensory material modernity chased by Neo-Sensationalists), but precisely because of a common need of escaping from these things.

However, on a deeper level, this public sphere, which is associated with nostalgic traditions, may not only be about escapism. This is not only because the revival of traditional culture emphasizes adaptability to modern society and harmony with modernity, which has been discussed in the previous practice of the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies, but also because it involves ethnicity, which is closely related to a more radical and initiative proletarian public sphere of modernity. Regarding the love of tradition, one Chinese scholar argues that this love of traditional aesthetics dating back to narrative art (including Ming dynasty drama and Tang dynasty legends) is fundamentally rooted in the “national characteristics”: the narrative model of Chinese films emphasizes storytelling and tends to make use of narrative modes that are programmed with plot twists, including the emotional stories of kind heroines, who suffer from all kinds of tribulations, who are always battling forces above them, and so on (Xu, Changlin “Zaoqi zhongguo” 20-21). On this point, film theorist Nick Browne also believes that “the most complicated and powerful popular form always involves a mutual compromise between the traditional ethical system and the new national ideology, a form that integrates the scope and strength of the emotional conflict between the two (40-56)”.

The germination of nationality or the new national ideology is also reflected in the popular film publications founded by the most successful “popular genre” of modern China literature, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school. In this long article, “Discussion of Historical Films” which was serialized three times in *Mingxing Tekan* from November 1925 to February 1926, Bao Tianxiao detailed their discussions on “why historical films are needed”, “difficulties in making historical films” and “points to note in making historical films”. In their view, China, is an ancient civilization, and people there has a deep concept of history. Whether it is Peking Opera, Academy, or New Drama, etc., all of them are performed with historical footage. Therefore, for the Chinese film industry to flourish, “it must not rely on the bashful romantic films played by fashionable male and female stars but must make historical films!” (T. Bao “Lishi yingpian (shang)” 9).

The starting point of Bao and others’ advocacy of historical films is certainly an attempt to save the Chinese film industry by inheriting the historical concepts of the ancient Chinese civilization and the historical experience of traditional Chinese theater, while their visions and ambitions have a modern consciousness to respond to the global society with a strong sense of national ideology. In their view: “The film industry cannot be confined to one single country but should be popularized

all over the world. Nowadays, in Europe and the United States, every time a film is finished, within a week, it has already gone to all countries”. If Chinese films want to head out of the country, they should produce their own historical films, because “European and American countries all know that China is an ancient country, and they all want to know the great reputation of Chinese history, but now there are no materials of Chinese history and no evidence of it. Now there are films describing the great history of China: civil officials wearing formal dresses with graceful carriages; awe-inspiring military generals with long spears and big halberds in their hands. These films, with detailed commentary and brief Western subtitles, are popular with Europeans and Americans. How can the spirit of our ancient history and the rise of heroes possibly fall backward the lately civilized countries?” (T. Bao “Lishi yingpian (Shang)” 10). In this sense, they have tried to save Chinese tradition and Chinese history through film, and in turn to create modern China through Chinese tradition and Chinese history. This action is a great success in a certain sense, setting off a boom in filmmaking and viewing.

This germination of nationhood and national consciousness is closely related to the formation of the public sphere. Citing Benedict Anderson’s description of “a nation is first and foremost an ‘imaginary community’ and the technical medium that represents this ‘imaginary community’ before it becomes a political reality, that is, the publishing culture”, Leo Ou-fan suggests that nationality and the public sphere (as the imaginary community) precisely constitute the issue of Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the century. Leo Ou-fan believes that when intellectuals tried to define a new group of readers, they all tried to imagine a “new village of a nation or state”. Although this “public sphere” is not identical to Habermas’s, the concept of readership nonetheless creates public space and urban space, which may construct a “semi-public sphere” (Lee *Shanghai Modeng* 60-62). From the perspective of this dissertation, this “semi-public sphere” undoubtedly conforms to the broad definition of the film public sphere inherited from Hansen’s theory. It is led by the literati of Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school, using translated modernity as a medium, with the traditional value and ethical system and national characteristics of ethnicity, commonality, and emotional support as the ties that organize a readership with common anxiety, nostalgia, secularism, and the urgent need to rebuild themselves and obtain survival strategies in modern society.

In this chapter, I have examined the formation and evolution of the public sphere of film publishing, with a focus on the ways in which literati construct the non-verbal discourse epitomized by both sensual and emotional elements and material format through a new emphasis on reproducing and disseminating vernacular modernity. I examine the increasing interest in the public sphere from a variety of literary schools. First, the traditional publishing industry promoted the emergence of a public sphere of film publishing through literati-tuned-film critics to translate and distribute information; second left-wing literary circles asserted a more public discourse of cinema in an extension of a public sphere dealing with a broader social dimension; third, Neo-Sensualism school and the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school embraced a composite discourse of vernacular modernity.

Shifting away from the supremacy accorded language and literature in the discourse on the public sphere and modernity, I propose that pre-visual culture, early film publishing, as an inherently interdiscursive and intermedia cultural practice, embodies publicity and modernity as a cluster of interconnected social experiences that defy any rigid boundaries. As I have described at the beginning of this chapter, the various activities of literary genres feed the public sphere of film publications. It is possible to distinguish to some extent the tendencies of these film publications, but it must always be remembered that they are neither entirely independent nor can they be strictly divided into styles, but that they lie in a sort of middle ground mediated by various kinds of modernity and political and cultural contexts, and ultimately converge into the public sphere of film publishing as a whole. The production and reception of the public sphere of film publications, which share space with traditional publishing culture, are influenced by the habits cultivated by publishing culture, and thus, cannot be completely separated from the professional and rational discourse of the traditional literary public sphere. On the other hand, the combination with cinema makes it impossible to escape from the mass discourse. The sensual materiality and local masses of cinema are stubbornly presented at all times. As Amos Rapoport explained, “vernacular” is in the “continuum” of interaction and fluctuation composed of traditional, vernacular, popular, and elegant styles (Rapoport 76-77).

For example, even the left-wing writers with the most distinct stand, their publications have mixed the tastes of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and combined various cultural types such as written, spoken, and film. In fact, the left-wing film movement is far less coercive than we think—

the left-wing writers rarely impose their ideological views on the directors, on the contrary, they always respect the directors' intentions (Lee *Shanghai Modeng* 135). *Meiri Dianying* (Daily Film) of *Chen Bao*, once considered a left-wing film publication, had experienced a shift to the right. And the *Modern Screen*, an iconic neo-sensationalist film magazine considered to be right-wing, is not only about visual, physical, and sensory material information but also about logical essays on the modernity of sensory material. It has no specific political orientation or position, and articles by left-wing literary figures such as Sun Yu, Cheng Bugao, Shen Xiling, and Shu Yi have been published here. The statements and opinions in the publication are mainly based on the concern and discussion of the film itself, and the choice of publishing articles and reviews still adheres to the principle of fairness and non-proneness. Similarly, the Mandarin Darks and Butterflies school have attempted to enhance the communication of emotions by various means to compensate for the abstract nature of the communication of ideas and thoughts. What has formed around the film publication is a loose school of writers and readership rather than rigid factions.

The vernacular modernity discourse of literary schools presents one of the earliest conscious attempts to further widen the public sphere in which the masses can also participate in its various sociocultural and aesthetic agendas, encompassing mass aesthetics and culture, Neutralism, and nationalist re-energization of Chinese cinema. The public sphere of film publishing also intersects in a significant way with the context of the introduction and adaptive process of cinema and Western modernism/modernity. On this basis, literary groups actively have established film research societies, film companies, and film schools, and promoted films nationwide. Without this background, the local Chinese film industry can never be truly established. Further research hence is needed on how the public sphere of representational space contributes to the exchange and formation of collective experiences in social reality, as well as the relationship between cultural projects, political institutions, and social activities. The public sphere, organized by the experience of daily life and sensory exchange, may be extended to a deeper level of freedom and liberation. The challenge, then, is to consider the proletarian public sphere as a social space, albeit to remain focused on the public sphere of consciousness dimensions and representational spaces, which will be explored in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 The Flourishing Cinema and Spectatorship between Screen and Reality

The establishment and transformation of the film publishing industry suggest that cinema offers the opportunity to form a unique new public sphere of social interaction. As discussed in chapter 1, the intelligence network of film publishing, as well as the potential audiences and practitioners it netted, laid the foundation for the establishment of the local film industry. Compared to the hybrid of cinema and traditional publishing, the movie theater (including early film screening venues) is a more fertile ground where the direct vernacular experience of moviegoing can foster “illegitimate” social and political dynamics outside the regimented and orthodox public sphere. The concrete space created by the movie theater as the public sphere is a shared space, but never uniform. By focusing on the different spatial dimensions of the movie theater on spectatorship, I argue that movie theater provides people with a place where different levels of discourse and experience (high and low, enlightenment and entertainment, etc.) intersect, creating a new social consciousness and a community that confronts the social order and power. The experience of this public sphere, in general, informs us not only about the everyday content of intense urban life but also the related socio-political agendas and is itself actively constituted by the moviegoing experience. In other words, it renders the representations and actual forms of urban life, as well as socio-political discourse increasingly cinematic, that is, increasingly sensory materialistic. In this chapter, it is especially manifested in various forms of exhibitionism and physicality. In this sense, the movie theater space is a salient manifestation of a public sphere mediated and embodied by vernacular modernism.

According to Giuliana Bruno, the movie theater in public buildings, as a visible occupation of space, is always associated with the perception and reception of things usually related to the idea of the public sphere, such as arcades and cafes. (Bruno 49). With the gradual establishment of the film industry in Shanghai, “going to the movies” has become an important social ritual in modern daily life. Vivid descriptions of “going to the movies” can be found in various popular novels and city guides, such as *The Doorway to Shanghai* (“the doorway to watching”), which says, “Even the average women are now quite familiar with movies, so ‘going to the movies’ has become a modern

slogan. Young men and women in schools do so, and even older men and women patronize movie theaters. As a result, in recent years, domestic movies have not seen a boom, but movie theaters have catered to public demand, with the establishment of more than twenty. The momentum is steaming, with the trend of taking the stage and beating the amusement park” (D. Wang 14).

Only in recent years has a systematic study of the history of cinema and moviegoing emerged. Several doctoral dissertations have reproduced this history from different perspectives. *The Rise of Cinemas in Shanghai (1897-1934): A Study Focus on Film Exhibitors, Coincidentally, the Middle Class, Petty Bourgeois, and Females* uses an empirical approach to explore how movie theaters grew from nothing to eventually become the most popular urban entertainment venue for women, the petty class, and the middle class³⁸. It remains, however, the linear development history of moviegoing and movie theater. On the other hand, *Research on the Early Chinese Cinema Space Culture (1886-1949)* adopts Henri Lefebvre’s spatial division method to observe the historical phenomena occurring in movie theaters from the mundane aspects of the daily lives of small people, such as food, clothing, housing, and transportation, presenting a sociocultural picture³⁹. However, displacing the dominance of movie theater’s purely developmental history with the sociocultural history still ignores the “complexity of the audience’s experience”. The movie theater itself may be divided into various spatial compositions, but the moviegoer’s experience is not entirely compartmentalized. When movie theaters are strictly divided into physical, perceptual, and social space, the study of physical space is limited to the architectural aesthetics and the environment of the theater itself, rather than considering its impact on moviegoing; within the perceptual space, audiences are deprived of the social and physical environment in which they live, and previous studies rarely consider the impact of different environments, identities, and experiential horizons on spectatorship. Moreover, when considering the social space of the movie theater and exploring the social activities of different social groups in the movie theater, they rarely address any perceptual experiences of the audience.

However, while the imagination of cinema in the viewer’s mind undoubtedly contains a psychoanalytic dimension; on the other hand, it is also situated in a double context, in a specific public space that includes a particular social audience, a particular type of place, stage, and mode

³⁸ See Zhao, Yingying.

³⁹ See Liu, Lei.

of projection, as well as a public horizon that is produced and reproduced, appropriated and contested in cinema, just as other cultural mechanisms and practices. The movie theater space is thus a comprehensive product of the superposition of various spatial conditions. It is the combination of these factors, i.e., the connection of physical, perceptual, and social space, that constitutes the complete moviegoing experience, a process of perception, reflection, and even action triggered by “watching a movie”. This continuum of “sensory-reflexive horizon” needs to be highlighted rather than severed to clarify the meaning of the public sphere of cinema advocated by Hansen, who argues the cinematic public sphere provides a theoretical matrix around different levels of investigation and methodologies to uncover the blind spots caused by the increasing specialization and segmentation of film studies, offering new conceptions of spectatorship and filmmaking (*Babel and Babylon* 15).

Based on this idea, this chapter attempts to examine the formation and transformation of the public sphere of film viewing, not through the division of space, but from a holistic perspective that includes the dynamic interaction of these spatial elements. This dynamic interaction is brought about by the changing phases of the development of the film industry. Situating the film reception in this broad historical scenario, this chapter tries to genealogize and reweave the history of the activities and practices that materialize the projection venue as a public sphere. I will chronologically trace the transition from “exhibitionistic early films,” to “films of narrative integration,” and “nude films”; the changing configurations of production, exhibition, and consumption patterns, as well as the changing audience group, which have contributed to the transformations not only in the scale of the public sphere but also in its overall character as a “sensory-reflexive horizon”.

Specifically, in 2.1, I discuss the emergence of a public sphere in the film screening venue since the late Qing dynasty, which manifests itself as a place where a small number of heterogeneous and coincidental viewers frequently engage in physical exchanges and come to know the world beyond various boundaries through exhibitionistic spectacles. I illustrate this point by tracing the cinematic experience embedded in *Zhang Yuan*, an early film screening venue, in which Chinese and Western cultures intermingled and entertainment, social, and political activities overlapped, regardless of ethnicity, class, or gender. 2.2 discusses how, with the popularization of exclusive movie theaters that accompanied the mushrooming of narrative cinema in the 1920s and the streamlining of social space, the cinematic experience became increasingly internalized, and the movie theater became a

place for intellectuals to delve into the realm of consciousness. I illustrate this by exploring the perceptual experiences of Lu Xun and Hong Shen. The movie theater has become a site of political demonstration and mass political action. 2.3 discusses that with the establishment of a complete film exhibition system in the 1930s and the influence of a particular vein of nudism and nude cinema, the cinematic experience was externalized, popularized, and radicalized, which coincided with the eager embrace and construction of a new public sphere where the general public could address social and political issues. Particularly, I examine nude film's dialogue with feminism and its entanglement with communism, leading it into a paradox of appropriation and endorsement that complicates the prospect of the public sphere and spawns more intense antagonisms in the complex competition of vernacular experiences.

The development of the film industry and the interactive trend of spatial conditions of film screening venues construct a multifaceted "sensory-reflexive horizon", and reshape the public sphere physically, perceptually, and social discursively. It is a place of cognizing the world, a place of conscious awakening, and a place of political activism. In terms of scale, the subject of the public sphere has evolved from a casual crowd that cannot be called the film audience to the middle class, intellectuals, and the general public. In terms of content, it is a site for negotiating various social practices and cultural discourses such as consumerism, anarchism, enlightenment, nativism, social and gender inequality, communism, etc. It encompasses alternative (or inadmissible) discourses and practices of groups placed outside of paradigms and dominant discourses, as well as various internal and external conflicts.

By pointing out these conflicts or oppositions, I do not mean to simply highlight the political nature of the cinematic public sphere or reduce it to a massive revolution. As I have shown in the prologue and first chapter, the public sphere of cinema functions as a contending forum for a host of perspectives and discourses. Within it, the vernacular modernity has attempted, if often with deep ambivalence, to reconcile various competing and consensual interests of art and business, the "highbrow" and the "lowbrow" taste, spirit and flesh, political pedagogy and mass entertainment, mundane life and sublime faith, collective innervation and individual autonomy, and Western modernist impulses and indigenous traditional ethos. To some extent, we can distinguish those interests, but they are often interpenetrating in the historical practice of the public sphere of film viewing. There is always a place for the vernacular style, which changes the way the world is

perceived and experienced, the production and dissemination of knowledge, and the formation of the subject of modernity.

Thus, the oppositional public sphere of film viewing discussed in this chapter is not an evolutionary monolithic model. The emergence of cinema's political nature does not imply the demise of its entertaining nature; on the contrary, the confrontational and political cinematic experiences discussed in this chapter emerge precisely from the rehabilitation of numbed nerves and alienated bodies through "play". Cinema achieves a process of redemption through play and mimetic faculty as forms of innervation. It rescues not only itself (as a technology) from the objectification and abuse of capitalism, but also allows humans to break free from the prison of an alienated and broken real world in the intersection of the senses and technology. Here people gain an extraordinary physical sensation and regain the dynamism of experience. At the same time, through "the mass production of the senses", cinema proficient in this modern Esperanto rebuilt the "Tower of Babel", reconnecting people who are separated⁴⁰. In this sense, Hansen defines the public sphere of cinema as the sensory-reflexive horizon of vernacular modernity, where circulating individual experience find public recognition and resonation, and "contexts of living" once categorized as private and rejected from public representation such as memory, imagination, and sensory materiality enable the collective reflexive experience of modernization and modernity. Complicating modernist formal self-reflexivity with bodily sensorial reflexivity and local reflexivity, the public sphere of vernacular modernity catalyzes tripling reflexive modernity betraying a certain elitist paranoia and western centralism myth⁴¹.

In other words, the public sphere of film viewing offers first and foremost a democratic, playful, and distracting form of engagement, albeit one rich in political metaphors and with far-reaching practical implications. This places the public sphere of film viewing in the constellations of perpetual ambivalence: its primitive forces of providing comfort and pleasure are coupled with its instrumental functions of changing social reality; its emotional volatility and evocative sensory stimulation analogous to the conflicting dimensions of crowds and political radicalism and activism; its contiguity with technology, human body, and exhibitionism accompany its imbrications with the mixed promises of modernity and the rise of the public sphere.

⁴⁰ See Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*; "The Mass Production".

⁴¹ See Hansen, "Fallen Women".

2.1 Exhibitionist Spectacle, Contingent Spectator, and Modes of Cognizing the World

On December 28, 1895, the Lumiere brothers screened a film in the basement of a cafe in Paris. This was the first time a film was shown publicly, and just a few months later, films were staged in Shanghai, China. The exact location of the first screening in Shanghai has not yet been determined, as the timing of the film's first entry into Shanghai remains an unresolved academic controversy. The name of the cinema when it was first introduced to China was "shadow play", the same as traditional Chinese shadow play and other art forms such as slides, so it is difficult to determine whether it was a film showing based on descriptions of the time. *The History of Chinese Film Development*, edited by Cheng Jihua, considers the "Western shadow play" shown on August 11, 1896, in Shanghai Xuyuan to be the first film show in China, interspersed with "juggling", "fireworks", "phrase riddles" and other entertainment and vaudeville performances (Cheng et al ch. 1). However, some researchers believe that the screening in Xuyuan was a slide show rather than a movie. The first screening in Shanghai should be postponed until May 1897, when it was held at the Rizhao Hotel, followed by Zhang Yuan, and then successively at Tianhua Teahouse, Qi Yuan, and Tongqing Teahouse (D. Huang "Dianying chudao" 106).

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact date of the film's first screening, the positive coverage in local newspapers allows us to glimpse the process of introducing the film to the city. One of the first advertisements, "See the New Arrival of Electromechanical Shadow Play in America," ran almost uninterruptedly from July 26 to October 6, 1897. The opening time and location, as well as a brief description of the film, were often previewed only a few days in advance or the morning of the day in the *Shen Bao*:

Starting today, the Electromechanical Shadow Play continues to increase the stories from Western countries, which are more vivid and dynamic than the real thing... The show will be held from 8:00 pm to 11:00 pm at the horse racing lounge under the Ni Cheng bridge of To Maloo. (*Shen Bao* 14 Aug. 1897, 6)

The growing presence of cinema raised tensions with government authorities. Among the early news about cinema were many stories of obstructions and bans on film screenings. The opening and construction of film exhibition venues in Hubei, Jiangsu, Shandong, Guangdong, and Jiangxi were prevented and obstructed⁴². Numerous clashes between the spectators and sheriffs or inspectors occurred at movie screening venues across the country. For example, in February 1909, the *New York Times* reported that in Xiamen, China, a Spaniard was arrested by the Chinese police for continuing to show films in defiance of a notice of silence on the day of royal mourning. The police seized the exhibition venue, causing serious riots and protests by the audience, resulting in several casualties, and the theater manager was released only after the mediation of the French consul representing Spanish interests⁴³. While paying with one's life to watch a movie may seem incomprehensible today, audiences did pay an extraordinary price to defend the "right to watch movies" in the early 20th century. From this report, we can perceive that for the masses of the time, cinema already had considerable significance and even some connotations of fighting against power and defending freedom. This anti-authority effort was unbroken in the early history of cinema and throughout the narrative of this chapter, except that sometimes it was carried out in a blatantly "revolutionary" manner, and at other times it was carried out subtly in more roundabout ways.

Shanghai was more open to the new technology of film, with more teahouses and famous gardens providing natural venues for film screenings, but the situation was equally bleak at first:

Preventing the Screening of the Shadow Slay

...Yi Zhi Chun teahouse set up a stage for the screening of the shadow play the night before. People who went to watch it gathered like bees and ants, crowded abnormally, loud, and boisterous. The sheriff found out and sent someone to stop it, and the spectators dispersed. ("Zuyan yingxi" 3)

Blocking the Screening of Shadow Play

The Qinglian Ge Yan teahouse in No.4 Horse Road, recently rented out its front to foreigners to screen the shadow play. The day before yesterday, new patrol Huier Niu found that the

⁴² See "Quzhu yingxi"; "Jinyan yingxi"; "Tingzao"; "Yaoqiu kaiyan"; Bofu jinyan"; "Jinyan yingxi zhi jiaoshe".

⁴³ See "Arrest Spanish Chinaman".

teahouse business was particularly brisk, the doorway was blocked by the shadow play, and the space was very narrow. In case of an accident, it would be dangerous. Yesterday, the agent Dou Ruhai ordered to stop the performance. (“Zizhao tingyan”17)

No Shadow Play

Ma Youqing is suspected of colluding with the officials to show the electric shadow play in Yin Feng Lou, which has been reported to the Director of the Protection Bureau of the General Engineering Bureau for verification and has been reprimanded and banned for fear of causing trouble. (“Buzhuan yan yingxi” 3)

Prohibition of Shadow Play

A teahouse north of the Tai Yang Lang in Zhabei is owned by Xiao Jinhua. Recently there suddenly gathered male and female audiences and started to show shadow play. The noise throughout the night was unbearable and was banned by the police yesterday. (“Jinshi yingxi” 3)

Most of the initial reasons for banning movies were crowd noise, obstruction of traffic and fire protection, danger to people, and so on. Newspapers were filled with negative reports about the serious consequences of audience gatherings, describing in graphic detail not only the injuries caused by exploding local film projection equipment (“Wucenglou” 3) but also the “tragedies” caused by film projections around the world (“Yingxichang zhi canju” 12). Subsequently, traditionalist accusations of cinema turned to “indecent” and social degradation. Some articles described the trend of countries banning films out of fear that they would undermine civic morality (“Jinshi: waiguo zhibu: Deguo” 220; “Jinshi: waiguo zhibu: Meiguo” 437), and in response to “indecent” and “lewd” behavior in movie venues, Shanghai City Hall issued rules for film exhibition:

Rule 1, opening a screening venue must be approved to receive a license. Rule 2, men and women must have separate seats. Rule 3, no obscene and indecent shadow plays. Rule 4, the show must be stopped before midnight. Rule 5, any violation of rules 2, 3, and 4, once found the license will be revoked and penalized. Rule 6, inspectors and office investigators can

conduct inspections at any time. Rule 7, the license is not allowed to be lent to others. (“Shanghai shizhengting” 10)

Early moviegoing was under the watchful eye of the authority, and conservative voices in society never ceased to call for the banning of cinema until the advent of feature-length films and the accompanying establishment of the lavish movie palaces, which gave cinema a chance to be known as high art at least until approximately 1921. However, pressure from all quarters could not quench the enthusiasm of early audiences, and an article entitled “A Phenomenon in Shanghai Society” described how moviegoers in Shanghai clamoring to see films:

The noisy shadow plays on the No.4 Horse Road

Westerners have electric shadow play, which is a beautiful drama with no sound at all. This is not the case with the shadow plays on the No.4 Horse Road. There are hired foreign drums and trumpets, and I have heard the Chinese gongs and drums, and the noise is incessant. This is the opposite of what happens in the West. I draw a picture of the raucous scene of shadow play and created Wu Geng Diao to describe it. [Fig. 2.1] (“Shanghai shehui zhi” 7)



Fig. 2.1 “A Social Phenomenon in Shanghai: The Noisy Shadow Play on the No.4 Horse Road” in *Pictorial Journal* (1909)

In short, through repeated bargaining by multiple forces, the cinema eventually gained a firm foothold in Shanghai, although at this point it was not yet capable of securing its own independent space. Judging from newspaper advertisements, most of the films of the time were shown in

teahouses, theaters, and parks. Each small square in the newspaper previews various public events to be held in several most popular public venues of the city [Fig. 2.2], including literary gatherings, auctions, donations, dances, plays, magic, acrobatics, and firework⁴⁴. The smorgasbord of films, popular local performances, and elegant literary events simultaneously shared promotional and performance spaces. This format might have continued until 1909 when the first official movie theater, the Victoria Theater, was built⁴⁵.

If cinema can construct a public sphere at this time, then this public sphere undoubtedly resides in these public places. Cinema shares not only the same exhibition space and mode but also similar audience groups and participatory experiences with other traditional popular forms and continues to serve similar functions as they do. In such a complex context, what kind of people are these audiences, and what does the “right to see movies” they are fighting for mean? I would like to redraw a cultural map of early film projection in Shanghai by examining Zhang Yuan, one of the earliest film projection venues, in conjunction with the material and cultural foundations that its modern appearance and transformation laid for the development of film projection venues and the reception of films.

In 1882, a wealthy merchant Zhang Shuhe bought a garden residence from a British businessman, Groome, and named it “Wei Chun Yuan” (Wang and Zhang 7), also known simply as Zhang Yuan. Originally covering an area of approximately 20 mu (1.33 hectares), Zhang Yuan was a new-style garden that combined Eastern and Western styles and was open to both Chinese and foreigners. In stark contrast, a notorious sign at the entrance of the park in the public concession reads “Dogs and Chinese Not Admitted.” The full sign did not actually say that, but the arrogance did not alleviate much and even excluded more people. Of the five regulations issued in 1916, the second excluded dogs and bicycles, the third excluded Chinese (except for white men’s Chinese

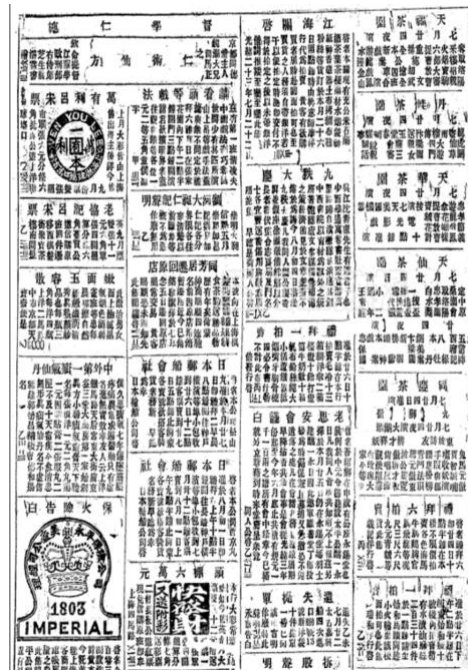


Fig. 2.2 Entertainment Advertising in *Shen Bao* (1897)

⁴⁴ See *Shen Bao*, 21 Aug. 1897, 6

⁴⁵ See D. Huang “Zhongguo zuizao de” 79-87; Li and Xing 7.

servants), and the fourth excluded Indians (except for the nobly dressed) and Japanese (except for those wearing suits) (Pan 36), and these regulations were not completely repealed until 1928(Lee *Li Oufan Zixuanji* 195). In addition, modern public places such as assembly halls, theaters, and horse racing halls also stipulated that the Chinese were not allowed to enter freely. In such a context, there was no doubt that Zhang Yuan was a very important open public space. Therefore, it seems coincidental but perhaps inevitable that Zhang Yuan, one of the early film projection venues, is also a high-profile case in the study of Shanghai's original public sphere. Some scholars argue that, as the largest public event venue in Shanghai, Zhang Yuan was a product of the special times and circumstances of Shanghai in the late Qing Dynasty, successfully mobilizing the relevant resources of traditional and Western cultures to create a unique public sphere, regardless of ethnicity, class, and gender (Xiong "Zhangyuan" 31-42). This kind of public sphere was the overlap of leisure activity space, social activity space, and political activity space in the special state of intermingling and coexistence of Chinese and Western cultures (Xiong "Wanqing" 73-81).

The above comments on Zhang Yuan precisely fit the definition of the vernacular modernist public sphere that mediates the conflicts between modernity and tradition, exoticism and local interest, etc. Before the new audiovisual medium, the film can establish its own kingdom, it had to find a place for itself in this already largely characterized public sphere. Just as Zhang Yuan offered the citizens of Shanghai the possibility of a public sphere that crossed all kinds of boundaries through the expansion of space, I argue that if early film screening venues can construct a public sphere, its most important function will be to gain a mass base, expand public horizons, and fight for the right to participate in social interactions by occupying the space for public activities. This is reflected in the various practical conflicts and struggles in early film projection practices described above, as well as in the expansion of cultural activities and expressions that emerged in the public sphere of Zhang Yuan, the complex early moviegoing experience.

One of the most important activities in Zhang Yuan is the tour of the garden, that is, a viewing activity. There was a wide variety of exotic flowers and birds from the West, as well as rockeries and lakes for climbing and boating. In addition to nature viewing, many activities combine traditional entertainment with Western fashion, such as kite fairs, horse races, flower shows, fireworks, poetry, and magic shows. "A Visit to Wei Chun Yuan" recorded the feelings of a visitor to Zhang Yuan who said that it was like being in a fairyland (Wang and Zhang 19). By 1894, Zhang

Yuan expanded to 61.24 mu (4.08 hectares) and became the most famous large-scale comprehensive entertainment venue in Shanghai. There were various fashionable palaces and activities such as flower rooms, bouncy houses, throwing courts, bicycles, pleasure boats, bookstores, Suzhou opera, junior girls' traditional opera, teahouses, western restaurants, and smoking rooms. (Wang and Zhang 42). In addition, there were lectures, exhibitions, shopping, and competitions. Zhang Yuan held several high-impact charity sales, such as the "Universal Treasure Competition" and "Chinese and Foreign Entertainment and Treasure Contest for Disaster Relief". Officials and their families from Britain, France, Japan, Spain, Portugal, and other countries set up stalls, hung their national flags high, and brought out distinctive goods for charity sales. Chinese merchants also set up stalls to sell their goods and built an 'art gallery' to display and sell Chinese paintings, calligraphy, carvings, and other artworks". The park was thronged with visitors, goods from different countries competing for attention, exhibitors, and vendors shuttling in and out, attracting many curious Shanghai residents to join the event, which was similar to a mini-Expo preview (Wang and Zhang 118). Several entertainment and treasure contests had been extended, showing the enthusiasm and motivation of the participants from a wide area.

Thus, Zhang Yuan was chosen as one of the original venues for film screenings, probably because it was famous in Shanghai and the daily large crowds for entertainment were a guarantee of profitability. However, the initial film screenings played only a small supporting role in the flashy entertainment world, and the moviegoing audience should more accurately be called opera-goers or garden-goers. They perceived the rapidly changing society they lived in through Zhang Yuan, and during their visit they also became subjects and citizens of modernity, forming a potential film audience. The noisy physical space of Zhang Yuan greatly affected the pattern of film viewing. In those more specialized theaters which used fixed, separated seating to limit people's activities and social interactions, the moviegoing experience will become a quiet, "solitary" experience in the dark environment. In contrast, the openness and publicity of the early cinema-going experience are especially evident in the casual and distractive sharing of a film with others in a mishmash of various performances. More critically, the Chinese word for "Youyuan" (to visit the garden) is a dynamic and playful concept. The common denominator of Zhang Yuan's numerous activities is the promotion of physical interaction, which can produce the so-called "mobilized gaze", and as Ann Friedberg points out, this is also a unique way of perceiving and experiencing early cinema (29-32).

Moreover, Zhang Yuan's fame also came from a different, albeit much less culturally prestigious, type of exhibition activity, namely, the social activities of the so-called "socialites", a group of high-class prostitutes in Shanghai at the time. "It was estimated that there were at least two to three thousand high-class prostitutes in Shanghai at that time... Zhang Yuan was the stage for their 'gimmicks and gossip'. Whenever the sun went down in the west, young girls would call on their friends and four carriages would come straight to the garden" (Wang and Zhang 83). The reason why it would say four carriages was because in the 1890s, the four famous prostitutes —Lu Lanfen, Lin Daiyu, Jin Xiaobao, and Zhang Shuyu—came to Zhang Yuan every day. These famous prostitutes soon became representatives of "socialites" due to the promotion of the "Flower List"⁴⁶ to select celebrities at that time. Showing off luxury and fashion was an important criterion for selecting courtesans at that time, and if one wanted to be famous on the "Flower List", one had to wear the most fashionable clothes, ride in the most luxurious open carriages and show oneself in public places. The presentation of the "commodified female body" was crucial, as it was closely related to the survival of these "socialites". Based on the scale of these prostitutes' activities, we can assume that some of the people who visited Zhang Yuan may have been johns, and films may have been a windfall for them. The expectation of prospective moviegoers for some form of female bodily display coincides with the subsequent direction of the film.

Since traditional Chinese culture promotes romance between literati and "famous prostitutes" (e.g., the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly school mentioned in Chapter 1), the status of prostitutes may not be as inferior as one might think. In modern urban life, they even can further exemplify the experience of fashion and vernacular modernity. Hu Shi links the literary vernacular transformation to the bodily experience of Chinese women by using the metaphor of foot binding (and unbinding) (91-93), which illustrates the point that vernacular modernity is not limited to linguistic properties but can also be understood as a bodily experience. Most literary figures are coincidentally concerned with the modernity displayed by the female body. These literati, who gradually became the main force of film production and consumption, have found their female protagonists, the objects of the camera, and the film plot in the bodies of prostitutes and dancers⁴⁷. Female sensuality and fashion

⁴⁶ The Flower List was published by the *Youxi Bao* (*Game Gazette*) from September 19, 1897.

⁴⁷ A typical example is the story of the famous prostitute-turned-film actress Xuan Jinglin. Xuan Jinglin did not start out making movies to become famous, but only to make money to redeem herself and change her status. However, her secret movie making was eventually discovered and her savings were confiscated by the brothel. When Zheng

are some of the paradigms of soft cinema promoted by Neo-Sensualism. Most famous left-wing films also focus on the current situation of women's lives in the underclass. For example, *Fengyun ernu* (Children of Troubled Times, 1935) tells the story of a poet who abandons his life of pleasure to join the revolution, in which the performance of a female dancer becomes a key episode as it arouses the poet's patriotic passion; and the film's interlude "March of the Volunteers" is still the national anthem of the People's Republic of China.

Zhang Yuan was a grand view garden that, through its visual intuitiveness, thematic diversity and affordability offers a roughly comparable or proto-cinematic experience. As a part of the hodgepodge performance, the film screenings simply and brutally glue the gap between the traditional folk art of Shanghai and the novelty of the Western world, advancing the fragmented digestion of the experience of vernacular modernity by the coincidental, heterogeneous but actively interacting audiences. Same as garden tours and other visual activities, this early cinematic experience is a pastime in the "amusement parks" of old and new techniques, where numbed nerves, alienated bodies, and feelings of being disconnected are rehabilitated through mass entertainment and performance. At the same time, this pastime or play is a specific form of innervation, with the help of which one explores the boundaries of the world with one's own body, establishing "a mode of cognition involving sensuous, somatic and tactile forms of perception, a noncoercive engagement with the other that opens the self to experience" (Hansen "Benjamin and Cinema" 329). Thus, these frequent physical interactions and the lack of spatial separation in fact contribute to a political allegory for liberation and imaginative spatial appropriation on a larger scale.

Some of the film reviews at the time provided us with material to study this kind of film-viewing experience. The 2,500-word-long "A Memoir of Watching a Shadow Play in Wei Chun Yuan" is important reference material for its specific descriptions of the screening process, environment, content, and audiences' reaction to the "spectacle film" ("Weichunyuan guan yingxi ji" 11-13). The film is approximately 90 minutes long and contains short documentary films and episodes of simple cityscapes and landscapes. The author repeatedly used words such as "uniquely fine," "wonderful" and "appalling" to express the feelings of watching the film. These feelings

Zhengqiu of Mingxing Yingpian Gongsì (The Star Company) found out about it, he used the company's money to redeem her and wrote a film script about the life of a prostitute, Shanghai Yi Furen (A Shanghai Women, 1928) and asked Xuan Jinglin to play the female lead. Her performance and deeds were appreciated by the audience and Xuan Jinglin officially became a movie star. As a result of her freedom and change in status, she was able to marry the love of her life.

showed that in the early days of cinema, visual “spectacle” was the most important feature of cinema, and shock was the most intuitive and common reaction of film viewers, sometimes even showing excessive fear and dread.

Benjamin early diagnosed the problems of modern culture in his famous treatise: the further demise of the aura of the work of art in the modern industrial age has instead led to a growing need for ever more powerful aesthetic techniques, for more exciting spectacle and sensational effects to penetrate the protective membrane of consciousness (“The Work” 220-222). Much has been discussed about early cinema as “the film of attraction” that displays the “spectacle of modernity” and provokes “shock” (Gunning 64), but the special significance of “spectacle” and “exhibitionism” for Shanghai audiences has yet to be examined in detail. Understanding the construction of the public sphere in the case of spectacle films requires contextualization in the complex network of symbolism, cultural imagination, and historical practice associated with early films, in which the collective desire for the “culture of spectacle” implies a symbiotic relationship between vernacular modernity embodied as exhibitionism and visuality and the public sphere characterized by spatial expansion and worldliness. Another post-viewing essay provides an informative text worth analyzing.

...Another was the fire wheel car (author’s note: refers to the train), powered by electricity, the wheels rolled as fast as the wind, and the whole room was shocked and dazzled. After a few turns, the wheels stopped, and the passengers swarmed down and scattered to the east and west, men, women, and children, no less than a thousand people. After watching it, I sighed that the countless changes between heaven and earth are like a mirage, and how is this different from the shadow play of the past? Since the creation of electricity, it has opened up miracles that have never been seen in the past and released the infinite secrets of the Creator. For the shadow play, tens of thousands of miles are within reach, there is no need to seek immortal occult techniques to shrink the earth to an inch⁴⁸, and there are thousands of shapes and forms, just like “the images on the casting tripod”. In its flickering, life is a dream, an illusion, a bubble, and a shadow... (“Guan meiguo” 1)

⁴⁸ A Taoist mythology that Taoist immortal can shrink the distance of 10,000 miles into an inch.

“The image on the casting tripod (铸鼎象物)” is the lore about the tripods of the Xia Dynasty, that is, the story of “Yu casting nine tripods.” The tripod was a ceremonial vessel used to hold food for rituals, and gradually associated with the ancient gods, became the object of ancient sacrifices and a “sacred and spiritual being.” Yu was the common lord of the world, he presented everything under the sky on the nine tripods so that those who saw them could recognize the world and distinguish between good and evil. This distinction is based on the visual impression given by the image on the casting tripod. Simply put, anything that looks mild is good, and anything that looks fierce and aggressive is evil. This aesthetic ideal of the unity of beauty and goodness is an extreme emphasis on visuality, which is also a distillation of the characteristics of early cinema. The images carved on the tripod include actual things in the real world as well as imaginary images and “totems”, such as the taotie, dragon, and phoenix. Thus, these images also have certain elements of cultural imagination⁴⁹. The identification of good and evil through the representations on the tripod is an extended interpretation in a certain historical and cultural context, and its ultimate purpose is moral discipline. Therefore, “the image on the casting tripod” as a symbol can also be regarded as a means of edification, reflecting the political function and social role of art.

As one of the earliest symbolic artifacts, “the image on the casting tripod” is a mixture of spectacle and symbolism, artistic aesthetics and political indoctrination, enlightenment and superstition, reality and fantasy, and throughout Chinese history, these theological, aesthetic, and political associations of the image are often evoked to highlight the excessive visual experience. In this sense, it is not incongruous for the author to use it as a metaphor for early cinema. More importantly, comparing films to “the image on the casting tripod” suggests that for audiences of the time, the technical magic of early cinema superseded the role of the mythology of tripod, provided visual stimuli for knowing the world and discerning good from evil. And films, like “the image on the casting tripod”, symbolized a composite mode of cognition that stitched together art and politics, enlightenment and superstition, reality and fantasy. This complex meaning of cinema for the audience is precisely an expression of what Hansen defines as vernacular modernism. In other words, early cinema is incapable of telling stories; it offers all kinds of magical visual experiences, the landscapes of modernity, and modern people try to resurrect ancient dreams, an enlightenment that

⁴⁹ For example, Western dragons often appear in the image of “evil dragon”, while the Chinese are good, and can travel clouds and rain, making “national peace”.

is not entirely scientific and rational through these cinematographic representations as an alternative to tripod-presented images. It relates to the imaginative occupation and reshaping of space, the complexities of which are concentrated in the promotion of vernacular modernity and the expansion of the public sphere, where the mobility and complexity of crowds break through the limits of spatial boundaries, while the expansion of public space lends itself to the magic of technology and the sensory reflexes of the audience. In the following, I will elaborate on this process.

The full afterthought also mentions various other modern scenes, including downtown, roads, rain, the coast, indoor hotels and cafes, and the trains highlighted here are considered as a transportation system that has profoundly changed the way people experience the world around them since the 19th century and an important image of vernacular modernism (Morgan 67-82). Kirby applied the “panoramic perception” of moving landscapes by rail passengers to the film experience (7). Giuliana Bruno also uses the analogy of the train to describe the film viewing experience: she believes that being in a movie theater is like being on a train, where a visual machine allows the viewer to see the scenery along the way, to spend time with others, to travel through time and space, and to observe everything from an exquisite perspective through a moving frame (50). These interpretations of the connection between trains and cinema emphasize the transcendence of time and space through visual and physical interactions brought about by technology. The film’s appeal to the viewer may come from the virtual trip to a “heterogeneous space” that the author of the above-mentioned afterthought calls “dreamlike” and “the myriads of changes and mirage-like” scene. This is the same “being in a wonderland” feeling brought about by the trip to Zhang Yuan.

Retreating into the fairyland brings undoubtedly temporary relaxation, the comfort of sensual pleasure, and even a fantasy world where one can escape from the various external forces that drive one to be restless and timid. However, it is worth noting that for the citizens of Shanghai, these wonderlands and fantasies (such as modern public places like parks) are real, not only in distant Western countries but also in the nearby bustling concessions, which unfortunately are mostly off-limits to the Chinese. This, then, may make their illusions and distractions inevitably tainted with realistic associations. Thus, in Shanghai, a city of mixed styles, cinema’s ability to create dreams does not conflict with its representation of everyday life. On the one hand, it captures the audience in an instant, giving pleasure and comfort, and is the perfect place for Chinese audiences to escape from reality and enter the realm of the imaginary. On the other hand, it is parallel to the

representation of modernity and modernization, bringing Chinese audiences a hazy view and feeling of various modern social spaces.

The significance of such spatial displays lies not only in the ability of early cinema, i.e., photography, to present realistic scenes of modernity but also in their ability to bridge the gap between private and public space. As this essay notes, “tens of thousands of miles are within reach, and there is no need to seek the immortal occult techniques of shrinking the earth to an inch”—Cinema can bring the vast external world tens of thousands of miles away to the audience’s eyes; or rather, bring the individual audience collectively to the outside world. The fascination with spectacle cinema comes from its resonance with public senses and sensibilities—the actual or imaginative appropriation of the world is perhaps central to early cinema viewing and its public sphere. Thus, we may be able to discover the real purpose of audiences going to the movies in the pre-cinema period. For Shanghai’s entertainment community of men, women, and children, they did not necessarily go to see a “movie”—the precinema did not have the recreated imagination or storytelling that would later become its central quality—but rather to see the world that was real yet as far-fetched as an illusion. Audiences were impatient to make up for the trauma of being shut out of the experience of modernity for various reasons (race, wealth, and gender) through the publicization of visual and physical space.

Triumphing in the balance between surrealism and realism, cinema and its audiences also traverse the line between entertainment fantasy and political reality. The popularity of these spectacles that contribute to the imaginative occupation of space coincides with the above-mentioned spontaneous maintenance of film screening venues to physically occupy the space, both perhaps stemming from the need to expand the public sphere to counter the various strict spatial segregations of real society. Spectacle film’s minimal distance from the world, as well as the sensorial immersion it offers, contribute to a hotbed of feverish mass anticipation of the modern city and public space, fostered by the hyperbolic rhetoric of Taoist fairyland. The audience likened the film with the secrets of creation and various Taoist immortal arts. This local religious coloration, which was regarded as “superstitious” by the May Fourth Movement, is given a new meaning in its combination with modern city and technology and can be considered part of vernacular modernity.

To understand this vernacular modernity, it is necessary to learn about the unique historical-cultural significance that this reality-based imaginative rhetoric has in the local context. Typically,

residing in deep wilderness, beyond the reach of ruling powers, Taoist immortals are received as naturalists in classical tales and folklore, closely associated with esoteric arts and magical powers. Their geographic remoteness and political neutrality (or, rather, ambiguity) have also made Taoism a political heresy. In this sense, this so-called “fairyland” created by the film is the nodal point of the anarchic social landscape, whose power to present real scenes also generates an imagination space that allows the audience to transplant the remote Taoist fairyland directly into the urban space. The inequalities of the city, further exacerbated by the presence of the concession, are compensated for vicariously by such transplantation. This imagination and transplantation thus promote and reflect the audience’s ambiguous political and social ideals of “freedom and equality”. The association with traditional myths, however, in no way amounts to a nostalgic return to pre-modern, primitive times, as technology has irreversibly cut into the way people experience and change the world. Through the recovery of human senses by the innervation of technology as well as the interpenetration between fantasy and reality, these ambiguities of new social and political dreams about equality and freedom emerge in the cinema screening, which has been transformed into an emerging public sphere. Here people occupy and reshape the modern city to confront social segregation and subvert inherent power.

The claustrophobic-like urgency to occupy space became increasingly intense during the ensuing decades of the film industry’s formation and prosperity. As a brief example, three “warnings” published in film magazines in 1925 reminded the Chinese film industry that:

WARNING!!!

All Chinese filmmakers unite! Resist the sabotage and monopoly of a certain country!

WARNING TWO!!!

There are only manufacturing plants, no distribution houses, thousands and thousands of feet of film being shot every day, but not an inch of land for screening. Ah! The huge crisis that cuts off our lives!!



Fig. 2.3 “Warnings” in *Yingxi Chunqiu* (1925)

WARNING THREE!!!

Friend! Wake up! Don't just bury your head in making films! Open your eyes and see where your film will be screened after it is made? [Fig. 2.3] (*Yingxi Chunqiu* 6; 9; 14)

For a long time, the lack of screening venues was considered the biggest crisis in the Chinese film industry. Local films not only needed to gain recognition from foreign-controlled movie theaters but also wanted to establish their own distribution networks and have their own movie theaters. The internal logic of Chinese filmmakers seeking survival space in the market is the same as that of Shanghai citizens fighting for survival space in the concession, behind which lurks the rise of nationalism in response to China's semi-colonial condition. By the mid-to-late 1920s, when Shanghai citizens finally had free access to concession parks, the dilemma of domestic films was also significantly improved by the rapid construction of theaters. Nevertheless, in an era of fierce competition and confrontation, obsession with the public sphere has always been one of the themes of the film industry, only that they may have taken different forms at different times and for audiences from different backgrounds. The cinematic experience and its public sphere are always on the "continuum" of vernacular modernity, fluctuating between mass entertainment and political enlightenment, the senses and the spirit, mundane life and sublime faith, collective innervation and individual autonomy, but most importantly never fixed at either end of the pole. Here, I would like to complement the discussion in this section by showing some clues about the functional transformation of early cinematic public space.

As the traditional assessment that "Zhang Yuan is a money-squandering den and a place of heroes" suggests, Zhang Yuan is a highly complex metaphorical public sphere in the context of Chinese urban culture. It carries a hybrid model of vernacular modernity that encompasses different media and cultural forms and reconciles entertainment with politics. Zhang Yuan is never just a paradise for "hoi polloi" and "prostitutes." While some people are attracted to visual commercial civilization and consumerism, others who gather at Zhang Yuan are reviewing the fragrance of culture and focus on public socio-political affairs. I am concerned with the influence of these people on the reception of cinema and the shaping of the public sphere of film viewing.

Zhang Yuan has held many "painters' gatherings" and "literati gatherings". The "Haishang tijin guan jinshi shuhua gui" was a large and active painting and calligraphy association in Shanghai in

the late Qing Dynasty, which gathered hundreds of calligraphies and painters who often met together for art exchange activities. The members often brought their precious paintings, calligraphies, seals, and other collectibles to the Zhang Yuan for exhibition, communion, and study. Sometimes they argued with each other over the identification of ancient seals and ancient paintings, or the authenticity of ancient handwriting, and the atmosphere of academic contention was quite strong. In addition, the 60th birthday of the famous literary scholar Yuan Zhizu and the 50th birthday of the chief writer of Shen Bao were also held in the Zhang Yuan. From 1882 to 1916, the politician, poet, and calligrapher Zheng Xiaoxu recorded in his diary that he had visited Zhang Yuan as many as 108 times. The South Society, a bourgeois revolutionary cultural group that had a major impact on modern Chinese history, also held several “Yaji” (elegant gatherings) in Zhang Yuan. Because of these connections with literary and publishing luminaries, gatherings of various forms and purposes held in Zhang Yuan were published in detail in newspapers, from the initiation and holding of the gatherings to the coverage of their main contents. This mode of interaction with the court of public opinion expanded the influence of Zhang Yuan and brought more people to the different gatherings.

It is therefore not surprising that some influential political events were also held in Zhang Yuan. For example, on the afternoon of December 6, 1897, a women’s assembly known as the “Skirt Assembly” was held in Zhang Yuan. This official gathering drafted a brief constitution of the Women’s College, which was of great importance to the cause of women’s education and the equal rights movement in China. Zhang Yuan also held several anti-Russian rallies to protest the treaties proposed by Tsarist Russia to deprive China of its sovereignty over the Northeast during the Battle of Peking. At the rally on March 24, 1902, a 16-year-old girl named Xue Jinqin delivered an impassioned speech, the first time a Chinese woman had ever spoken at a public rally, pioneering the public participation of Chinese women in political affairs. On November 21, 1902, the Chinese Education Association held a meeting in Zhang Yuan to assist students who had dropped out of Nanyang Public School to protest the suppression of freedom of expression. Dedicated to educational reform, the China Education Association was also a democratic revolutionary group. On March 15, 1903, it held a protest speech at Zhang Yuan against the discrimination against the Chinese at The 5th National Industrial Exposition held in Osaka in 1903. In addition, Zhang Yuan held several meetings to ban opium and cut Queues to popularize the idea of strengthening the body, getting rid of the reputation of being “the Sick Men of East Asia” and promoting the “revolutionary”

spirit of moving from feudalism to civilization. In the following years, Zhang Yuan also held the “National Convention” (1915), with over 30,000 participants; Sun Yat-sen also visited Zhang Yuan to give a political speech (1916)⁵⁰.

Zhang Yuan manifests the mixed style and latent intra-group tensions in Shanghai’s urban culture, a theme that has been presented throughout the history of Chinese cinema. If the early film exhibitions well continued the exhibitionist part of Zhang Yuan’s public sphere, catering to audiences immersed in the entertainment enjoyment of sensory material modernity (though they also had the opportunity to feel the appeal of democracy), audiences seeking edification and refined artistic tastes wanted cinema to serve as a more educational public sphere that would open the audience’s spiritual world and spread modern knowledge and value systems to the general public. In other words, in the precinema stage, despite the shock and pleasure brought by the spectacles of modernity triggered a general fascination with urban public space and a vague awareness of freedom and equality, audiences with more complex cultural backgrounds (especially intellectuals returning from study abroad) were barely moved by these spectacles. Not only had they already been to those places and experienced those activities firsthand in real life, but they were also devotees of serious enlightenment and rationality, trying to push cinema and its public sphere to a position close to the other end of vernacular modernity.

The different tastes of audience groups set the stage for the transformation of the film-viewing experience and its public sphere. As mentioned in the previous chapter, intellectual audiences tend to immerse themselves in the tumbling storylines of novels and dramas because they are accustomed to the viewing habits and expression mechanisms of traditional forms of leisure. These literati or intellectuals were at the same time the pioneers to be able to enter and be active in the film industry. Of course, in the pre-cinema stage, most of the creative intellectuals had not yet invested in this superficial “low art.” But it was with the influence of traditional opera that the first film produced by Chinese filmmakers was none other than the static recording of a Beijing Opera *Dingjunshan*, produced by the Fengtai Photo Studio in Beijing in 1905. Without a script, “Ding Jun Shan” consists of several Peking Opera performance clips filmed with a fixed camera, and the entire film is 30 minutes long. This combination of traditional national art with foreign novelties seemed to be extremely well received: “They were varied and extremely impressive” and “thousands of people

⁵⁰ See Wang and Zhang, especially chapters 3, 4 and 5, for a detailed description of these activities.

came to see them” (“Jiuju dianyinghua” 421). This was a more localized creation and reception, and at the same time, the first step toward narrativization had been taken, even though cinema at this time was still far from the closed narrative style of the classic Hollywood films that would later become popular in Shanghai and throughout the country. This trend is consistent with film historian A Naite’s account of the history of American cinema:

In the years before 1900, movies were easy to attract people by their novelty alone. People were excited to see a train coming toward them, a crowd strolling down a boulevard, an army on the drill, or a waterfall pouring over rocks ... but within a few years, that novelty slowly wore off ... Seeing that the movies were rapidly losing their viewers, the early producers tried to lure them back ... The ultimate salvation of cinema, or the transformation of cinema from a new scientific technique to a compelling means of art, depended on the use of film to tell stories. (Naite 205)

In fact, after the introduction of cinema to Shanghai, some soon began to wonder how long the appeal of pure exhibitionism would last:

Shadow plays are prevalent.

This year, since the opening of the various fireworks and shadow play shows at Wei Chun Yuan, all kinds of shadow play shows have sprung up. From Ming Yu Lou in the west to Xicheng Photo Studio in the east, no less than five or six of them have been set up on No.4 Horse Road. The audience watched them over and over again. It’s a sensation, but it may not make a lot of money... The situation of the Shanghainese swarm to see all those novelties and strange customs will not last for days. (“Yingxi shengxing” 2)

Some Shanghai audiences began to be tired of these films, consistent with Georges Sadoul’s claim that after 18 months, audiences were no longer interested in Lumière’s “moving picture machine”. Itinerant merchants of phonographs and “cinematographs” had to boast to the countryside about the scientific marvels that they had not yet seen (Xu and Chen 17; 24). Similar to the situation in the West, it was only when the Shanghainese gradually lost interest in simple and short “spectacle

films” introduced since around 1897 that films began to spread to other parts of mainland China such as Shandong (1904), Sichuan (1905) and Tianjin (1906) (Chen, Yiyu 72).

Thus, the inward transformation of cinema was reflected not only in the increasingly internalized viewing experience brought about by the rationalized cinematic narratives but also in the gradual development of the mainland market. For cities that had been marginalized in the origins and development of the film industry, the metropolitan self-images created by Shanghai’s rapidly growing film industry once again spread rapidly as a “spectacle” to the less developed mainland. The 1910s were a chaotic time, and Shanghai had an influx of native immigrants from all over the country. For these people from the countryside, the city itself was an alluring place that provoked shock and awe. “Going to Shanghai” meant opening one’s eyes to the world. Early Shanghai films might provide an opportunity for those who had not been able to visit Shanghai to directly feel the beating pulse of the modern metropolis, while at the same time avoiding the risks and demands of real city life. In other words, audiences in remote provinces were finally able to encounter and imaginatively occupy the modern urban space of “Shanghai”. This process was no longer new to Shanghai audiences, whose voracious gaze had shifted from the concession to the more distant and glorious Hollywood, and further shifted from the modern landscape and space to the consciousness dimension, reflections on modernity, modern political institutions, and social systems, especially after intellectuals focused on enlightenment began to actively enter the film world.

The different social bases of audiences, the geographical imbalance in the development of the industry, and the special structure of geopolitical and cultural relations embodied in the pre-cinema period have presupposed a “center-margin” model for the development of the film industry afterward. This exists not only within the film industry but also between the film industry and external forces. The tensions between multiple sets of relationships at different levels make it possible for cinema to become a democratic medium whose mature public sphere emphasizes not only the numerical growth of groups and the expansion of space but also the potential dynamics of social change through the impact and occupation initiated by the periphery on the center. This, of course, cannot rely solely on the “crossing/fly-through” of the body and the rekindling of sensory instincts achieved by the technical magic of spectacle films but also requires further progress in the realm of consciousness and social reality. Such a public sphere of film viewing will become possible with the active participation of intellectuals. Importantly, however, the political ideal and democratic

practices of this public sphere remain tied to the notion of experience/memory, and its roots are still deep in the “bodily collective innervation” generated through play and mimetic faculty that lend themselves to the power of technology.

2.2 Internalized Cinematic Experiences, Intellectuals, and Ways of Consciousness Awakening

While early moviegoers have accustomed to the bombardment of shocking things (images), the instantaneous bursts of sensory pleasure and the gradual enrichment of the plot and narrative logic of the film continued to capture the audience’s attention. Beginning with *Nanfu nanqi* (Die for Marriage), a 1913 adaptation of a modern play, several short feature films that initially met the standards of narrative cinema attempted to cater to audiences’ changing tastes, beginning a decades-long process of active reconciliation between shock and plot, entertainment and enlightenment, the masses and the elite, commerce and culture, and even politics. In 1921, the first full-length feature Chinese film, *Yan Ruisheng*, was born. Based on a real-life, shocking crime, the film premiered at the Olympic Theater and won the huge box office (Xu, Chihen 27). Soon after, Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Zhengqiu, and others started the Star Company, which began a policy of producing “long films and serious dramas”. Zheng Zhengqiu believed that “art is for edification” and that “Star Company’s productions should be serious dramas when they first meet with the Chinese people on the screen. The first thing to do is to reveal the correct doctrine to the society” (qtd. in Cheng et al. 57-58). Roughly speaking, early Chinese filmmaking went through a process that began with opera films and developed into documentaries and feature films⁵¹. It was also a process in which film creators explored appropriate storytelling methods, i.e., narratives along the lines of adapted modern dramas, real events, and literary works.

The integration from attractive to narrative cinema went hand in hand with the shift from noisy open spaces to large, enclosed movie theaters, reflecting the interplay of perceptual aesthetics with spatial and architectural aesthetics. By around the mid-to-late 1920s, the more mature film production industry and film projection venues had been built, with more than 50 large and luxurious

⁵¹ See Li and Xing for an insightful analysis of this trend.

movie theaters established in Shanghai alone (Wang, Ruiyong 82-98). In 1926, the publication *Yingxi Daguan (The Great View of Chinese Cinema)* introduced eight movie theaters in Shanghai. Among them, Shanghai Odeon Theater was the most developed “aristocratic movie theater” in Shanghai. The article mentioned that the interior of the Odeon Theater was extremely luxurious and can accommodate a total of about 1,400 spectators. The most unique feature of the theater was that its lighting could change gradually from dark to light or from light to dark, unlike other movie theaters whose lighting suddenly became brighter or darker, which was harmful to the eyes (Xu, Chihen 132). The seats were divided into two classes, with the upstairs seats being more luxurious but less ventilated. However, the theater was equipped with heaters and fans, claiming to be “warm in winter and cool in summer” [Fig. 2.4] (“Aodian daxiyuan” 3). In addition, the Carlton Theater had the largest screen and there were places for the audience to wait inside the theater without having to endure the cold wind and hot sun outside, etc.

Most of the theaters were founded by or with the participation of foreign investors, and the audiences were mostly foreign guests and upper-middle-class Chinese. These theaters were also frequented by Shanghai’s intellectual class, and the author considered them to be “noble theaters, free from all kinds of hawking and chaos”. Secondly, there were the Pantheon Theater, the Xinzhongyang Theater, the Empire Theater, and the Carter Theater, which were not too expensive but clean and serious in layout and management and were mostly frequented by the middle class. Finally, there were small movie theaters such as Wan Yuan, Gonghe, Shijie, Wuzhou, and Jinxing, which were relatively inexpensive, and most of the audiences were young children and women, and the films shown were martial arts and comic films (Xu, Chihen 132). Formal movie theaters, especially those lavish movie palaces, became independent art halls and architectural wonders; film audiences began to form and broke away from the parasitic environment of teahouses and famous gardens, acquiring a public sphere of their own.

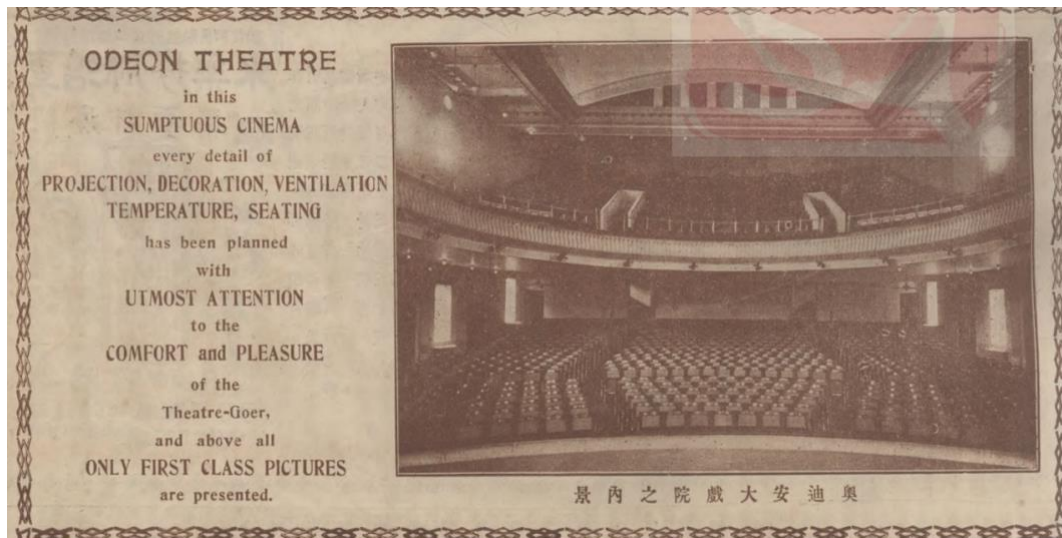


Fig. 2.4 Interior view of the Odeon Theater in *Liangyou* (1926)

At this time, movie theaters were typical bourgeois public places, just like cafes and theaters. According to a study of Shanghai's wage levels and movie ticket prices, going to the movies was not an affordable activity for the general public in the 1920s, but was acceptable to middle-class families (Chen, Yiyu 72). Around 1920, movie tickets cost about 1 to 2 yuan. A worker's monthly salary was about 9 yuan, and for the average person, the monthly catering costs ranged from 6 to 8 yuan. In contrast, some intellectuals in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Lu Xun, earned an average monthly income of up to about 300-746 yuan (Han 11-19). As a result, "those who frequent public entertainment venues are mainly urban middle and upper classes, most of whom are literati, freelancers and company employees" (Chen, Yiyu 52).

The activities of movie theaters in this period were far richer than we can imagine. The early movie projection venues that were once confined to a corner of famous gardens and teahouses not only developed their own independent spaces but also inherited parts of their various activities that had a high cultural reputation. Browsing through advertising messages and news reports, one could find a wealth of news that movie theaters used to host various elegant artistic activities and political events, including musicians' recital events, foreign singing and dancing performances, exchanges of horticultural skills, academic and amusement meetings of various organizations, student gatherings, celebrities' speeches, preaching sessions of Confucius, etc. The merchant communities also frequently rented movie theaters to show movies to raise donations for national salvation, and the movie theaters became public places for patriotic activities.

The world musicians arrive in Shanghai and decide to perform at the Olympic Theater
Mr. Rogani, the greatest musician in the world, has arrived in Shanghai on the Japanese mail ship Saikyo Maru. He is accompanied by Mrs. Rochanaev and Mrs. Bismarck Ignatius. They are also good at music. They have decided to open the show at the Olympic Theater in Jing'an Temple. After one or two weeks of performances, they will go to the Japanese Imperial Theater. (“Shijie yinyuejia” 10)

Newly arrived British cabaret troupe, Lulla Forbe, Diek Norton, and others, will perform at the Carlton Theater for a week starting today. (S. Ping 1)

Nan Shi Cheng Dong Girls' School will rent the Olympic Theater for an entertainment convention on Saturday, June 30. In addition to student performances, celebrities are invited to perform live. The fare is 1 yuan, and all but the necessary expenses will be donated to the school fund. (“Nanshi chengdong nuxue” 15)

We are very grateful for the generous support of Mr. Haishan Li, General Manager of Xinshijie Cinema. Every Sunday, we borrow the theater as a venue for preaching Confucianism. (“Mingxie xinshijie” 9)

Initiating a shadow play to raise funds

Chen Shunchu and eleven others initiate a one-day shadow play show at the Victoria Theater on Haijianing Road. The proceeds are all used to fund the National Salvation Reserve without taking a penny for themselves. Their passionate patriotism is very respectable. (“Jiuguo chujin jiyao” 1)

There were even students who used the movie theater as a place to learn foreign languages:

Recently, a young man with an English-Chinese dictionary went to the Carter Theater every evening. When he saw a word he didn't know, he looked up in the dictionary while watching the movie, looking very busy. When he looked up the meaning of the word, he would recite it

over and over again in a whisper so as not to forget it. He is a young man who loves to learn.
(“Yingxiyuan zhong fan zidian” 1)

The welcome party for Wang Jingwei, a senior KMT government official, was held in a movie theater for party members and in a stadium for the general public, suggesting that the movie theater was even a relatively more “formal” political venue:

The two welcome meetings for Wang Jingwei tomorrow

The citizens’ meeting will be held at the public stadium and the party members’ meeting will be held at the Republican Cinema. The Shanghai Special Municipality Subdivision will hold a public meeting to welcome Chairman Wang Jingwei tomorrow at 2 p.m. at the South City Public Stadium. All preparations are ready, and Mr. Wang of the party-nation will be able to attend the meeting and receive a warm welcome from the general public. The Special Municipality Subdivision will also convene a citywide party meeting at 9:00 a.m. on the same day at the Republican Cinema in Fangbanqiao, West Gate, to welcome comrade Wang back to China and urge him to work hard for the Party’s cause. (“Mingri liangge” 13)

The independent closed and elegant viewing environment, the proliferation of integrated narrative films, and the solidified audience all mean that internalization of the viewing experience is inevitable (Elsaesser 167-168). The internalized moviegoing experience helps cultivate more engaged and focused audiences, stimulates more intensive perception and reflection, and liberates the potential of perceptual space. This perceptual dimension differs significantly from the pre-cinema period in that it not only offers urban communities the opportunity to break through strict spatial segregations and recognize the world but also shifts the direction of its bold imagination and rich referential ability from the outside to the inside. In other words, “going to the movie theater” goes beyond its literal meaning; it not only implies spatial appropriation and material possession but also facilitates the self-reference of the audience and the active construction of public critical space, spurring them to the beach a new world in the realm of consciousness. The pressure of competition prompted cinema practitioners to reorganize the relational structure of physical and representational space to create a larger, more concrete “cinematic world”. Independent of the

comprehensive physical spaces like “Zhang Yuan”, it is no longer even clung to the landscapes and urban spaces of modernity, but rather attributed to the critical thinking and consciousness awakening that deconstructed the real-world order.

The exploration of the movie theater as a perceptual space for self-referential can be traced back to the personal life change of Lu Xun, one of the most famous intellectuals in modern Chinese history. Reflecting on his choice to abandon medicine for literature, Lu Xun described an unforgettable moviegoing experience he had while studying medicine in Japan in 1906.

This was during the Russo-Japanese War, so there were many war films, and I had to join in the clapping and cheering in the lecture hall along with the other students. It was a long time since I had seen any compatriots, but one day I saw a film showing some Chinese, one of whom was bound, while many others stood around him. They were all strong fellows but appeared completely numb look. According to the commentary, the one with his hands bound was a spy working for the Russians, who was to have his head cut off by the Japanese military as a warning to others, while the Chinese beside him had come to enjoy the spectacle. (X. Lu “Nahan” 2)

Lu Xun has a dual (as the person watching the execution and the executed being watched) echo with the Chinese in the film, who is both the viewer and part of the landscape watched by other viewers. His viewing experience came not only from the public experience of the film, but also from his personal experience, from the public space he was in, and from the public vision given to him by his cultural background. As a viewer, he was in the same position as the Chinese spectators watching the execution ritual in the film, but he could hardly be as indifferent as the numbed Chinese people. At the same time, Lu Xun and his Japanese classmates were undergoing another ritual, one that took place at the film’s screening venue, the lecture hall, where Lu Xun was in the same position as the executed Chinese in the film: “... the crowd gathered around to watch were Chinese. Also, there was me in the lecture room. ‘Banzai!’ They all clapped their hands and cheered. They cheered everything we saw, but to me the cheering that day was particularly jarring to my ear” (“Tengye xiansheng” 942).

While his Japanese classmates could, with a slight sense of superiority, abandon the tortured

Chinese in the film to the position of the “other”, Lu Xun could not. He suffered the mental torture of the film, becoming the mirror image of the cinematic landscape in real life. This mutual reference and exchange of experiences inside and outside the screen occur in the space of perception, which is the key to the public sphere of cinema. Specifically, it was a painful experience of vernacular enlightenment, both for Lu Xun personally and for the later Chinese “revolutionary cause” as a whole. For Lu Xun, what was more shocking than the brutal execution was “the numb faces of the spectators”: “at that time and in that place, however, it made me change my mind. Before the term was over, I had left for Tokyo, because after this film I felt that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made examples of, or to witness such futile spectacles; and it doesn’t really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement” (X. Lu “Nahan” 2).

Lu Xun’s film-viewing experience during his study in Japan illustrates the fact that the cross-reference between the audience and the film, the Chinese and represented Chinese, triggers a process of consciousness awakening that is not mediated by classical verbal communication. This is precisely the alternative public sphere envisioned as a medium for organizing “the social horizon of experience” that relies on individual and intersubjective vision and is intimately rooted in the material condition of production. Cinema makes its claim to reality through technologically traversed sensory immediacy, turning the human perception into the most intensive site and medium through which “communication,” “participation” and even political concepts are processed and transmuted. Thus, perhaps for some intellectuals, the cinema of the time may have been the best place to recognize and change the “numb face” of the Chinese people. The opportunity for collective self-examination and introspection through the cross-cultural public horizon provided by cinema makes the specificity of this medium manifest in the context of the times and the social environment.

This process did recur in later Chinese film practice, and Lu Xun did use the term “numb face” to refer to Chinese moviegoers. It symbolizes, above all, the tame, submissive state of the Chinese. Under the influence of film as a powerful emotional medium, the audience’s self-projection of the film image makes this “numb face” particularly common. This desire for projection is described as a strange “racial fantasy”, as Lu Xun points out in “The Lesson of Cinema”. The “enslave and

enslaved” relationship between the two civilizations, represented by the white and the black, somehow touches the Chinese audience, causing them to be influenced by the “power relationship” in the film and to project themselves into the image of the “enslaved” black. In the “Translator’s Note” of “Modern Cinema and the Proletariat”, Lu Xun bluntly points out that this is “the servility of the Chinese people” (“Xiandai dianying” 33).

But by the time I saw the movie in Shanghai, I had already become a “lower class Chinese”, watching the white and rich people sitting upstairs and the middle and lower class Chinese people lining up downstairs. On the silver screen, white soldiers fought, white lords got rich, white ladies got married, and white heroes explored so that the audience admired, envied, felt horror, they felt unable to do so. But when the white hero adventured in Africa, there were often black loyal servants to him to open the way, to service him, to risk their lives, to die for him, so that the master returned safely home; when he was ready for the second adventure, the loyal servant was no longer there, so he remembered the dead. As soon as his face fell, a black face in his memory appeared on the screen. The yellow-faced spectators’ faces also fell in the shimmering light: they were touched (“Dianying de jiaoxun” 21)

If this strange racial fantasy of projecting oneself onto the image of black people requires a certain “imagination”, some domestic films offer more images of the “numb face” of the Chinese, which are more convenient to assimilate and cultivate the “interest” of the audience. But on the other hand, it provides intellectuals such as Lu Xun with a special perspective, a position to observe the audience, and an opportunity for self-reflection, which reveals the “servility of the Chinese people” and highlights the need to “excite the beast” and “lift up the chin” to rebel. In “On the Face of the Chinese People”, Lu Xun writes:

After that, I also gradually feel a kind of dissatisfaction with the appearance of some Chinese people. Whenever they see uncommon events or gorgeous women and hear some intoxicating speech, their chins always hang down slowly to open their mouths. This is not very elegant, as if something is missing in their spirit...The Japanese Hasegawa Nyozeke is good at making satirical writings. Last year I saw a book of his essays called “Cat, Dog, and

Man” (犬・猫・人間); one of them was about the faces of Chinese people. The idea is that when you see Chinese people for the first time, you feel that something is missing in their faces compared to Japanese or Westerners. After a long time, when one gets used to seeing them, one feels that nothing is lacking in their faces, but there is something extra in the faces of the Westerners. This extra thing, he gives it a not-so-good name: bestiality. The Chinese do not have this on their faces but are human, so adding this extra thing makes the following equation.

Man + bestiality = Western man

His purpose of praising the Chinese and denigrating the Westerners to ridicule the Japanese is achieved, so naturally, there is no need to consider whether this bestiality, which is not seen on the face of the Chinese, does not exist originally or has now been eliminated. If it is eliminated later, then is it gradually purged and only human nature remains, or just gradually becoming tame? Buffalos became domestic cattle, wild boars became domestic pigs, wolves became dogs, and the wildness disappeared, but this is only to make the herdsman like them, no benefit to for themselves... I have heard that the reason why there are so many domestic films is that the overseas Chinese welcome them and the producers can profit from them. Every time a new film arrives, the elders bring their children and point to the movie and tell them: “Look, the people of our motherland are like this”. It seems to be popular in Guangzhou, too, where I often see a full house at four shows day and night. Guangzhou is now cultivating its interest in this way, just as Shanghai is. Unfortunately, when the movie starts, the electric lights must go out and I cannot see people’s chins. (“Luelun” 799-800)

The “numb face” that Lu Xun uses as a metaphor for Chinese audiences is no less ironic than Hasegawa Nyozeikan he praised. In this period, most of these “numb” audiences were ordinary middle-class people. They could afford to watch movies but were not good at critical thinking, so not surprisingly, movies were merely entertainment and distractive pastimes for them. This is certainly one of the basic functions of cinema, but for intellectuals like Lu Xun, his critique of the “numb face” demands a more active and contemplative viewing process to achieve a consciousness awakening of revolutionary nationalism. In other words, it is an aspiration to use the cinema as a means of vernacular education.

This mode of “irony” and “mockery” of criticism was a new tradition initiated by Lu Xun,

which aroused the greatest concern among Chinese intellectuals (Hongkou qu tushuguan 147). After the Nationalist Party's successful unification of China in the Northern Expedition (1928), censorship of speech forced public intellectuals to use more covert methods to create critical space. This attempt to use ridicule and mockery to express views at odds with the "mainstream" is a kind of anti-authoritarian discourse. Likewise, for most intellectuals, "watching movies" is perhaps also an anti-authoritarian discourse and even has a double meaning. It represents the cause of enlightenment and liberation beyond the "mainstream" of literature and elite modernism, while also disdaining the "official status" of government propaganda organs. Even if considering only within the film industry, the left-wing films, which Chinese film historians like to give an unshakable mainstream position in historical narratives, are not a closed system with hegemonic power. As covered in chapter 1, due to the ambivalent stance of left-wing discourse, no matter how much it emphasizes its solemnity, the re-sensitization through inflammatory emotions and the emphasis on popularity never allow it to become a legitimate ground for purely rational criticism and resistance. Thus, both the heroic deeds of left-wing filmmakers in the early 1930s and other cinematic practices were fighting for unorthodox freedom of expression that further gave birth to vernacular modernism and its public sphere. It was for this reason that these public intellectuals in opposition had the opportunity to participate in and organize such social feasts that greatly satisfied their political radicalism within the confines of perceptual space.

In addition to the pivotal moviegoing experience that led him to abandon medicine for literature, Lu Xun wrote in some correspondence with friends that he went to the movies almost every day during his days in Shanghai in 1927 (Hongkou qu tushuguan 147). Lu Xun was particularly fond of those realist films that exposed social ills, enlightened the audience, and called on the people to rise against reality. "As for Soviet films, Lu Xun refused to miss any of them. We were willing to any theater, no matter how far away, and the important thing was to see the films" (G. Xu 390). Ten days before Lu Xun's death, he also went to see the film "Revenge of the Sexual Encounter", adapted from Pushkin's novel *Dubrovsky*. "Last year (1936), on the Double Tenth Festival, he saw *Revenge of the Sexual Encounter* for the last time at the Shanghai Grand Theater and was so pleased to recommend it to his friends. That night, Lu Xun, who was suffering from a high fever, wrote to Huang Yuan and other friends recommending the film and asking him if there was any discrepancy between the film and Pushkin's original work. Lu Xun thought the film was "the greatest consolation,

the deepest love, and the most memorable pleasure before death, especially the scene in which the serf gives the final blow to the landlord that pleased him the most” (G. Xu 390).

If there is one thing that the films Lu Xun likes to have in common, it is perhaps the “angry faces” they convey. Lu Xun is by no means the only case of confrontational experience gained through film-watching; perception in the movie theater is not random and disorderly but serves to provide a communal vision, create a shared imagination, and organize a cohesive collective, thus exerting a subliminal effect on culture. Several articles documenting the cinematic experience of the time vividly describe the process of “fire” that is ignited in the perceptual space of the movie theater, including how emotions and actions are stirred, how senses condense into thoughts, how entertainment transitions to revolution, how audience and film cross-referenced, how people relate to each other, and how angry collectives are created:

Cinema is a microcosm of nature and mankind, giving appreciation and entertainment. Any kind of work must contain the cultivation of inspiration, overflowing with valuable meaning, concealing a stimulating medium, conveying hints to the audience, arousing their inner turmoil, and making them respond and resonate immediately. Thus, the audiences receive an invisible touch, happy to see happy, sad to see sad, sometimes laughing, sometimes sighing in contempt, and even can’t help but cry...

Last autumn, the famous film *Boot Man*, which shocked the whole of Europe, was screened in Shanghai Olympic Theater and was banned after only three days. During those three days, the audience was packed. A Russian orchestra was invited to sing while playing, and its score was synchronized with the film, which made the audience more moved, impassioned, and more and more excited. When the performance proceeded to the restoration of the White Party, the audience cheered wildly, applauded thunderously, and there was a clamor off the stage, with those who threw coins to the stage, and those who knew the song shouting it loud. This was all because the revolutionary blood of the film shot through our hearts and was burning. The practical embodiment of the idea induced an internal and consistent attraction among people.

The audience seems to be in the film place, they have no distance from the film, to sing and cry with the medium of external fluctuations so that they can promote the joy contained

and wash away the sadness accumulated in their hearts, which is the basis of the comfort given by the film. Therefore, we should not misunderstand the meaning of cinema, which is not entirely for entertainment but should be combustible, allowing the audience to trace the content from its beautiful appearance. When the delight evokes mental images in the depths of the senses, this is when the main idea of the film reaches the audience and stirs up waves in their mind, thus suggesting the ultimate purpose. (“Guanzhong de gongming” 28-29)

The above description of the function of cinema is very close to Hansen’s account of film viewing as a process of experiential communication, sensory reflexes, and the formation of a public sphere at the consciousness dimension. The emphasis on incendiary nature is reminiscent of Bao Weihong’s brilliant discussion of early cinema, in which she argues that it is the Chinese phrase “kindling the fire of anger” (nuhuo 怒火) that graphically expresses how the emotional changes of fire are transmitted to people, altering their physical state and inspiring action. This “anger” is a testament to the viewer’s agency, to an active and positive viewing, and to the potential of cinema to provoke criticism and confrontation, a self-consciousness that can even help shape democracy and the public sphere⁵².

This awakening of consciousness, amplified by anger, often coincides with actual action in theaters. Regarding the various protests that took place in movie theaters, a prime example was Hong Shen’s famous protest in the Grand Theater in Shanghai in 1930 against the screening of Paramount’s *Welcome Danger* (1929) starring Harold Lloyd in his first talkie. Halfway through the film screening, Hong Shen took the stage to urge the audience to boycott the film because of its racist depiction of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco’s Chinatown. “My fellow countrymen, what kind of film is this? As you all see, how can we tolerate the screening of such a film that insults our Chinese nation on our Chinese soil?” He spoke with great emotion, “Can we tolerate it?” Hong Shen raised his arms and the audience immediately responded. People rushed to the stage to demand that the film be banned, and many others rushed to the door to ask for refunds. At that time, the British manager of the Grand Theater detained Hong Shen illegally and tried to have him arrested by the police department under the Shanghai Municipal Council. However, considering that a large number of people had not left the theater and that the situation would affect the business of the

⁵² See W. Bao, especially chapter 1 and 2.

Grand Theater, Hong Shen was eventually released. With the assistance of dramatists, journalists, and artists, the event resulted in Hong's victory. The literary and artistic groups in Shanghai issued a joint statement firmly demanding that the Kuomintang government ban the film, with such force that it even caused repercussions nationwide. Public opinion also began to target the Shanghai Grand Theater, putting it in danger of closing down. Then in July, the Film Censorship Law was announced, which stipulated those films insulting to the Chinese nation and destructive to morals would be banned. The lawsuit filed by Hong Shen against the Grand Theater ended with a fine of 5,000 yuan to the theater, Paramount eventually withdrew the film and Lloyd personally wrote an apology letter to the Chinese Consulate in San Francisco.

If one were to carefully discern what exactly gets on intellectuals' nerves, the answer would be more than the racist portrayal of the Chinese in the film *Welcome Danger*. Film studies that attribute this event exclusively to nationalist discourse would not only obscure the diversity of public semantics and vernacular modernity, but also other implications of Hong Shen's protest. Through the comments on the *Welcome Danger* incident, we will find that the intellectuals' anger also reveals another internal orientation, namely, venting dissatisfaction with the reaction of the film audience, the "numb faces" as Lu Xun satirized. Before the "Hong Shen event", the public reaction to *Welcome Danger* was very limited. The "Film Viewers Association" even gave the following comment: "Harold Lloyd has opened his mouth, which is the first time in Shanghai. It's worth a look" ("Guanying tongzhahui" 2). After the film's release, there was a steady stream of viewers, and the "numbness" of the public was very common:

In the past few days, the two major theaters, Grand and Guanglu, have been bragging in the Shanghai newspapers that Harold Lloyd's *Welcome Danger* is good medicine, a masterpiece that will "make you laugh and laugh so hard that a thousand sorrows and a hundred diseases will disappear". The advertisement was placed in the newspaper, and I don't know why it didn't get into the sight of the Film Censorship Board. However, since "all your illnesses will disappear", we "sick men of Asia" noticed it and shouted to see this comedy film. I don't know why, but the thousands of people coming and going were numbed with laughter by this "particularly good comedy" ... ("Women duiyu" 35)

For the average viewer, this comedy film is like any other “slapstick” film. The silly Chinese characters with goofy behavior are like the Chaplin character that has been around since the 1920s. This clown-like, playful, and richly physical charisma can be universally understood without translation, giving the audience pure joy and temporary pleasure. However, as a vernacular hybrid containing the antagonism of pleasure and pain brought about by technology, films allow for different reactions and interpretations by different audiences. The criticism of *Welcome Danger* by intellectuals and the general audience’s enthusiastic welcome of the film once again exemplify the contradiction within the audience that existed as early as the pre-cinema period. This contradiction is exacerbated by the increasing participation of intellectuals in the film viewing, whose explicit criticism gives the film’s court of public opinion a sense of laceration.

On the other hand, although Hong Shen, like Lu Xun, witnessed a film that insulted the Chinese, underwent the same process of self-reflection and introspection, and then observed and perceived the “numb face” of the audience in the theater, the difference was that he not only published a written critique afterward but also acted immediately to change it. The combination of performance and education bound the eye to the mind, thus pushing the spectator from light-hearted amusement to irrepressible anger. People laughed at the slapstick and physical performances as much as they were outraged by the teasing and insults, and it was Hong Shen’s actions that led to this shift in perception. Rather than being a detached subject watching and thinking, Hong Shen was actually an integral part of the performance, an “angry” performer. In this sense, Hong Shen’s action was on the extended line of the self-awakening process of Lu Xun in the perceptual space.

Just as Lu Xun was accustomed to making sharp comments in publications, some intellectuals could not tolerate such “degenerate behavior” of most audiences and launched a decisive written protest against *Welcome Danger* before Hong Shen went to the cinema. They, however, failed to rouse the audience from their numbness. The above-mentioned article goes on to satirize the weakness and incompleteness of these people’s protests: They maintain the demeanor of supposedly decent people, merely talking in newspapers and seeking so-called popular support, while refusing to interact with the audience on the spot or take direct and effective action at the movie theater:

...but only thirty-six of them wrote an open letter and posted it at the entrance of the Grand Theater. Probably they thirty-six accidentally united, and after the movie, it was too late

to contact the audience, so they just watched them leave one by one with smiles on their faces. These thirty-six people thought they could call out people with their pens and ink, so they spared theater audiences, but “please patriotic gentlemen’s attention” in *The Republican Daily News*. Say something like “... we Chinese also have hot blood, and we Chinese also will not be afraid of death...”, “our blood is almost boiling, we can not hold back any longer, we have the enthusiasm, we have our hands, but...” “But now, for the time being, we will not follow the example of Italian sailors who smashed the Guang Lu theater, and we are not willing for the time being to follow the example of French soldiers who burned a film insulting France in the theater, because we are not foreign Qiu Ba (a jocular term for soldier), we are the nationals of a polite and righteous country.”

And what would they do? That is, “We are here to tell you this fact with sincerity and indignation” ... After the thirty-six people left, some college students came; if one letter did not work, they wrote another one. The audiences were still in the theater watching and laughing, but they just let the audiences go again. These letters were only published in newspapers, but they claimed their sincerity and indignation came from the so-called “mouthpiece of the people”. (“Women duiyu” 35)

As the article suggests, certain intellectuals are accustomed to being the “mouthpiece of the people,” but the audiences they speak for have little real sense of engagement. Some intellectuals have called for a boycott at length in the newspapers, yet the point is that the unmodernized audience neither does necessarily understand the film in the same way as the intellectuals do, nor acts in the way the intellectuals expect, and they do not even get to see the words that supposedly serve as “the mouthpiece of the people”. When nationalist or enlightenment ideas are force-fed beyond subjective identity and understanding, their creativity is rather weak. The intellectuals’ expectation of representing the general public in protest against *Welcome Danger* may have been wishful thinking, at least until Hong Shen himself went to the movie theater to perform.

I emphasize the “performative” nature of Hong Shen’s speech in the theater for two reasons. First, Hong Shen’s action is not as accidental as he narrated but carefully planned. Second, as mentioned above I think Hong Shen’s action is an important part of the film screening. What makes Hong Shen’s plan ultimately successful is not his speech that is just like the written protest in

newspapers or open letters posted at the entrance of the theater, but the highly infectious “live performance” he brings, his “angry face and angry voice”.

According to Hong Shen’s account, when he saw the film’s “degrading content”, he “couldn’t sit still and went out”, although his friends were “still watching”. He first returned home, but “the insult to the Chinese stayed in my mind,” so he returned to the theater and spoke on stage before the next screening, urging the audience to boycott it (S. Hong “‘Bupsasi—daguangming” 12). However, according to Tian Han’s recollection, Hong Shen first came to the South Agency after the film to discuss with Tian Han, “saying that he had arranged to speak at the theater and asking the audience not to see it”, and that before the action, “he had already talked to Star Company’s lawyer and asked him to defend himself in court if he was arrested”. Afterward, Hong Shen did get the help of Star Company’s lawyers when he fought the lawsuit with the Grand Theater side. Hong Shen did not go to the Grand Theater alone either. Tian Han “found several members of the South Agency comrades to go with Mr. Hong Shen to help him, namely musician Zhang Shu, film actor Jin Yan, and journalist Liao Mosha” (Tian “Yi Hong Shen” 8). Zhao Mingyi later recalled that “the South Agency was a strong supporter of Hong Shen... It could be said that this action was a planned and legitimate anti-imperialist struggle” (M. Zhao 19). In addition, Xia Yan, who was present at the time of the incident, also observed that the protesters included members of the South Agency (Xia 110). The riot caused by Hong Shen at the Grand Theater was premeditated, and the participation of the South Agency members played not only a cheering role but also a guiding role in the subsequent development of public opinion.

If the film text alone is not enough to stir the nerves of most “numb” audiences, to build a bridge for the awakening of consciousness with what Hansen calls “a rich variety of structures and charms”, then this spectacular live performance in the movie theater transcends the storyline on the screen, with its unique immediacy and provocative power that can even be understood as a film in progress, giving the audience a sense of immediate confrontation and a cognitive shocking experience. As Hansen puts it, the imagination of cinema in the viewer’s mind is situated in a double context. It is in a public vision that is being produced and reproduced, appropriated and contested in cinema, just as in other cultural mechanisms and practices, as well as in a specific public sphere that includes a particular social audience, a particular type of place, stage and mode of projection to emphasize the value of film projection as a live performance, rather than in the projection of a

uniform film product.

On the one hand, Hong Shen's performance cuts off the narrative continuity and opens up the film's time and space, allowing the viewer to enter the screen world with personal experience and a new public vision. These narrative breaks provoke the viewer to discern and reorganize the information on the screen and create his or her meaning of the images. On the other hand, Hong Shen's live performance and the ensuing ferment of public opinion immediately become public events, emphasizing the public place of screening and the collective context of the society in which the audience is placed, providing a new context for the reception of the film *Welcome Danger*. In other words, the scope of perception expands from the screen to all elements that influence the viewing experience; the content of a film is not limited to its storyline. Hong Shen's performance, the reactions of other audience members, and even newspaper opinion constantly add new twists and turns to the film, influencing the audience's perception. While renewing the message and scope contained in the public sphere of cinematic reception, its promotion of vernacular exhibitionism and immediacy further contributes to the radicalization of confrontation.

Hong Shen's example shows that it is the exchange of experiences between the film and the audiences in the movie theater, rather than articles published in newspapers, that promotes self-reflection, political consciousness, the birth of rival groups, and the creation of a public sphere of consciousness. The success of Hong Shen's action lies in its combination with cinema, which depends more on "cinematics" than on "discourse," i.e., its sense of immediacy, exhibitability, and physicality. This co-temporal nature provides a public field for the collective experience of vernacular modernity, where the passion, sense of mission, and urgency of modern intellectuals extinguish the divergence of different subject identities with a prairie fire, bridging the alienation between intellectuals and ordinary audiences.

In other words, although intellectuals such as Lu Xun criticized the general audience who indulged in entertainment and amusement in movie theaters, pure enlightenment, as well as the protest that was completely divorced from such entertainment venues and lacked sensory impact, had little effect. This public sphere of film viewing was closely related to the two-sided concept of vernacular modernity with various competing elements. It was not the "mouthpiece of the people" that ultimately dissolved the "numb face" but the "angry face" in the theater. The gap between the intellectuals' bourgeois status and their proletarian revolutionary ideals forces them to learn to bring

intense and direct feelings to the movie theater on a sensory level, to physically interpret struggling emotions and irrational actions for the audience, and to evoke the most direct and fierce resistance with the simple conflict between good and evil. In this context, cultural consumption and mass entertainment are no longer a negative phenomenon; the unpredictability of collective perception in movie theaters makes it a way for the public to personally participate in public life and construct a public sphere.

In this event, it is the confrontational experience and practice gained in the perceptual space of the movie theater that is a high point compared to the public opinion in the newspapers before and after Hong Shen's performance. But these confrontational experiences and practices are also inseparable from public opinion, historical reality, and social space. Each viewer is a concrete image with both a unique and a common vision and social context, which is one of the conditions of the public sphere of film viewing. If the various contexts and common horizons of social space expand the scope of perceptual space and play a crucial role in the audiovisual process of viewers, this visual medium soon leads to a retrograde process in which perceptual experience shapes social reality and movie theater becomes a site for the creation of new social spaces. The public sphere of consciousness that exists between the audience's mind and the film is originally invisible, but Hong Shen's concrete action is not only a clear manifestation of the confrontational consciousness that he and the audiences acquire during the perceptual process but also reaches into the social space and causes various chain reactions. *Welcome Danger* the film itself fails, but it is a film that has achieved an ideal ending in the social realm. The confrontation that erupted in the public sphere of the movie theater's perceptual space has turned into an overhaul of the entire film industry, not only overturning the image of the film *Welcome Danger* in public opinion and the position of Grand Theater in the industry but also suppressing the "traitorous film merchants" in the socio-economic environment and even influencing the standards of movie censorship, completing the taming of public power.

This kind of incident in the Grand Theater was not an isolated case; emotional energy and incitement, as well as fire-like combustibility and radicalism, clamored constantly in the perceptual space of the movie theater, and similar protests abounded. For example, on February 22, 1930, when the film opened at 9:00 p.m., "a loud noise suddenly occurred in the venue, audiences were greatly alarmed, and the screening was interrupted in chaos. Fortunately, no one was hurt. It later turned

out to be a warning and demonstration against the theater by the angry audience who set off firecrackers” (S. Hong “Hong Shen dui” 1). This series of conflicts and confrontations intensified around the 1940s when violent clashes such as the burning of films and fights between audiences and policemen to maintain order continued to occur frequently in theaters. As the audience base and perceptual space expand further into the social realm, the confrontation that was still limited to the film industry at this time will gradually become a storm big enough to sweep through the whole society.

2.3 Repopularized Bodily Sensations of Nude Films, Female Masses, and Political Activism

By the 1930s, going to the movies had become one of the most important civic activities. Pictorial newspapers of the time even put photos of many movie theaters on the map of Shanghai with a large caption: “The places where millions of people spend their time every day!” (Shanghai tongshe 532). The location of movie theaters had become the new geographic knowledge of the city that people needed to know. A newspaper article entitled “To the Cinema” in 1932 described the new habits and social rituals of urban life in terms of material culture: “Today, movies are really in full bloom, and movie theaters of three different classes cover the entire city. The streets, lanes, newspapers, and magazines are full of fleshy, mysterious, and romantic advertisements, powerfully enticing people to go sightseeing. As a result, people immersed in urban life, one after another, shouting the slogan ‘Save the country but don’t forget the entertainment,’ scrambled to the movie theaters...” (“Dao yingxiyuan qu” 8). The “three classes of movie theaters” mentioned in the article are not casually referred to by the author but are related to the Run-Clearance-Zone system established in Shanghai in the 1930s⁵³.

The purpose of this system was to guarantee the circulation of films to ensure broad exhibition and maximum profit for the parent company. The exhibition market in Shanghai was divided into geographical zones. In each zone, films moved consecutively from first-run through several intermediate steps (second-run, third-run, and so on) to final-run venues. Ticket prices tended to

⁵³ For more material related to Run-Clearance-Zone system in Shanghai, see Song 161-170.

drop with each run. The advantage of Run-Clearance-Zone was that they brought more of the underclass into the movie theaters, where they could access the same spectacles and stories, albeit with a slight time lag. According to a survey, around the 1930s, the highest ticket price was 2 yuan for the first-run venues; 1 yuan for the second-run venues; 0.5 yuan for the third-run; 0.4 yuan for the fourth and fifth-run, and 0.2 yuan for the sixth, seventh and lower-run venues (G. Chen 119). This monopoly of filmmakers gathering power to co-distribute films and control distributors and theaters netted all potential audiences. The enlarged market and the enlarged audiences simultaneously reshaped the mechanism of production and the reception of cinema both as a perceptual experience and a social practice.

The growth of the cinema audience has quickly made them a powerful new group in society. Benefiting from their diverse identities and life backgrounds, the perceptual space of the movie theater is increasingly connected to social space. Regarding the extension of perceptual space into social space or the generalization of the public sphere of film viewing into society, in the following discussion, I will mainly examine the role played by the experience of physicality. Browsing through historical documents from the 1920s and 1930s, one may be surprised by the number of commentaries on the nudist movement, although they have been ignored by film studies so far. Nudism was documented as early as 1908, and the movement exploded and expanded in China due to the ripple effect of the nudist movement that prevailed in Europe in the late 1920s. The reason the nudist movement has caught my attention so much is that it quickly infiltrated the film industry, both in Hollywood studios and in the local parody industry (“Haolaiwu xinjin” 10-11). This trend was mediated in the local context until at least the war against Japan. The celebration of nudity in the 1920s-1930s raised the question of the public sphere in relation to mass-mediated culture, public authority, and confrontation. Exploring the reception of nude films in the pluralistic social context of a discourse that includes the aesthetics of vernacular modernism and the new definition of the public sphere, I reassess the pitfalls of existing historical narratives on early cinema that have never focused on the discursive articulations of nude films.

In this section, I examine the historical and cultural significance of the invention and reception of the nude film, with a focus on how the oppositional public sphere emerged through a new emphasis on the exhibitionism of the body. To begin with, the nude film facilitates a popular genre, a vernacular modern discourse achieved through the film representational space where the

conceptions of the body in traditional discourses are assimilated and transformed by technology; second, its excess aesthetic extends into a larger social space and presents one of the earliest conscious attempts to sensualize and somatize the public sphere for its various social and political agendas, encompassing feminism, naturalism, and communism; third, it addresses the issue of film censorship. The change in the direction of film censorship suggests not only an intense political power struggle between the public sphere and public authorities but also the competition among subordinate public spheres. Ultimately, these questions are bound up with the complex meaning of the body as they are articulated through the hybrid genre of the nude film and the interaction between perceived space and social space.

At the center of the investigation into nude films are the Soviet production *Fit Women*, and the German film *Back to Nature*, whose public discourses provide illustrative cases for my inquiry. The difficulty involved in dealing with the brief yet explosive popularity of the nude film is due in part to the scarcity of extant films. I will adopt a film study method that has been widely used in recent years, which is to revive the look of these films by studying their surroundings. These films have been discussed extensively by film critics. This textual richness provides a precious entry point into this “subgenre” of nude films within the vast scene. Judging from various related sources, if there is anything peculiar and extraordinary about these “nude films,” it is how the human body is given symbolic meaning—rebellious, free, egalitarian, science—and socially engaged in the most exciting sensory struggles, and finally how it catalyzes the maximization of shared experience contributed to the public sphere.

Fit Woman was a Soviet film released on November 5, 1933, at the Shanghai Grand Theater. As Germany was the source of the development of nudism in the 20th century, the film was commonly mistaken for a German film at the time (“Shijie ying” 7). The film’s content can be glimpsed through the numerous reviews of the *Fit Women* of the time: it is about two hours long and deals with the hygienic lives of factory workers and the daily work of ordinary women, including opening windows, doing laundry, sweeping floors, and so on. From these aspects of life hygiene, the film eventually advances to women’s exercise, the care of pregnant women, methods of child-rearing, female anatomy, and other aspects of physiological hygiene. The concern for hygiene is consistent with the initial and most basic position of nudism, which is “for health”.

A review at the time positioned *Fit Women* as a “purely cultural film”, intending to affirm its

educational and scientific popularization function. The film depicted female workers happily opening all the windows after hours of work, taking off their work clothes, and doing five minutes of soft gymnastics in unison. According to the author, the audience in the movie theater whispered about the scene that “it’s impossible to do something like that” (“Ping ‘jianmei de nuxing’” 23). The author also thought at first that the scene might be too idealistic, but then he thought: “It is impossible in China, Europe, America, and Japan, but in the Soviet Union, as shown in the film, it is possible under another social system” (“Ping ‘jianmei de nuxing’” 23). The author adds: “when cinema is in the hands of foolish frauds, it does not benefit the audience, but spreads harmful seeds to them. However, when the audience itself gets cinema when it is in the hands of the true activists of the new culture, it becomes the most powerful tool for public education. The *Fit Women* confirms the truth of this statement that cinema can benefit audiences in many ways, both intellectually and cognitively” (“Ping ‘jianmei de nuxing’” 23).

The text mentions the envy of the socialist system so that “bodily nudity” is given political and cultural significance. The author’s view that “the audience should get the film” rather than “the film that deceives the public” immediately reminds us of Kluge’s argument that to create a public sphere of consciousness between the audience and the film, the audience should possess cinema, not the cinema possesses the audience (Liebman and Kluge 23-59). The “most powerful tool of popular education” mentioned in the article can be understood as a tool of “vernacular enlightenment” or a vehicle of “vernacular modernity”, that is, the public sphere of cinema. As the author says, it can give the audience a new experience of equality and freedom on the level of “knowledge” and “cognition” and evoke “the collective spirit of the audience” (“Ping ‘jianmei de nuxing’” 23) in a very novel and sensory-stimulating way. The *Fit Women* has not only attracted countless audiences around the world but it is also said that “the whole city tunes in to watch”, even breaking the box office record (“‘Jianmei de nuxing’ ping” 2):

Perhaps because of the appeal of the words *Fit Women*, I always go to the movie theater but I have never seen the audience as crowded as this time at the Shanghai Grand Theater. Even with a full house, many audiences were willing to pay extra for a chair in the aisle or stand in the gap between the last row and the wall. As soon as the trailer ended and the words *Fit Women* appeared, the audience erupted in applause. (“Shanghai ying ‘jianmei de nuxing’ 6)

In this review, the author argues that the film is particularly suitable for the “female community” and therefore strongly recommends that women come to see it (“Shanghai ying ‘jianmei de nuxing’ 6). We are not sure if the author’s call works, but the film has attracted “at least 40,000 to 50,000 female viewers” (“Jianmei de nuxing” *Shen Bao* 20).

The ambiguity of the nude film genre, however, lies in the fact that the “sensual stimulation and immense inflammatory power” it contains and the “socially edifying purpose” it seeks to achieve—that is, its impactful aesthetic significance and rational political and scientific nature—are intertwined and even contradictory. But this is precisely what has given birth to the tension of vernacular modernism/modernity. It connects formerly disparate fields and creates new areas of controversies in this interweaving, and is thus a permeable, active, and vital presence. Nude cinema, or references to the body, then naturally becomes the center of public controversy. The audience’s understanding of nude cinema is unlikely to be consistent, and the objectification and trivialization of the female body is the biggest challenge facing feminists⁵⁴. Faced with this danger, the “female community” took a firm stand and did not hesitate to join the debate on the social significance of nude films and the body. The following will quote an insightful post-viewing at the time, which can be seen as representative of the “female community’s opinion” stirred up by the nude film:

Whether it is for sex education or lured by the mysterious nude movement, it is an undeniable fact that the beauty of women’s curves and flesh have played an overwhelming role in propaganda. It is clear that in China, women’s fitness and beauty are first promoted by men, who then inspire women’s desires. If there are healthy and beautiful women, then there will be happy families, and if there are happy families, then there will be a stronger nation. This is what *Fit Women*’s supporters claim: “When the family is united, the country is ruled” so that men can engage in public service and all walks of life will flourish, and politics will be on track. This is the path to China’s independence and freedom. This is as plausible as the advocates of national martial arts competitions, who say that with a strong body comes a strong career and a sound nation, and that only then can we discuss fighting our enemies. It is as if

⁵⁴ As early as 1923, *Nvquan (Feminism)*, edited and published by Zhonghua Funu Xiehui (Chinese Women’s Association), was launched in Shanghai. It was founded during the rise of the modern women’s rights movement, and its manifesto stated that the publication “serves as an organ of expression for our fellow women throughout the country, as well as an organ for the exchange of views between the Association and our fellow women throughout the country. Our purpose is to awaken our compatriots in the women’s world to work together for the path of self-reliance. We hope that our sisters will join us in the struggle.” See Fan 3-5.

the thinness and physical frailness of Zhuo Wenjun (卓文君) and Lin Daiyu (林黛玉) is the root cause of the current loss of land and troops, and must be swept away. However, despite this male-dominated, female-followed women's bodybuilding movement seeming pointless, there is still a need to review its shortcomings and allegory of the times.

The modern girl now apparently considers this imported word bodybuilding to be the same as the freedom of love, marriage, and divorce to enhance the status of women and to be the infinite glory of women. If someone praises a woman for her healthy beauty, it becomes something she can boast of. But in practical terms, when the scribes who advocate bodybuilding go to the cinema to see the Hollywood thighs and breasts; when they see the white Russian women with bare breasts and fluttering nipples on Xia Fei Road, they salivate and praise: Western women are rich in healthy beauty... When they come back to the weak and sickly wives and concubines at home, they feel bored: Chinese people are too thin and weak, so they advocate bodybuilding. It has become a phenomenon that bodybuilding is not for women themselves, to improve their social status and develop their careers, but for men's pursuit of carnal desires. Therefore, the bodybuilding movement, which is supposed to be for the advancement of women's status and career, is in the situation of "Tai E Dao Chi (太阿倒持)" (author's note: refers to holding a sword with a sword blade, and using the handle to face others. A metaphor for giving away power to others while being harmed by them instead). One cannot see any benefit to women except for increasing the number of vases, standard beauties, celebrity social flowers, etc., in the stores and institutions.

.....

However, not eating for fear of choking or hiding a sickness for fear of treatment, is never an approach our highly critical women should take. A strong body (healthy is beautiful) is indeed necessary for our women, both environmentally and personally, which needs attention: first, the purpose of exercising is to seek one's independence, to increase women's social status, and to develop one's career. Bodybuilding should be promoted by women on their initiative; secondly, we should liberate our minds from using bodybuilding to achieve certain ambitions of women, and of course, give a rebuttal to those men who want to promote women's bodybuilding to achieve certain ambitions. In this way, we will have the possibility to take back the female bodybuilding movement, which is playing into the hands of men, into the hands of

women, and make it a female bodybuilding movement for ourselves and society. (“Jianmei de nuxing” *Shen Bao* 20)

The above-impassioned statements have a distinctly female perspective and are fiercely confrontational. First, the author affirms the strong excitement and attraction of “physicality” and considers it as a “propaganda discourse”. However, the author explicitly rejects the male discourse of bodybuilding because these grand statements crudely equate women with reproductive value, while providing a better excuse for sexual exploitation. In the face of this risk, the author’s argument is clear: the female community needs to reverse the status quo of “Tai E Dao Chi (太阿倒持)”, which blatantly reflects the imagination of holding power. There are certainly risks in the power struggle, but the female community is very determined: “we cannot stop eating for fear of choking”, because the body has always been the center of the gaze in the current power structure. The female body has never been exposed to public space on such a large scale, and the accompanying huge propaganda effect means that new battlegrounds of public opinion focused on the female body must be contested.

Self-expression with the body presupposes that women need to find meaning for their bodies outside of the patriarchal-centered family for reproductive purposes. As a result, the political and cultural significance given to nude films or “physicality” becomes more aggressive, implying women’s ownership of their own bodies and the political power that accompanies that ownership. From beginning to end, the naked women in the film are not confined to the private space of the nuclear family, but rather become indestructible bodies and free agents in public spaces that dare to challenge any taboo. The body that enters the public sphere is given multiple meanings of modernity, it evolves further from a sensual message, a tool of enlightenment, to a symbol of resistance. This transforms the female body from a symbol of flesh and sensuality catering to men into a political tool, a marginal public discourse: the body speaks out even if the voice is drowned out. However, nudity is paradoxically linked to women’s public power: women escape the male gaze by examining and manipulating their bodies, they mock and break the so-called voyeuristic desires of men by making their bodies, which are watched every moment, legitimately public, while this legitimacy and protest discourse may require a strict “desexualization” of their bodies.

In response to this risk, the film-related sector has shown progress beyond expectations. A

cartoon published in the *Zhongguo Sheying Xuehui Huabao* (Chinese Photographic Society Pictorial), “Male Seduction as the Destroyer of Female Fitness,” may help us further imagine the subtle changes in the role and status of women in the public sphere through this nude movement [Fig. 2.5] (“Nanxing de gouyin” 3). The men’s canes represent the power they hold in their hands, while the bent hooks pulling the women correspond to the Chinese word “勾引 gouyin,” a term often used in native contexts to describe the seduction of “decent men” by “sluts” or “sirens”. The inversion of gender relations shown in this public discourse is crucial to the feminist theme connoted by nude films. It clarifies the legitimacy of nudity: the exposure of the female body is not a crime, but rather the desire and seduction of men is the crux. This helps women to defuse potential dangers without having to strictly enforce “desexualization” because what is wrong is not the nudity of the female body, but the desire of men. In this rebellious thinking, women are increasingly participating in public spaces and representing a stronger social force.



Fig. 2.5 “Male Seduction is the Destroyer of Female Fitness” in *Pictorials of the Photographic Society of China* (1931)

Another post-viewing from the same period offers a complementary perspective with the same significance. The author, also from a feminist perspective, dismisses the prejudices embedded in the film promotion including those sexually suggestive advertising slogans such as “Absolutely forbidden by the concession authorities” and “No children allowed”; and the slogans similar to the aforementioned appropriation of the nude movement, “A strong son must be preceded by a strong mother!” or “To strengthen a nation, we must first strengthen the seed” and so on. Despite the disappointing promotional discourse, the author likewise considers the film itself to be good enough, especially in its emphasis on equality based on “physical differences”.

...But there is another meaning of this film that is often overlooked. This is to clarify the biological burden of women. Because of this biological burden, they should not have the same social burden as men...The fact that women with special biological burdens bear the same social obligations as men is the extreme inequality between the sexes. After the Soviet revolution, there have been extremes of gender equality... There is a biological difference between men and women which is supposed to be a social difference. This film *Fit Woman* has the purpose of promoting this idea in addition to instilling physiological and eugenic knowledge. Its production may have been somewhat influenced by Grecoff's *The Tragedy of the Biology of Women*. (See *Shiritan*, no. 9.) I think it is necessary to watch this film, we will not be disappointed! ("Jianmei de nuxing". *Shiritan* 14)

What makes this equality based on biological differences so crucial is that it departs from the image of the "independent woman" in the male discourse. In the male narrative, as the author puts it, if modern women want to gain independence and dignity as "human beings" they have to make a revolution and fight "like men" ("Jianmei de nuxing" *Shiritan* 14). However, this brings a new gender dilemma, because the demand that modern women or independent women live and fight like men is itself a form of "equality and independence" based on the male perspective. This de-gendering of women to gain status as "human beings" is similar to the "desexualization" that arises to counter the "sexual objectification" of the male perspective: this time it subtly conceals the subjectivity of women, and removes them from their bodies, turning them into a "sub-male" under the cover of national discourse.

However, this common concern that the feminist significance of the nude film faced a tendency to be appropriated and submerged in the torrent of state and nation, revolution and war, would not be so easily avoided, especially when left-wing discourse reached its peak in the 1930s. The struggles written by nude cinema, growing on the margins of power discourse, were inevitably dragged into a more complex social context beyond the control of the "feminine community". A review describes how the author's view of the nude movement has changed after watching *Fit Women*, which reveals the elementary communist ideology. The author, who originally considered the nude movement as "a passing activity of fashionable girls of the times and modern young men", now turns his attention to "another corner of society" and has a compassionate mood:

Look, isn't that 18-year-old girl over there still wearing no pants? Aren't those sallow-faced, emaciated people over there who are so thin that you can see their bones already naked all day? Why are they naked? Is it because they are tired of wearing clothes and want to find new excitement? Is it a violation of the law, a violation of customs, and an indulgence in absurdity? But why they are forgiven and allowed to "get away with it" without taking any strong measures? Can we justify them with natural disasters and fate? ... What can we do to oppose the nakedness caused by social reality? Yesterday, I saw *Fit Women* in Shanghai, and I felt a lot of emotions... This movement is not just a trick for a few hipster girls and modern youngsters to find something new and exciting. Although the movie that moved to a strange country like ours is just an "ideal", I cannot forget the tragic howls of the 18-year-old girl who is said to be forced by the natural disaster and fate to wear no pants and the adult naked body with a sallow face and skinny bones! They get used to being naked almost every year, so why not be "fit" somehow? ("Guanyu 'luoti' he" 23)

While rescuing the body from the shackles of shame, the author reassigns it with the kernel of class struggle. The nudity of the body may be a symbol of class, a forced-choice under desperate poverty, and therefore nothing to be ashamed of, nor a manifestation of moral decadence. The author argues that the nude movement should not be just a tool for "the bourgeoisie to seek excitement", but an opportunity to turn the spotlight on "another group of people who have been nude for a long time". In other words, the nude movement needs to come down from the altar of the ideal and take root in the lives of the masses.

A complex field of public opinion has developed around *Fit Women*, including multiple interpretations of naturalism, feminism, and communism. This is also true of other films in the same genre. Among the nude films released in Shanghai after *Fit Women*, *Back to Nature* was considered the genre's groundbreaking work, and critics at the time believed it would become as popular as genres like "bandit films" and "Western films" ("Cong huidao" 372). The film's narrative motivation is not strong, and there is no depiction of any romantic plot, but rather the distant shots of hundreds of nude figures, which can be described as pure propaganda for the nude movement. On the film *Back to Nature*, critics of the time once commented that:

Back to Nature, an artistic movement of recent times is also a scientific movement. It is particularly used by a group of advocates of the nude movement. Back to nature! Let's all go back to our primitive lives! We are unclothed, basking in the sun, living in nature, without worries... My friends, do you imagine this kind of life? How will you envy this evolved primitive life? In Italy, Germany, Soviet Russia, France, and the United States, the nude movement was fervently promoted, and we see that there is a German film opening in the Shanghai Grand Theater, which describes, advocates, and promotes the nude movement. This is a portrait of the life of the nude movement in Germany. People generally think that the nude movement involves sexual desire, but it does not. The meaning of the nude movement is to return to innocence, so those of us who go to see this film should not have other subconscious. Just like a Soviet Russian film about women's lives that opened at the Shanghai Grand Theater, those who want to see flesh and the idea of sexuality will be disappointed by such a film. Although we do not necessarily advocate the nude movement, I feel that *Back to Nature* is a kind of sex education and bodybuilding movement that can be seen to contribute to the expression of the German national spirit, which is also beneficial to our countrymen, so we would like to introduce it to sincere people to see. ("Dianyingjie: huidao" 429)

The "shorthand" of the "theater reporters" at the time provided us with a true picture of the movie viewing:

Because of the great attraction of the advertisement, the upstairs and downstairs were full of people and caused a lot of trouble. Here were some interesting shorthand notes: "Help! Help!" An elderly man was crowded and screamed. Audience A: "Fuck it! The most important thing is to see the models", audience B: "Ah-ah! I've lost my shoes!" ... Female audience A: "I'm dying, it's so crowded." Audience A: "This woman came to see the model too! Ha-ha", audience B: "This old woman also came to see" ("Shanghai da xiyuan" 8)

The reactions of the male audience in the movie theater are worth savoring. First of all, they come to see the "flesh of models", and seem to be very confused as to why the female audience wants to see female nudity. In other words, it is difficult for them to understand the significance of

nude films from a female perspective revealed in the above review. However, the film does seem to be in line with the female perspective, not only because male viewers have cried that they have been fooled—“Audience C: ‘I’m going to post a notice at the school telling them not to come and be fooled!’” (“Shanghai da xiyuan” 8)—but also because of the general acclaim from female viewers:

The movement of healthy and beautiful, if not centered on pleasing men, would have been a good way to strengthen women’s bodies and to promote women’s social careers in China, where the aesthetic concept is based on the frail and sorrowful Lin Daiyu (林黛玉). It is not only about the health and beauty of women’s bodies, but also about women’s struggle for social status and freedom from family burdens. In terms of breaking the social system of men’s manipulation of economic power and restoring gender relations in primitive society, it can also be said to have the meaning of “back to nature”. As for the nude movement, it is not a public exhibition of genitalia, as the advocates and people in this sick society thought. On the contrary, it is to release the shackles of pearls on the head and limbs and has the purpose of opposing the aesthetics of treating women as playthings and ornaments, while on the other hand, it is aimed at improving the physical fitness of women based on physiological hygiene and eugenics. (“Huidao ziran” 20)

The dichotomy between male and female audiences, as well as the previously identified sexually suggestive promotional discourses and the criticism of the former by female audiences, is similar to the conflict between the general audience and the intellectuals described in the previous section. This conflict can be traced back to Zhang Yuan’s hybrid style. For some audiences, the primary function of cinema is its “spirit of entertainment,” whether it’s exhibitionistic spectacles, amusing Slapstick, or the sensual thrill of nudity. It is a remedy prescribed to modern people who are suffering from long working hours and are physically and mentally exhausted. Yet these experiences are not entirely antithetical to the democratic consciousness fostered in Zhangyuan’s fairyland, the awakening of intellectuals, and the political consciousness of the female audience, but are both competing and interdependent. No matter how much people complain about the male audience’s desire for sensual stimulation, one cannot deny that the incendiary power of nude films also comes from this. In this paradoxical symbiosis, the flesh and the machine unite to achieve

enlightenment and reformation through “probation” rather than “ideological construction”. As the filmmakers of that time believed, only cinema could be both “entertaining and edifying” compared to certain “legitimate/orthodox” culture forms. This experience of enlightenment is not obscure, programmatic, or passive, but rather touristic and “immersive” (Zhou and Wang 16-18). In other words, if the film viewing experience is somehow confrontational and political, it always develops out of these pastimes and games. Nude cinema is no exception, and even its confrontational and political consciousnesses are also diverse and competitive.

Bryan Foy, the director of *Back to Nature*, went on to make *Elysia* (1933), capturing the characters’ full bodies through the masterful use of close-ups [Fig. 2.6] (“Dianyingjie: huidao” 429; “Dianying tekan” 2). Although the film involved the representation of love, it was “much lighter than the usual hot romance films” (“Cong huidao” 372-373). This was because the nudist believed that “unclothed love between men and women does not become rude” (“Cong huidao” 372-373). To justify this, they had to show a deliberate sense of restraint in the representation of love. A Chinese viewer’s comment about the scenes during the filming of *Elysia* is worth mentioning: “Bryan Foy and his camera crew spent a week in the nudist village of Elysia, on which much of the film is based. Like everyone who entered the park, they were asked to remove all their clothes... One of Bryan Foy’s team was against nudism but later joined. There was also a businessman from California who asked to visit the garden, and a few days later his wife, son, and daughter all came to join. All ages, religions, rich and poor, mingled in the nudist country, each addressing the other by name only. The distinction of classes was left like clothes at the entrance to the garden” (“Cong huidao” 372-373); “All the boundaries between human societies were annihilated” (“Haolaiwu xinjin” 10-11).



Fig. 2.6 “Film Special: A scene from the German film *Elysia*” in *Xin Tianjin Huabao* (1934)

The content and filming philosophy of several films about the nudist movement conveyed naturalistic ideas and were given a rich feminist meaning in their local reception, and the utopian-tinged world was inevitably linked to the ideals of the communist nationalist revolution in the broader Chinese social context.

Of interest is a review of *Back to Nature* that gives us an important clue to the fact that the entanglement of nude cinema with feminism and communism has a deeper basis in socio-historical reality:

...The tide of the times is too upside down. A few years ago, the nude movement in the Soviet Union and rumors of nude marches somewhere in our country aroused criticism from people defending traditional moral principles in various countries and our country and scared them. They immediately opposed it as a big scourge, but now the movie theaters are using it for propaganda and promotion, and they even follow this trend... (“Huidao ziran” 20)

The rumors of nude marches mentioned in the above quotation are related to the feminist movement and the repression of communism. In other words, the connection between feminism, communism, and nudism goes back to a time before they entered the movie theater. This complex series of historical events laid the groundwork for the formation and transformation of the public sphere of nude cinema.

Since the 1920s, when nudist ideas gradually penetrated Chinese society, several feminist nude marches inspired by and evolving from the nudist movement spread to various places such as Jiangxi, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong. One of the most influential events was the women’s protest march that broke out in Wuhan on March 8, 1927, to commemorate International Women’s Day. Female students, workers, peasants, Communist Youth League members, and representatives of various organizations chanted slogans such as “Long Live the Liberation of Chinese Women!” “Overthrow Chastity”, “Women Can Remarry”, and “Against Polygamy”, and 200,000 people participated in the march (Jing 36). It was remarkable that eighteen prostitutes participated in the march naked. Afterward, Gu Lingzhi, the leader of the Third District of the Women’s Federation, led five young girls to give speeches at various places in the streets, demanding the release of the feet, opposing breast binding, and advocating hair cutting and free love. During a speech on behalf

of the Third District in Wuchang on March 28, Gu Lingzhi took off her blouse and held her breasts in her hands, saying, “Look, this is true liberation!” The scene became unprecedentedly enthusiastic, and Gu Lingzhi choked on tears as she said, “Long live the liberation of women in China! Long live the liberation of women all over the world! Long live the victory of the National Revolution! Long live the victory of the proletarian revolution all over the world!” (Jing 97). Gu Lingzhi’s speech of a performance nature successfully overshadowed the speeches of the first and second districts, immediately eclipsing any sermons and theories.

This event is extremely avant-garde even today, as it reminds us of the radical feminist group Femen in Ukraine, whose most controversial form of protest, known as extreme feminism, is the demonstration through semi-nudity. It is not my intention here to discuss specific theories of feminism, but only to illustrate the public context related to the discourse of nude film reception. An exploration of the social space of cinema should involve not only the expansion of cinema’s influence in society, i.e., its contribution to the public sphere of social opinion, but also the necessary social context in which these discourses are produced to fully grasp the ongoing interaction between film viewing and the social realm. The particular group reception and exchange of experiences that emerge from this interaction constantly contribute to the metamorphosis of the public sphere or give rise to new public spheres.

What complicated the situation was that because the women’s liberation movement of March 8 and 28, 1927 was extremely shocking at the time, its enormous influence was quickly exploited in the political struggle. Women had just escaped the “male gaze” at the cost of the extreme way of completely disclosing their bodies, only to fall into the trap of “political surveillance” the next moment. The naked body was transformed from a political tool to fight for women’s power into a narrowly defined political prop for the Kuomintang to purge the Chinese Communist Party. This effect was achieved through a series of carefully orchestrated political propaganda tactics. The “rumors of nude marches” mentioned in the above quote most likely do not refer to the women’s liberation movement on March 8 and 28, 1927, but rather to these dramatic series of political propaganda that followed.

First, the newspapers and magazines in April and May 1927 published numerous rumors about the upcoming or completed nude parades of women in Wuhan, to slander the “Revolutionary Party,” i.e., “Communist Party” for planning the parade to “break the shame” and thus promote the appalling

policy of “communist public wives”. In May 1927, Zhang Xichen, the editor-in-chief of *Xinnuxing* (New Woman), wrote the following in an article entitled “On Rituals, Communist Public Wives and Nude Parades”:

Since the Kuomintang launched its purge campaign to completely drive out the Communists, the call for the preservation of rituals suddenly started up again. The first time was that the leader of an association issued a telegram against the Communist Party, accusing it of destroying rituals and promoting a policy of public wives, which discouraged women from staying at home. The repercussions of this event have not ceased until now. Not long ago, I saw a telegram from a women’s group opposing the nude parade of women in Hankou, saying that such behavior was against the rituals and that it was used to break the shame in order to implement the institution of public wives... whether the Communist Party had done any work under the banner of the Kuomintang to destroy the rituals, I am neither a member of the Communist Party nor the Kuomintang, so I have no way to know...As for communism’s advocacy of public wives, not only should those who insist on ritualism oppose it, but we who reject ritualism would never dare to agree with it.

However, although I have seen the street slogans posted by the propaganda team of the Zhilu Army and the recent anti-communist telegrams declaring that the Communist Party advocates public wives, I still do not understand what the public wife is. If, according to the common interpretation, a public wife means treating a woman as public property and allowing any man to give out his lust to her, then why the openly practiced modern system of prostitution is not considered a great scourge and violently opposed by the defenders of the rituals? Or if the communist public wife is considered horrible because it is not traded for money like the prostitution system, then their objection is not to the public wife but to communism. However, such a non-monetary system of the public wife is now also practiced almost everywhere under the iron heel of the army that opposes the public wife and crusades against the Red, and we need not give further examples. (X. Zhang 475-478)

After the false propaganda of the “May 1 Nude Parade”, inciting “nude parade”, breaking the rules of “propriety, righteousness, and integrity”, and advocating “communist public wives” became

the exclusive crime of the Communist Party. From 1927 to 1936, there were numerous essays on these topics in major newspapers. Borodin wrote in his report that: “the petty bourgeoisie imagined communism based on the depictions of the imperialist and reactionary press, saying that ‘pulling naked women all over the street (socialization of women)’, that socialism will be implemented immediately, and private ownership will be eliminated, etc.” (Zhonggong Zhongyang 221). This premeditated political propaganda caused the nude movement, nude parades, and nude films, which were closely related to physicality, to gradually lose their feminist core and be equated with the Communist Party’s usual radical stance, or even the “Red Scourge”. This smear was carefully orchestrated, and to make the rumor more realistic, newspapers even claimed that the initiator and leader of the movement was the wife of the Communist Party chief Xu Jilong, and a pictorial newspaper at the time claimed that they drew the image of Mrs. Xu in the nude parade because her picture was too blurry to print [Fig. 2.7] (“Luoti youxing zhi” 28).



Fig. 2.7 “The Initiators of the Nude Parade,” in *Shijie Huabao* (1927)

Eventually, under this certain pretext, the Kuomintang purged the Communists and thousands of “revolutionaries” were brutally murdered, while the feminist movement, which was attributed to the Communists, was also affected. Women who participated in nude marches were paraded naked, beaten, and abused, and women with short haircuts were murdered (Jing 218-235). This turned into humiliation and public execution of women who suffered double oppression from men and the “revolution”. After being forced to have their own “allies” i.e., the Communist Party, and becoming part of the revolutionary discourse, they also bore the cost and trauma of the revolution.

It was in this social context that the nudist trend soon spread to Shanghai. Although the few nude marches organized in Shanghai were far less radical than those in Wuhan (“Shanghai zhi nuzi” 15), and the nude movement was strictly prohibited by the Concession authorities (“He dequan” 14), nudism was able to meet with the mass media of cinema in Shanghai and expand its influence. Perhaps it was because the eagerness of certain male audiences to find carnal entertainment in these films has led to a constant emphasis on the sensual stimulation and consumerism of these films, thus temporarily overshadowing the political nature of nude films and instead “helping” them to survive, or perhaps it was because Shanghai’s developed film industry was unwilling to give up the economic benefits of these films and provide them with commercial allies, or perhaps the delicate political landscape of the Shanghai concession provided a haven for these films (especially foreign films). In any case, the nude films were eventually released in Shanghai. In other words, while nudism and the resulting feminism became entangled with communism in 1927 and suffered relentless repression as a result, the relatively marginal discourse mediated by nude cinema escaped the political purge of the Kuomintang. In a society of imbalance and inequality caused by rapid modernization and overly inflated public power, while language and expression became increasingly classed and strictly censored, cinema has acquired accessibility as a “language of images.” The social scope and confrontation of the public sphere were further expanded in the relatively safe space for growth guaranteed by the marginality and hybridity of its discourse, the nesting of politics in entertainment, as well as the special representational space of cinema, which, beyond all other forms of expression, could correspond the technology and the body, the representation and the real reality it referred.

The public context provided by the social environment has undoubtedly influenced the reception of nude cinema. Therefore, it is easier to understand the various concerns expressed in the above-mentioned reception of nude films by female groups, which are a kind of review of historical facts. However, unfortunately, it is also a prophecy of the future: when the dark clouds of political struggle finally enveloped the Shanghai film industry, the pluralistic discourse constructed by nude films was further undermined. As early as the Kuomintang purged, the recurring entanglement of nudism and communism had set the stage for the plight of nude cinema, and as the direction of film censorship shifted toward left-wing cinema, this space of public opinion continued to be distorted.

Due to the growing presence of film in public spaces, or the gradual expansion of the scale of

the social public sphere of film viewing, censorship had already taken shape in China as early as the 1910s. According to the film censorship law promulgated by the Nationalist government in 1930, four types of films would be banned: (1) Those that undermine the dignity of the Chinese nation. (2) Those that violate the Three Principles of the People (三民主义). (3) Those that are harmful to public decency or public order. (4) Those who promote superstition and heresy (“Dianying jiancha fa” 20-22). By the 1930s, films with nude scenes were almost completely banned under the third restriction (Z. Xiao 194). But film censors seemed to be able to distinguish easily between “science” and “pornography,” clearly separating nude films from pornographic films. The film *Jianmei Yundong* (Bodybuilding Exercise), directed by Dan Duyu, was successfully released in 1934, although it was not as well-received as foreign nude films (“Ping ‘jianmei yundong’” 23). Many critics in Shanghai, while expecting a boom in nude films, also mentioned the censorship problems they would face, yet they were generally optimistic that nude films would not be censored.

However, things took a turn for the worse in 1936 when the film *Zhongguo Jianmei Nuxing* (Fit Chinese Women), shot in Shanghai, became not only infamous but also banned. The title suggests that the film is a copy of the aforementioned Soviet film, but the reason for the ban is somewhat strange. The official censoring requirement is to remove the image of the woman giving birth (“Zhongyang dianying jianchahui” 476). This is not because of the “pornography” covered by the third provision, but if it is because the knowledge of physiological hygiene is too shocking, then *Fit Women* also has scenes showing “the inhumane and disgusting habit of Mongolian women in childbirth” (“Jianmei de nuxing” *Shen Bao* 23). All in all, it is difficult to see any nude film released after 1934, even though it had a significant impact on various social and political issues.

The real reason for the decline of nude cinema may lie in the increasingly brutal and oppressive political environment, in which everything related to left-wing cinema is suppressed. This speculation is not an idle one. Not to mention the background of the connection between nudism and communism in local historical practice, the two are also inseparable in the film industry. For example, left-wing filmmaker Sun Yu’s work *Daoziranqu* (To Nature, 1936) has been called a domestic film version of *Back to Nature* (“Guochanpian zhi huidao ziran” 2), and his film *Sports Queen*, which promotes the image of fit women, also seems to be linked to *Fit Women*. The even stronger evidence is that in the growing debate between hard cinema (left-wing cinema) and soft cinema (right-wing cinema), nude films seem to be naturally placed on the side of “hard cinema”:

For banning sex education films like *Fit Women*, we would say straightforwardly that we wouldn't dare to agree with the "decent gentleman's elegance"! If we ban lap dance movies of pornographic culture, I think the soft gentlemen will also jump up to oppose it, saying: "In these days, are we not even allowed to sit on the sofa or eat ice cream? It's so unbelievable!!" ("Hanshi chajin" 9)

The above satire on "sofa and ice cream" is clearly in response to the famous theory put forward by proponents of soft cinema in *Modern Cinema* magazine, as described in the previous chapter: "Cinema is a sofa for the mind and ice cream for the eyes (Jia 3)". In this dichotomy of positions, nude films were passively associated with left-wing ideology, just as the women who participated in the nude marches became forced cohorts with the Communist Party. The passivity here means that while leftists were indeed committed to the feminist movement, the women involved in these events had explicitly expressed their rejection of the "revolutionary discourse" in their perceptions of nude films. Yet wrapped up in the tide of history, the connection in both cases came at the cost of the "women's liberation" discourse being overshadowed by the left-wing "enlightenment project".

The story that followed is well known. In the years following 1933, the number and influence of left-wing films caused the Nationalist government to become nervous, and the Film Censorship Commission quickly shifted its focus from martial arts and mystery films to left-wing films. This time their work was difficult, as left-wing public discourse never compromised in its years-long struggle against public authority, and the culture war they provoked even rose to the level of real war. For the oppositional public sphere of women enabled by the nude film, although left-wing discourse had been one of the enemies of their confrontation, their discourse was quickly merged into this larger oppositional public sphere and engaged in a more intense struggle. There was once an extremely complex competition and collaboration between the subordinate oppositional public spheres provoked by nude cinema, but after the radicalization of politics, the only way was "revolution".

Of course, the nude film did not disappear completely; it was incorporated into the left-wing cinema, which was once only one of its complex references. The "revolutionary history" of left-wing cinema has always been a hot topic in film studies, and I do not want to dwell on it in this dissertation. I would like to emphasize that if the "hard and soft cinema debate" is considered the

most visible manifestation of the public sphere formed by film viewing in social space, then nudism and nude films are one of the precursors of this public sphere, albeit of a very different nature, as a precursor to the beginning of the communist ideology, and on the eve of the left-wing cinema movement in full swing. This public sphere, typically constructed by the language of the body, actually fits better with Kluge's definition of the "oppositional public sphere (of cinema) in the true sense"—"the public discourse of experience" (Kluge "On Film" 211-212; Saito 9). The emphasis on experience here is intended to expand the rationality and standardization of the mainstream public sphere project. This is not just because experience is more provocative and popular, but because such immediate experience may be the only way to avoid being represented and suppressed by grand narratives or being merged with various mainstream forms. It opposed to the "pseudo-public sphere, that is, a representative public sphere which is representative in so far as it involves exclusion" (Kluge "On Film" 212).

This is also evident in the encounters of Gu Lingzhi and the eighteen prostitutes who participated in the nude march. Jin Yayu, the initiator of the march of 18 prostitutes, was only 11 years old at the time. Infected by the fervor of women's liberation, she enrolled in the women's team of the Wuhan Central Military Academy and tried to join the Women's Federation to participate in the women's revolutionary movement, but both were rejected because of her status as a prostitute. She finally decided to make her own independent "revolution," but as she said herself, "I didn't dare and couldn't give speeches because that required a certain level of skill" (Jing 17), so she chose to organize a nude march of prostitutes and let her body speak. The Women's Federation recognized the courageous revolutionary spirit of these prostitutes, and they were incorporated into the Women's Federation's "New Youth Academy" to help them become self-supporting and achieve "women's liberation". However, due to the pressure of public opinion and the changing situation, the Women's Federation eventually expelled them (Jing 42). In fact, the Women's Federation was also forced to expel Gu Lingzhi, the leader of the third district after she repeatedly gave nude speeches (Jing 71). The cost of the Women's Federation's continued "legitimate" feminist movements was that it made these women scapegoats for the dismantling of political authority and social order. These examples illustrate well the reality that permissible expressions are mostly discourses that conform to the prevailing standards, but they do not necessarily represent the interests of those who need expressions most urgently. Although prostitutes were perhaps the group

of all women most in need of emancipation, and even though they could only be heard in such an extreme way, and the Women's Federation of the time recognized this, they would eventually be abandoned on the premise of legality.

The politics of extreme physical experience reminds us of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnival, which states that all activities at a carnival such as nudity are closely linked to the expansion and indulgence of the body. Through body language of extreme exaggeration, deformation, and parody, people enter the rhythm of the carnival and release a kind of life energy. This kind of body is called the "grotesque body". Using the grotesque body and the "square discourse" that accompanies it, carnival brings people out of the cage of the serious body and poses a great challenge, collective uprising, and rebellion against the conventional and serious "official discourse" which is subordinated to a strict hierarchical order (Zhao, Yong 8).

Scholars have compared this theory to Benjamin's ideas⁵⁵. More importantly, Benjamin combined political enthusiasm, aspirations for revolution, and bodily particularity with his fascination for modern technology. In "Surrealism", Benjamin argues: "The collective is a body, too. And the physis that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its political and factual reality, only be produced in that image sphere to which profane illumination initiates us. Only when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the Communist Manifesto." (One-Way Street 239). For Benjamin, the body becomes an instrument of revolution when it is armed with technology. In this way, everything that happens in the movie theater—from the shocking effects to the laughter of the audience—no longer becomes meaningless. Because all of this means the awakening and critical rehearsal of the body. Benjamin's vision of technology being socially and creatively embraced is condensed into concepts such as innervation, play, and mimetic faculty. It is in this sense that Hansen constantly emphasizes the importance of these concepts when discussing cinematic vernacular modernity and the public sphere. For the experience of the public sphere, the body must be arranged and shaped by the sensual image, which is accompanied by technical and material powers.

As discussed in detail above, this politics of the body is uniquely represented in the history of

⁵⁵ See Eagleton.

early Shanghai cinema. This is because the feelings and experiences of individuals in extremely vulnerable positions were always suppressed and represented, leaving these groups to actively seek alternative means of expression. They have to choose methods that are disregarded by the mainstream, or even devalued and scorned, and are called “irrational, non-elite, or even incomprehensible”. This is also evident in the changing revolutionary line of the Communist Party. Initially, they maintained a serious Enlightenment stance, equating high artistic vanguardism with political radicalism; later they began to learn the emerging techniques of cinema, attempting to amass the power of a larger mass movement in a medium more marginal to enlightenment discourse; eventually, the Communist revolution abandoned its urban strategy based on the workers’ movement, reaching out to the vast countryside. These circuitous routes culminated in Communist leader Mao Zedong’s famous “encirclement of the city by the countryside” approach to the struggle, and Mao’s philosophy has also been compared to Kluge’s public sphere (Knödler-Bunte, Eberhard, et al. 73).

In the grand discourse of mainstream society and politics, cinema seems to be a vulgar entertainment product that cannot be associated with it. Yet it turns out that if we try to construct an oppositional public sphere, cinema is perhaps one of the most powerful props for such an attempt. Confrontation is not only related to radicalization, but also refers to the alternative expression of excluded groups, discursive struggle initiated from the margins, and the occupation of the public sphere. The left-wing discourse was a marginal discourse to the national government; certainly, in the face of the expanding left-wing discourse, feminist discourse gradually became a marginal discourse as well. Whether it is the competition between subordinate public spheres or the confrontation with the dominant public authority, Kluge treats these oppositional public spheres as synonymous with the proletarian public sphere, because only “opposition” means that the excluded masses can be visualized and included in a real sense, in their unique way, without any compromise.

In contrast to the traditional path of psychological analysis of audiences through film texts, I choose to draw on Hansen and Kluge’s theory to provide a close reading of the reception of nude cinema in the public space and public horizon in which the audience is located, and then I delve the discourse into the social revelation and cultural influence of nude cinema, as well as its production and promotion of vernacular modernity and an oppositional public sphere. At the same time, as the background of one of the most highly regarded left-wing film movements, I hope to provide a complementary perspective for film studies by elaborating on this lineage of development. As a

neglected film genre, nude cinema unconstrained by any established ideology, makes a difficult start between the “softness of carnal entertainment” and the “hardness of national revolution”, attracting active readings from local naturalist, feminist and communist discourses, and gaining access to the construction of multiple oppositional public spheres. The reception of the nude film has confirmed the possibility of an oppositional public sphere for the masses—it has provided a brief but valuable moment for the embodiment of physicality as publicity and modernity and given them a formal name.

This chapter describes the history of the cinema as a “proletarian/ oppositional public sphere”. First, Zhang Yuan and its network of exhibitions expand the scope of public space for the citizens of Shanghai beyond various segregations, and this public sphere for recognizing the world offers the democratic and confrontational potential to transform the center-margin paradigm that has existed in the film world as well as the access to modernity and public space. Subsequently, other new modern theaters, such as the luxurious Shanghai Grand Theater, constitute a synecdoche of a vibrant and rapidly expanding film culture in Shanghai and other urban centers. With the popularization of exclusive movie theaters, the mushrooming of narrative cinema in the 1920s, and the streamlining of social space, the cinematic experience became increasingly internalized, and the cinema became a place for intellectuals and the middle class to delve into the realm of consciousness. Lu Xun’s case demonstrates the audience’s more internalized exchange of experience brought about by the spatial interiority of the theater, and Hong Shen’s active performance further reflects the corollary between the internal perception of the movie and the socialized spectatorial “psychology”. This social engineering of the isolated individual audience within a collective cinematic experience is further articulated in the discussion of the cinematic ontology and social efficacy of nude cinema. Nude cinema functions as a particular sub-genre, a form of competition, a contending forum for a host of perspectives and discourses, with their contradictory yet collaborative mechanisms. This externalized, popularized and radicalized film experience coincides with the eager embrace and construction of a new mass and public sphere where the general public can address social and political issues.

By pointing out this oppositional public sphere, I do not mean to simply highlight the radical political nature of the cinematic public sphere or reduce it to a massive revolution. Rather, as I show,

this interest in opposition helps us reframe cinema within a more comprehensive horizon of vernacular modernity and the public sphere. It emphasizes not the demographic expansion of numbers and size, but the practice of alternative (or impermissible) ways of discourse by groups placed outside the paradigmatic and dominant discourse, which is by no means merely related to the classical public sphere. Nor is its public discourse in any way overshadowed by the consistency of nationalist discourse or class struggle; rather, it encompasses a variety of orientations of both internal and external oppositions. This does not, therefore, mean to focus on the much-discussed public sphere of left-wing cinema; nor do I want to reduce the confrontational issue of the public sphere to an ideological struggle. Rather, I demonstrate the increasing political consciousness preceded the rise of 1930s Chinese left-wing cinema which took the public sphere of cinema as a site for negotiating modernity's conflicting effects and promises, including anarchism, enlightenment, naturalism, social and gender inequality, and communism, and how the connections between bodily perception and discursive contestation broke through the shackles of experience, expression, and censorship in unique ways.

These political consciousnesses were a precursor to the 1930s left-wing film discourse but demarcated a distinct viewing collective. Rather than the melodramatic didacticism and rationality, as emphasized in left-wing film discourse, the audience was configured in the metaphor of visual and physical forces, such as the face and body, and the spectacle of modernity, whose symbolic and subconscious power depends precisely on its experiential and sensory immediacy. This emerging collective subjectivity, significantly, is contingent upon how physiological-psychological interaction, the synchronicity of experiential exchange, and its capacity for collective innervation are processed in a particular indigenous context.

In this hybrid space, thus, purely rational, serious, autonomous political thought or action based on the ideals of enlightenment modernity cannot exist. Instead, mere entertainment and momentary relaxation, physical pleasure, and play are necessary prerequisites. Vernacular modernism is oriented toward and relies on a mode of creation and viewing based on mass media that will thwart any attempt to set a higher standard for it. It has found some suitable forms of expression that allow it to cross various strict boundaries and reconcile conflicts. However, it is also far from compromised and superficial, but more like a force field that constantly generates tension and energy, combining disparate components of modernity and publicity.

For example, audiences escaping into fairyland through “bodily transportation” in 2.1, audiences numbed by the laughter of slapstick films in 2.2, and male audiences trying to find carnal entertainment in nude films in 2.3, all of these represent the general viewing experiences of mere entertainment and temporary relaxation gained through the physical and emotional mechanisms created and communicated by cinema. These so-called body genres evoke more instinctive responses than mere rational appeals. Although we have focused on the confrontational and political aspects of the cinematic public sphere, we also find that it still emerges from this collective sensory mechanism. On the one hand, this sensory mechanism helps people to transfer, relieve and exclude the stresses brought by urban life; on the other hand, the reflexive modernity fostered in urban life and consumer culture regulates the growing contradictions in the existing social system. Both sides are in the unity of vernacular modernity, albeit in different positions. In other words, when discussing the public sphere, we should not forget that the confrontational and political nature of cinema is born out of these apolitical or not-yet-politicized experiences of the “contexts of living”. The key is the extent to which these two can intersect through the film as a “playful, mimetic machine”.

This articulates a distinct notion of the public sphere of cinema that differs from the classical public sphere. It transcends the narrow definition of politics and is not limited to the enlightenment modernist style and rational thinking of language and subjectivity. The oppositional public sphere, therefore, refers to the external opposition to the classical public sphere, rather than to the reconcilable competitions within vernacular modernity. Indeed, it is the multi-layered but interrelated social practices and cultural discourses it encompasses that complicate the immediacy and radical alterity of the public sphere, which confronts not only the coercive force of public authority but also the pressures and rigorous standards imposed by the classical bourgeois-style public sphere and its orthodox discourses and practices. This is what Kluge calls synonymous with the proletarian public sphere (“On Film” 212), involving not only a shared interest in mass-oriented discourse but also showing a consistent interest in the way the audience emerges as an antagonistic collective. In this sense, this film reception built on the experience of vernacular modernity proposed a distinct mode of spectatorship outside the traditional film studies.

Of course, inasmuch as these oppositions or confrontations, though often conveyed through the film’s plot and the audience’s perceived responses, are still pinned on achieving some

overarching social purpose and actively intervening, the cinema world needs to be constantly expanded to open more possibilities, which will be explored in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 3 Beyond the Film Text: The Birth of Fandom and Stardom

This chapter is to demonstrate the importance of meanings generated outside of the film text and the movie theater in constructing the public sphere of cinema. In Shanghai in the 1930s, there was such a group, whose practices were closely related to the film world, but expanded from reel to real. Like the cinema audience, it came from a broad cross-section of society but had more potential to achieve some overarching social purpose and actively intervene. It was often versatile, and never predictable: it was sometimes spontaneous, casual, light-hearted, and gossipy, sometimes highly organized, diligent, devoted, and even serious, ambitious, and political. It refers precisely to fandom, contradicting many widely held assumptions that consider them as juvenile and trivial. Fan practice has more characteristics of proletarian cultural practice; it is active, fanatical, and participatory, as opposed to the bourgeois attitude of remaining distant, appreciative, and critical. These fans' large-scale configurations of experience, collective horizons of reception, and collaborative social practices are precisely what the proletarian public sphere is concerned with.

By examining the star system as well as fan groups, this chapter discusses how fans and the general public receive and interpret stars in specific cultural-historical contexts, as well as the vernacular modernity experiences and public practices of the fan public evoked by the star system. These interpretations, experiences, and practices have constructed an alternative proletarian public sphere that transcended the limits of dominant discourses and cultures, while at the same time influencing more popular discourses and contributing to a broader proletarian public sphere. The line between fans and the general public is inherently blurred: fans themselves are part of the general public and are closely connected to the rest of the "non-fan" general public. Studying the proletarian public sphere of cinema through movie fandom is significantly different from studying it through film viewers. In analyzing the public sphere through fandom, we should examine actual embodied practices within the interrelated arenas of film culture and mass politics, rather than focusing too much on the film texts. The premise for fan participation is not cinematic texts containing specific ideologies and fantasies but rather the fact that fan collectives and organizations offer access to vital cultural, and socio-political resources. It encapsulates the off-film experience and refers to the

sensory-reflexive field for the star system in a different cultural time and space. This does not mean that the experiences on and off-screen are diametrically separated, but because the discussion of film audiences still inevitably relies on the dimension of cinema as a consciousness industry, it is necessary to cover more of the practices documented by fans under the institution of the star system to further expand the understanding and study of cinema public sphere.

Fandom research is always inseparable from star research. There have been many pioneering studies on the cultural and theoretical issues concerning film stars, including the discussions about performing art; the study of industrial marketing tools and social role models; the social symbols of cultural meaning and ideological value; the mixture of body, fashion, and personal style; the products of capitalism and consumerism; and the traits of national celebrities and political figures, etc. These studies, of relevance to fan reception, are important references for this dissertation, and of these, the closest to the purpose of this chapter is Hansen's attempt to examine the significance of early cinema and the star system to immigrant groups, the working class, and female fans from a public sphere perspective. She applies various semiotic, cultural, and psychoanalytic paths to interrogate the desires, pleasures, meanings, and politics of fans. However, Hansen's research, as herself puts it: "must remain speculative, since it is difficult to know how these groups—or, for that matter, any groups—received the films they saw and what significance moviegoing had in relation to their lives." (Hansen *Babel and Babylon* 101). In fact, "how to determine the real experience of the audience" has been an insurmountable problem and knowledge gap in most film studies. This dilemma is also addressed by film scholar Richard Dyer in his book *Star*, where he concludes: "In talking of manipulation consumption, ideological work, subversion, identification, reading and placing, a concept of the audience is clearly crucial, and yet in every case, I have had to gesture towards this gap in our knowledge and then proceed as if this were merely a gap. But how one conceptualizes the audience—and the empirical adequacy of one's conceptualizations—is fundamental to every assumption one can make about how stars, and films, work." (160).

Samantha Barbas's study, *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars, and the Cult of Celebrity*, represents another avenue of research. By mining primary sources concerning the audience, Barbas has shifted the attention focused on the producers of popular culture to the fans and debunks the widely held assumption that the fans were an undiscerning receptacle, passive, and giddy. She demonstrates that the activities of movie audiences are active, interactive, and wide-ranging, and explores the diverse

ways in which movie audiences “set in motion a revolution in popular culture”. Her study, however, remains ambiguous and incomplete in analyzing the effectiveness of fan power and fails to focus on the political power of fandom. On the other hand, scholarship on early Shanghai fandom is not only scarce but as a whole suffers from insufficient research and a lack of structure. A doctoral dissertation, *The History of Cinephile Culture in Shanghai (1897-1937)*, devotes a considerable portion to the cinephile culture of Shanghai in the Republican period. It attempts to illustrate the transmigration of Shanghai from tradition to modernity and the history of Shanghai city life through the study of fandom culture. This study, however, is undermined by its conflation of readerdom, fandom, and audience. Moreover, it remains concerned with conceptual fandom rather than empirical fandom, with intellectual fandom rather than general fandom, perpetuating (feminist) cine-psychoanalysis rather than challenging it⁵⁶.

In other words, the intentional or compelling neglect of general audience groups is still prevalent in fan studies. In this chapter, therefore, I intend to chart the fan practice of a particular mode of participation, discursive construction, and experience exchange within the perspective of the public sphere. Rather than trying to offer a speculative account of fan psychology and behavior from functional assumptions of the star system, I will instead examine the star fans as a new social role and the empirical subject of the public sphere. I will discuss the question of an alternative public sphere from a less psychoanalytic and systematic perspective, focusing on the historical, concrete fans in 1930s Shanghai. By doing so, I will break down the general assumptions and pessimistic conclusions drawn about fans by cine-psychoanalysis and feminist film criticism and reveal the democratic and revolutionary power of fan culture.

The discussion of the proletarian public sphere in this chapter differs from the chronological scope covered in the previous chapter because the star system did not take shape in Shanghai until the 1930s. The star system in Shanghai was developed in parallel with Hollywood and has a certain awareness of the latter. The local Shanghai film industry was willing to imitate all the Hollywood trends, which led to the localization of the Hollywood star system in Shanghai. In addition, the shaping of the star system in Shanghai is also related to the “famous actor system” of Peking Opera. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the first Chinese attempt to make a film was in 1905, a Peking Opera video starring the Peking Opera actor Tan Xinpei, who was also the first Chinese film actor.

⁵⁶ See Hou.

He was also the one who established the “famous actor system” in the world of Peking Opera. Because of the close ties between Peking Opera and early cinema, it was very natural that the “famous actor system” of Peking Opera was introduced to the film industry. With the development of the film industry and the growing maturity of the star system, a fan base distinct from the film audience has gradually formed and become a special cultural phenomenon. The star system’s influence touches every aspect of ordinary life and vernacular modernity, dictating taste in fashion, desire, lifestyle, and even social perceptions and political ideologies. Cinema has extended its entertainment and ideological functions to fan discourse, and its power has gained strength.

The proletarian public sphere in relation to the star system in the 1930s could not be discussed according to the era division of the previous chapter, but it still had its unique pattern of formation and transformation. I argue that there are three important forms in the construction of the proletarian public sphere. These forms can be tentatively listed as 1) the formation of fandom and mass enlightenment, 2) the organization of fandom and mass discourse, and 3) the fandom as social subjects and political revolution. These different stages are related to the changing distance between fans and stars. This chapter’s investigation into the proletarian public sphere traces its evolution from the stars who were familiar and familial, less unapproachable but more moving, to the stars who lived at a distance from their fans, far beyond all mortals, and then to the stars who became political leaders, stayed close to all their fans as revolutionary comrades.

Specifically, 3.1 discusses how the in-depth experience of vernacular modernity brought about by the desire of fans to get closer to the world of cinema as well as the intimate relationship that fans maintain with the stars, forms a public sphere of mass enlightenment where fans of all genders and ages can renew their social perceptions and lifestyles, rebel against their families, make self-realization, enter new social realms and practice actively. 3.2 explores how the isolation between fans and stars, caused by the acquisition of the social and cultural status of stars and the emergence of authority in the film industry, has led fans to organize themselves so—collectively and cooperatively—they could both monitor and confront authority in the film industry, creating a public sphere for acquiring discourse power and constructing mass discourse. 3.3 illustrates how, as the scope and influence of the stars’ activities fully transcended the film world, fans were dragged into a public sphere of social change and political movements. Here, stars and fans became less like stars and fans in the traditional sense and acquired a new political identity as comrades of the

revolutionary cause. The fan-star relationship, which has been erased from identity differences under the grand narrative of statism, has returned to intimacy in a sense. Before discussing these three stages separately, I would like to clarify that the emergence of the second stage of “organization of fandom” does not mean the disappearance of the first stage of “fandom and mass enlightenment”. Likewise, the emergence of the third stage does not mean the disappearance of the second stage. These transformations can be characterized as a gradual overlay of experiences, discourses, and practices in the fan public sphere.

3.1 The Emergence of Fandom: The Vernacular School of Modern Life and Mass Enlightenment

Before entering directly into the discussion, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the early film actors. These brief introductions clarify certain particularities of the Shanghai film star system and lay the foundation for the discussion that follows. According to the statistics of the article “Film Practitioners” in the *Yearbook of the Chinese Film Industry (Zhonghua Yingye Nianjian)* published in 1927, there were 551 Chinese film actors at that time (Gan and Chen 974-986). There were also pioneering studies that estimated the number of professional film actors in the 1920s and 1930s was around 200 (X. Wu 19). Although the number of professional actors was not very large, as an emerging and extremely public profession that attracted the attention of the general public, its impact on the public sphere could not be underestimated. Judging from the prior research, the sources of early film actors could be divided into the following categories: First, civilized play⁵⁷ (wenmingxi) practitioners, second, film school students, third, film family, fourth, drama actors, fifth, song and dance troupe performers, sixth, freelancers. From the perspective of the employment relationship, it could be divided into basic actors, guest actors, and extras (Gong 67-68).

Basic actors signing contracts with production companies were regular employees and had long-term and stable employment relationships. Guest actors were often artists who had achieved some success in other fields or film actors who had become famous. They didn’t sign long-term

⁵⁷ Modern drama (also known as modern play) refers to a new form of theater established under the slogan of “mainly studying the new school”, using speech and action as the main means of expression and without a formal script, allowing for improvisation. It is also known as new drama, early Chinese drama, which was popular in Shanghai in the early 20th century.

contracts with companies, but rather sign contracts based on the number of films, or the amount of time it took to shoot a film. The last category of extras was similar to today's extras and stuntmen. Professional extras agencies appeared after 1926. The origin of extras was more complex, "Whether they are company employees, university students, or unemployed people who don't even know what a movie is, under the mercury lamp, everyone can get a few liters of rice for a day by working hard for a while" (Xu, Chihen 15).

There is a certain income gap between the three types of actors. The income of basic actors mainly had two parts: basic monthly salary and workload-based remuneration. When borrowed by another company to shoot a film, they could get paid additionally. Their monthly salary fluctuated between a few yuan and a few hundred yuan, which was related to the popularity of the actor, the strength of the company, the age (young people were high), and the gender (the female was high). Guest actors were generally paid higher, depending on the actor's box office appeal and popularity. For example, Li Minghui starred in *Zhuiqiu* (Pursuit, 1933) of Tianyi Company and earned as much as 4,500 yuan⁵⁸ (in only two months) ("Nanmingxing de xinshui" 1). In addition, the popular female actors had a variety of other sources of income, such as making records, stage performances, opening ribbon cutting, and advertising endorsements. On the other hand, extras earned much less, generally around 0.5 yuan to 1 yuan a day (Ke 9).

Although the income difference between actors was far from each other, professional actors, except for extras, earned enough to support themselves to upgrade to the upper-middle class. "In the 20 years of the Republic of China, with the gradual improvement of the production technology and art of the film, the film market has been continuously expanded, and the various companies have generally reached a better business situation. Therefore, the life of film practitioners also has improved at this time...the general price is very fair, a picul (one hundred and sixty catties) of good white rice only sells for seven or eight yuan, and the best British 'Garrick' cigarettes are only 0.3 yuan per each. French V·S brandy is more than 3 Yuan a bottle, and ten packs of British brand cigarettes, each pack for only 0.05 yuan. More than 70 yuan can buy one or two Chinese grams of gold, while a basic actor in a third-rate supporting role in the Star Company can get a salary of about 150 yuan per month... Each starring or supporting in a film can still get a salary of approximately one month. In addition, on New Year's Day or other festivals, they can also share a lot of dividends.

⁵⁸ If we use items such as gold as a benchmark, its purchasing power is roughly equivalent to about \$180,000 today.

If you are good at managing money matters, it is more than enough to maintain a family of four or five” (Gong 253).

In terms of career prospects and stability, it is undoubtedly the basic and guest actors who have the potential to become stars. It was worth noting that although the gender ratio of early film actors was roughly equal, the economic status of female actors was much higher than that of male actors. When equal pay for equal work was not possible in most fields, female actors in all categories earned much more than male actors. The above-mentioned social activities that could bring in extra income were often reserved for female actors, and they had a higher status in the industry. Famous actor Gong Jianong’s memoirs mentioned that “the incorrect concept of the film industry with female actors as the production center is extremely strong, and the traditional practice of using female stars as business security is also followed by everyone. Therefore, in common sense, male actors are invariably considered to be at the limit of their artistic creation if they can co-star with the top-billing female actors and play the role of green leaves to support the red flowers. Whether or not he is the central character of the whole play, it is very natural to rank second” (303). In response, the film presses at the time commented that “how incomprehensible this inequality is. Saying that their performance is good, it is not necessarily that Jin Yan will be worse than Ruan Lingyu; saying that they can attract the audience, then many female fans in the society have a deep admiration for Jin (like an Emperor). The reason for this different treatment is confusing, and it is really strange to have such a preference for women over men in the film industry” (“Nanmingxing de xinshui” 1). Film critics at the time also expressed the view that “the male and female stars are simply different classes” (“Nannv mingxing” 4).

Compared with the numerous reports in various newspapers and magazines on female celebrities, the amount of news about male celebrities was pitifully small, as if they did not deserve any attention at all. Even though there was news about them, most of them were because they had associated with a certain female star. “On the Chinese screen, the fate of male celebrities is to be a parasite with the achievements of female celebrities, and even this fate cannot last long, it only takes a little time for their golden age to pass” (“Nanmingxing de mingyun” 12).

Thus, the star system of Shanghai cinema is characterized by the fact that it is more of a “female

star system⁵⁹". The industrialization of the local film industry has given women unprecedented access to jobs and public spaces, which sets the film industry apart from other types of cultural endeavors. Traditionally, Chinese women have been largely excluded from the public sphere. Before the introduction of female actors in film, most female roles in both Beijing opera and other forms of performance were played by male counterparts. Even if there were a few female actors, they were not allowed to perform on stage with men, and in many places, women were not allowed into theaters even as audience members. Women were not free to appear in the public sphere as women, and the presence of female actors on the screen was made possible by the requirement of the "authenticity" of film.

...Most of the roles in our theater, both old and new, are filled by feminine men... But this is not the case in films, where there is no sound or speech to help the performance, so every move must be realistic enough and cannot be faked in any way. Therefore, female characters in films must be played by women. The main points of the art are "beauty" and "truth". In terms of "truth", of course, a woman playing a female role is preferable; in terms of "beauty", the presence of women is also needed in film art... This is how we know that women have a very close relationship with cinema. ("Funu yu dianying zhiye" 9)

Filmmaker Zheng Zhengqiu once pointed out in an article that the stubble and throat knots of the male actors in the female roles could not become invisible in close-ups, creating an unbearable incongruity for the audience (Z. Zheng 7). In the close-ups, even the performance of Peking Opera master Mei Lanfang is satirized as "incongruous and worthless in expression and attitude" (Yi 83). As a result, mainstream transgender performance gradually came to an end as the demand for female actors in films increased. It can be argued that although the appearance of women on the screen is related to the trend of women's emancipation since the May Fourth Movement, it is more directly due to the fact that the new medium of film has developed a set of discourses and visual politics different from those of stage performance, which in a sense has contributed to the democratization of the cultural enterprise.

⁵⁹ This contrasts with the situation in other countries during the same period, such as India, where female stars had a much lower status in the film system and male stars were paid at least twice as much as female stars. See Gledhill 138.

A career in screen acting offers unprecedented opportunities for women from diverse backgrounds. In the early 1920s, film actors were not so much a group of professionals who loved to perform and pursued artistic achievements, but rather a motley crew. The recruitment advertisements with few hard and fast requirements in the newspapers reflect the early inclusiveness of the film industry. While this lenient selection provided a new professional identity for women from different backgrounds, it failed to give them a new and legitimate social identity. The profession of female actors is still frowned upon by the upper classes and is considered “disgraceful” by the elegant art circle. As those at the underclass make up the majority of female actors, some have even issued an “introspection” about the film industry, arguing that: “those actors who have artistic geniuses are outside the door, and dare not go forward... Those dissolute ladies, high-class vagrants, unemployed and homeless, are abandoned by the society; so, they devote themselves to the film industry as a place to beg for food...” (“Dianyingjie zhi zixingyu” 7). Moreover, since the public appearance of women in social space is a threat to the patriarchal system, the publicization and ascendancy of female culture represented by female actors are inevitably accompanied by some by-products, including the stigmatization of female actors⁶⁰.

In this context, the star status of female actors does not lie in the elite, aristocratic social and cultural status of artists, but in the fact that in many ways they are important carriers of popular, vernacular modernity, including fashionable lifestyles (hair, clothing, makeup, driving cars), new outlooks on life (pursuit of material happiness, economic self-reliance, self-actualization), non-traditional gender relations (non-marriage, cohabitation, and open relationships), etc. As the critics of the time complained, “most so-called fans were intoxicated by the comfortable lives of film practitioners and the fashion of film stars, but none of them were really immersed into the film art”. (H. Wu “Yingtian zaguan: Guanyu yingmi” 11). While interpreting and displaying sensual material modernity, female stars break away from both the traditional feudal family and the brothel, creating an existence and expression that transcends the strict standards of “good wife and mother” or “slut”. For example, Xuan Jinglin transformed herself from a prostitute to a movie star, redeeming herself and gaining her freedom. Yang Naimei cut off relations with her family and started her own Naimei Film Company, because she was dissatisfied with being called on by male directors and company heads. Wang Hanlun also broke off relations with her family and directed her own films. After

⁶⁰ For a detailed description of the survival of early actresses, see Chang 128-159.

making a large sum of money, she retired from the film industry and started her beauty salon.

Female actors who rise to stardom demonstrate the magical power of cinema to change the way women live. More crucially, this power also works on the wider fan base, building a public sphere beyond the filmworld that reshapes the social perceptions and lifestyles of ordinary fans. In other words, the achievements of the female star were not only in their own transformation but also in the fact that the new territory they opened soon became the university of life and a training ground for the “admirers”, a kind of social experiential horizon of vernacular modernity. This self-enlightenment and the production of mass culture are the focus of this section.

Regarding the definition of these “admirers”, critics of the time gave them the name of “star fans” to distinguish them from ordinary moviegoers. Thus, the umbrella term “movie fan” has taken on a more nuanced internal division. The number of movie fans can be “organized into an army or two in each city, and even more so in a metropolis like Shanghai,” and the largest number of fans are “star fans,” in contrast to “drama fans” (Jun 50-51). The latter may have a particular preference for certain types of movies, such as detective movie fans, dance and song movie fans, etc. On the other hand, “star fans” is characterized by “star orientation”, “they are obsessed with a certain star, they watch all the movies the star has appeared in, and they must know everything about the star. Especially the private life of the star has become the center of their interest...Hu Die, Jin Yan, Ruan Lingyu, and Gao Zhanfei all have their fan base” (Jun 50-51).

...most fans will overlook the achievements of the film art because they prefer a particular actor or star, that they envy, love, or chase... Even, gradually fans will no longer want to see a movie, as long as they can beg for some personal things/relations (such as signing, getting to know, or even being a friend, etc.) of certain actors they acknowledge prejudicially. I believe that many fans are too busy writing letters to the stars to go see a good movie. (Su 12)

“...People think of all kinds of ways to meet with the stars, especially the female stars off-screen once, or to ask for an autographed photo. There are also hundreds of letters written to woo them...” (Tu 6)

Simply put, audiences are transformed into fans when their admiration and extreme fanaticism

toward the stars transcend the film itself; and this fanaticism is first manifested in the extreme concern for the private life of the stars, and even the desire to participate. These were made possible with the help of a “true-to-life” performing aesthetic at the time. The public believed that a good performance must come from the actors’ real lives rather than from acting techniques. It expresses the idea that “an actor/star should be what he/she is in the movie” and establishes the tautological existence of the star. This consensus allows film critics to dig into and comment on the private lives of stars to examine whether the star’s private life matches their public image. As a result, movie magazines and newspapers catered to fans’ keen interest in the private lives of female stars, offering them descriptions of when and where female stars met and dined with whom, what they commissioned, their origins, eccentricities, costumes, and all manner of minutiae. With the help of these print media, the private lives of stars emerged as a “truth” and new knowledge. In other words, the star enters the fan’s eye in some kind of real-life form. As an important part of vernacular modernity, it is the public material conditions and secular experiences accompanied by the assimilation of sensory reflexives that place the female actors under the gaze of the public and attract a large number of engaged fans. And as the private lives of stars became a valuable place of knowledge, fans were able to grow in these schools of vernacular modernity experiences, learning and emulating these vivid experiences. This is precisely the second characteristic of the star system of early Shanghai cinema, a necessary condition for the public sphere rich in production and everydayness.

In film studies, how to conceptualize the audience has always been a research difficulty and gap, and fan studies are no exception. Possible ways to investigate the audience are box office statistics and other market surveys done for commercial reasons, or other sociological surveys on the impact of films on the audience, etc. While this information can provide broad hints about what the audience likes and dislikes, it rarely explains more qualitative preferences. Fan writing about stars and their personal feelings is a richer source of information that can provide us with more details about the changing perceptions and behaviors of fans under the star system. Some prior studies have adopted a questionnaire-like approach (fans were encouraged to write letters to the researcher) to study the influence of the star system on fans by collecting and analyzing recollective representations of fans⁶¹; this certainly cannot be used to study star fans in the 1930s. But fortunately,

⁶¹ See Stacey, ch. 5.

we are able to find a large number of fan letters sent to stars at the time⁶², and these materials, which document the feelings and behavioral processes of fans at the time, might be more accurate.

Therefore, in the following discussion, I examine the proletarian public sphere through the analysis of letters sent by fans to stars, which cover a wide range of topics, especially the importance of stars to the lives of fans. By browsing through the letters sent to the stars, we can discover how the communication between fans and stars developed into a process of enlightenment. This enlightenment process involves not only psychoanalytic psychological processes but also reaches into the more general realm of social practices. This collective enlightenment can be seen as a form of experiential exchange that not only changes the construction of fans' identities and generates new collective subjects but also empowers their potential for public expression and resistance to reality. They imagine and realize a life different from the status quo through sensual elements and secular experiences that are excluded from the classical public sphere. Although the rights and freedoms that fans enjoy are not complete compared to those of the stars, the oppositional nature of this proletarian public sphere allows them to gain a real sense of disembodiment and enjoy the thrill of rebellion.

In analyzing a large number of letters, we can find a large percentage of female students as a group⁶³. I choose to focus first on the group of female fans and their relationship with female stars, not only because it is a recurring theme in the letters, but also because it has important implications for film studies. It breaks with the pessimistic conclusions previously drawn from feminist film criticism's view of stars as constructs of patriarchy, namely, that female viewers' pleasurable identification with female stars who have theoretically proven to be fetishistic and voyeuristic objects, would either be regarded as narcissistic or masochistic⁶⁴.

The types of emotions expressed in the female students' letters can be broadly classified as

⁶² These letters can be found in the newspapers and magazines of the time as well as in articles or memoirs written by the stars. Reference to the National Newspaper and Periodical Index database, major newspaper databases of modern times, and archives such as the China Film Archive.

⁶³ The recognition of women's education in the Republican period was nationwide. In 1907, the Ministry of Education of the Qing Dynasty issued the "Statute of the Women's School". Women's school education gained legal status, but this was limited to primary, secondary and teacher training. In 1912, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China formulated the "Renzi Guichou Education System", which proposed to abolish the inequality between men and women in education rights, and in 1919, the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China promulgated the "Regulations for Higher Pedagogical Education for Women", which established the system of higher education for women. The birth of the "Renyin-Kuimao Education System" in 1922 not only completely changed the two-track school system of both sexes, but also led to widespread equality in education for Chinese women: from elementary school to university, male and female students were allowed to study together, and there was no longer any difference between male and female schools in the curriculum.

⁶⁴ See Mulvey.

“inferiority and introspection due to devotional worship,” “envy of female power and new life,” “complaint and escape from the status quo,” and “fantasy of becoming a star”; and the types of behavior can be classified as “requesting for personal effects (autographs, photos, etc.),” “development of personal relationships (sisters, friends, colleagues, etc.),” “attempts at imitation and becoming,” and “escaping from family and self-actualization”:

I wanted to write to you a long time ago. But I don't know why I always feel infinitely afraid when I pick up a pen, so much so that I even drop the pen I just picked up... Now I finally get up the courage to write to you...I want to be your faithful friend; can you promise me? I don't think you will firmly reject me, right? I believe you are a faithful entertainer... that novel style and quick movements undoubtedly cause my admiration. (“Hujia xiaojie shoudao de xin” 8)

...I feel anxious and fearful to write this kind of letter because it is still a new initiative... I can't restrain my emotions...admire your slim figure, mellow voice, and fairy-like image! Attached is a photo of you for your signature...I'm a high school girl and would love to be your friend, but I don't know if I have the qualifications. (“Hujia xiaojie shoudao de xin” 9)

These statements characterize the stars as “fairies”, objects of worship. The religious nature here shows the devotion of the fans, but also emphasizes the “uniqueness” and “transcendence” of the stars. Fans believe that stars are not in the mundane world they live in and that they are “nervous”, “fearful” and “inferior” in light of stars’ extraordinary talent and beauty. These are essentially self-denying tendencies, and this introspective primary enlightenment suggests to fans the need for self-improvement. Interestingly, although fans see the stars as absolute idols or even “fairies”, they also constantly refer to their status as “friends” of the stars. This self-perception seems to narrow the gap between fans and stars. When writing letters, the fans always call the stars “lovely friends” and themselves “your faithful friends”. They use the standards of friends to demand themselves: “No need for pleasantries, I take off my mask and reveal my pure heart to my admiring friend” (“Yingmimen de reqing liulu” 14-15). Some of the fans in the backward areas also put their hope of “seeing the world” on the friendship and correspondence with the female actor: “Your living environment is completely modern, while I am a literary lover in a poor countryside, so I can only

be called an unseen student. I am asking to communicate with you in this way, can you add me in addition to the usual gentlemen and ladies?” (“Yingmimen de reqing liulu” 14-15). In other words, in these quotations, the fan does not exist only as an admirer. The reference to the status of “friend” suggests a subconscious of the fans to bridge the gap between them and the stars. There is more than a confession of admiration from afar; the line between the fan-self and the star-other is not solid, to begin with, it is blurred by a particular kind of intimacy.

The tension between the objective distance and the subjective closeness of fans and the female stars soon led to a desire that provided a powerful incentive to switch identities and change lives. Apparently, stars serve as a benchmark, so they are often interpreted by fans as a model for modern women. For example, female actor Xu Lai is called “standard beauty” by her fans because she is not only “innocent” but also “fit”, with “well-developed muscles and a strong look” (“Xu Lai shoudao de xin” 14-15) [Fig. 3.1]. The fan letters always mention the admiration and envy for the beauty, talent, attitude, power, novelty, free and bold habits, and fashionable and luxurious lifestyle of the female stars, especially when the life of the stars is contrasted with their own boring daily life:

...The criticism of the fans hit us in the heart every time. But there is one point that I don’t dare to believe. I think the life of a film practitioner is exactly my idea of a beautiful life. It’s a great opportunity to spice up your life while you’re making a film, while you’re putting on makeup! More than that, it adds infinite fun... In comparison with all lifestyles, none of them can be so interesting! And what about our student life? Just like the machinery, it’s so tiresome! (Zhao and Zhu 19)



Fig. 3.1 The “standard beauty” Xu Lai

The desire to transcend differences, to become like a star, and to live the life of a star is expressed here. Although the female students' desire for the modern lifestyle of stars was often criticized by magazine critics as “unaware of the hardships of the female actor's life,” they still believed in their feelings. Through various media, they have already recreated and adapted the vivid experience of being a star numerous times in their minds, entering a wonderful world of perceptual experiences.

For the silver stars of the movie country, in addition to admiring art, we often hallucinate a world beyond the horizon, so beautiful, so lovely, that we are intoxicated... I started to fantasize, fantasize about a beautiful and lovely world, to allow me to talk with you once, or even to meet you once. However, some people may say this is my ambition, then just forgive me for having this ambition! (“Yingmimen xiegei ‘qiuxiang’ de qingshu” 6)

The above expression reveals a certain escapist pleasure obtained by the fan, who can leave her world temporarily and enter the world of the star. In this example, the connection between the fan and the star, and the way the fan enters the star's world becomes more imaginative. This fantasy is, instead, the most viable way to overcome the distance between the fan and the star, and the way to exchange experiences valued by the public sphere of vernacular modernity. The “ambition” of the fans shows not only the desire to bring them closer to the stars but also a possible movement between the two identities. This fluidity and variability of identity are similar to the movie-going experience discussed in 2.1, which allows people to access a world that is inaccessible in real life. In this perceptual experience, fans shuttle between reality and fantasy, where fan identity merges with star identity and life.

More importantly, this ambition goes beyond fantasy and virtual experience to generate a new practice in which young women believe they can change their circumstances by learning from and emulating stars and drawing closer to their lives. This practice of “becoming like a star” occurs on several levels and manifests itself first through appearance. The tendency for “women to follow the attire of female stars” is often mentioned in the newspapers. There was a fan who admired the female actor Chen Yanyan and tried to imitate her makeup and looks, “drawing long eyebrows and a black mole on the left cheek” (“Changsha yi nvyingmi” 3). In other words, fans begin to create a “look”

similar to that of the movie star by transforming themselves. This practice of changing the physical appearance of the fan involves the overlapping of self and others, producing a new image that combines one's appearance with the qualities of the star. Unlike the temporary experience of fantasy, this is a more stable and realistic process of female identity construction and cultural reproduction. Soon, these various trivial imitations of makeup, dressing, and other lifestyles eventually unified into one ultimate goal, a change in life outlook and values that concentrated on the obsession of becoming a member of the film industry. If the process discussed in Chapter 2 of getting to know the world, gaining perceptual experience and awakening consciousness can be condensed into the slogan “going to the cinema”, the impulse of fans to transform all aspects of their lives and construct a new personal identity is eventually condensed into a simple and clear declaration, namely “becoming a movie star (or someone like a movie star)”:

A Love Letter

Sister Yumei, I've thought about it a million times, but I can't think of a suitable way to address you. Ms. Yumei seems to be insufficient to show my sincerity to you, and I can't call you Comrade Yumei either, cause I'm not a film practitioner... so I have to call you Sister Yumei, I guess you will not refuse it. I am a student who just graduated from junior high school. In Changsha, where education is not popular, it is not easy to find an entertainment place for after-school recreation...watching movies is my only pastime...I went with some classmates to see your work *Yunlan Guniang* (Yunlan Girl, 1931). The sweet and agreeable voice, fluent Mandarin, and moving expressions... You are simply a white and flawless plum, a fluttering pink butterfly, your beautiful shadow has been deeply imprinted in my heart. It will never disappear unless my shell turns to ashes... My desire to see you is more urgent than ever. Furthermore, I also want to try this silver screen life. But Shanghai—Changsha, isn't that a long way apart? Now, I have decided, I will go to your company. I am willing to do anything, I just want to meet with you. (“Yifeng qingshu” 2) [Fig. 3.2].



Fig. 3.2 The “Sister Yumei”

The female fan used the cinema as a place for extracurricular activities, where she met her dear “Sister Yumei”. Inspired and called by her, the female student had the idea to leave the backward Changsha to go to the modern metropolis of Shanghai to make a living, as well as the courage and determination to walk the long road alone. In other words, fans who encountered multiple constraints in both their real material and emotional lives were given vicarious feeling of thrill and practice opportunity to explore new territories. In the phrasing of a large number of letters sent by female fans to female stars, we can see that the statements of fans do not often characterize the stars as “unapproachable beings”, although their extraordinary talent and special features are repeatedly mentioned. On the contrary, female fans always called female stars “sisters” or tended to imagine them as their sisters, understanding their relationship as a loving and intimate one. The editors of the magazine expressed their disappointment after reading the above-mentioned “love letter” to “Sister Yumei” because they did not expect it to be written by a female fan (“Yifeng qingshu” 2). The friendship between women embodies a feminist utopian longing—the formation of a mutual love outside of kinship and the patriarchal-centered family for procreation. This relationship is clearly beyond the understanding of the average male editor, and also beyond our understanding of the relationship between fans and stars today.

Today, the distance between female stars and ordinary women is like a natural moat, and it is rare for female fans to think about becoming movie stars, let alone put them into action. However, as mentioned above, the standards for casting female actors in the film industry in the early days were not high, and female actors were not recognized by the upper classes. Instead of the unbridgeable status gap between fans and stars that exists today, the ordinary background of female stars and the serendipity of their fame also fostered a sense of vicariousness among fans. Film female actors thus became one of the few new career paths open to women in general. The article “Female-centered Cinema and Male-centered Society” at the time pointed out that “cinema is considered by women, in general, to be the only career object in their struggle for social status” (B. Chen “Nuxing zhongxin” 59). In almost every letter to the stars, there are enthusiastic self-referrals from fans, who tirelessly ask the stars to introduce themselves to film companies in the hopes of launching film careers.

On the other hand, the stars’ enthusiastic response to their fans fuels this behavior to some extent. Although they cannot grant every fan’s request to enter the film industry, the stars always

reply with a brief apology, and most female actors respond to almost every letter, even their request for signed photos. For example, when Ruan Lingyu received a letter from a fan, she “always happily signed each photo and sent it to the person, rarely disappointing her/him”(D. Bai 33); Fans take the stars’ replies for granted, they get confused when they don’t receive a reply and complain that “...asking for photos from female stars is an extremely common thing, but who would have thought that I never heard back from Ms. Yuan... One of my classmates sent a letter and got a reply... The photos I requested from Li Lili and Chen Yanyan have also been sent. This big star is really puzzling” (“Yuan Meiyun daodi zenyang” 624). A typical example of the close contact and frequent communication between stars and fans is the letters between the famous female actress Wang Renmei, one of the “Eight Stars of the Republic of China”, and her young fan “Xue Xuexue”.

...I will send you the picture you want, but it is not very good. I’ll send you better photos when I take them ah. Can you also send me a recent photo? Friend! Are you studying? In which school? Can you tell me? I’m on the screen... Haha! Don’t forget to send me your pictures! Good health! ... (The second letter)

Xuexue little friend, I call you like this, you should not be angry, right? Cause I don’t know your age and you are such a funny, naive, and lively person, I guess I can call you a little friend. You want a picture of Chen Yanyan (note: another female actor), I told her, and she agreed, but only if you send her a recent picture of you. You asked if you could come to visit me in Shanghai next month, and of course, I welcome you, with great enthusiasm, to come and play! ...I guess Xuexue must not be your real name, is it? ...I hope my letter is not for others to read! This letter was written while lying in bed, so it’s very scribbled. (The third letter)

...I’m waiting for you at home! I’m relatively free today, are you coming to play? ...If it’s raining, then come tomorrow, I’ll be waiting for you. (The fifth letter)

...naughty little kid, come and play today! Let me introduce you to a few female actors, OK? (The sixth letter)

Our Xuexue: ...you come and play! My friends would love for you to come and play! Lively and lovely child...ready to treat you to a movie tomorrow! (The seventh letter) (“Xiegei wuxi Wang Renmei de xin” 4)

Stars provide not only images or ideological values to be imitated and practiced but also personal relationships. In these letters, we can see how the female actor Wang Renmei gradually developed a deep friendship with a young fan she once did not know. Even when Wang Renmei's friends from the film industry left Shanghai, she also wrote to her "Xuexue" friend for comfort. "Xue Xue, think for me, how hard it is for me! My good friends are all scattered, and you are far away in Wuxi, I feel lonely, I am going to cry out! Xuexue, how will you comfort me? I'm so sad! ..." ("Xiegei wuxi Wang Renmei de xin" 4). This is certainly not to say that all fans could maintain such deep friendships with female stars, but the serendipity and randomness of such lucky individuals' experiences become a great inspiration for the fan base when this was published in the newspaper. We can find eager requests to become friends with stars in almost every fan letter; they quickly elevate this individually existing private relationship into a collective experience of fantasy and practice. The involvement of intimate relationships also embodies the sensual quality that characterizes the proletarian public sphere.

I emphasize the existence of this intimacy because it does not come entirely from fantasy, but rather an intimacy with a basis in reality, which will continue to trigger the desire of fans to approach the film world to gain a new life, determining that the identification between fans and stars will inevitably develop certain practices of self-transformation. Becoming a movie star, or a friend and colleague of a movie star was both a dream and a common career aspiration for a wide range of fans in the early cinema era. Thousands of ambitious fans (including male fans) flocked to Shanghai to try to become film actors. Some extreme fans even threatened to commit suicide to force studios to accept them as actors. This situation had intensified to the point that movie studios were so overwhelmed that they were issuing newspaper articles advising fans not to enter the movie industry blindly; film critics kept emphasizing the professionalism, hard work, and self-sacrifice required in the film industry to dampen the enthusiasm of fans and wake them up from their "pipedreams":

We sit on the spring chairs and look at the stars on the screen with admiration, and we are so envious that we itch to be a star ourselves... At the same time, there are pictures of stars printed one after another in movie publications, and there are attractive articles about the stars' daily activities and their living conditions. These make us fantasize about becoming a star ourselves... So, cats, dogs, high school students, and college students, all want to become stars, and the

number of fans increases day by day. Isn't it? There was a young girl who ran from Beijing to Shanghai to join Hu Die, there was Ms. Su Yan who wrote to *Meiri Dianying* from Jiaying to Shanghai, there was a young man from Beijing who wrote to Hu Die to be her stepson, there were many young people who came to Shanghai from far away to join the moviedom, men, and women, all the weird things appeared one after another.

...I would like to sincerely wish the fans wandering on the shores of the Silver Sea (moviedom) to come to their senses! (H. Wu "Fenggao yingmi" 13)

...Fans should not seize a part of the life of a film practitioner to fantasize about how beautiful it is. On the other hand, we should pay more attention to the spirit of sacrifice, perseverance, and hardship that film workers have...The life of a film worker is not as fulfilling as we think, and the title of a film star is not easy to get. May the film fans who are intoxicated with the life of the film worker wake up quickly. (H. Wu "Yingtanzatan: Guanyu yingmi" 12)

The snowballing self-promotion letters from fans and the numerous articles discouraging fans from entering the film industry, together, reproduced the fervent ideals and active practices of the general fans to become stars and try out new lifestyles. A large number of schoolgirls saw female stars as friends and mentors in life and spirituality, gaining enlightenment of modern women's culture outside of school and textbooks. Such stories abound, and there are many truly life-changing examples. Some new female actors, such as Yu Lin, tell the story of how she entered the film industry step by step under the influence of the stars when she was still an elementary school student. Like all fans, Yu Lin is very envious of the work of movie stars, and she often unconsciously fantasizes "as if I were living with those movie stars". While her classmates and sisters were still trapped by the adage "a woman without talent is virtuous", she actively pursued her education, joined the school's drama acting club, and eventually became a real newcomer to the film industry ("Cong yingmi tajin yingquan" 3).

Of course, the number of female students who have managed to enter the film industry is undoubtedly still in the minority, but almost all female fans have inevitably renewed their original life concepts in this star worship, in this training school of modern life. For example, another fan also aspired to be a star when she was in elementary school, but she was spotted by her family when

she applied for a film company's exam without their agreement. Although she was not able to join the film industry as she had hoped, she realized the backwardness of her family's thinking and remained determined to pursue her career aspirations:

They would not promise me, especially my grandmother who was the most vehement opponent. She thought only some dirty people, prostitutes will be engaged in the film industry. Why are their feudal ideology so deeply rooted and their minds so outdated? I almost broke with them over this matter... However, as long as I am still alive, my desire to join the film industry would never be destroyed. Whenever I have the chance, I will always run into the film industry, no matter how dark it is (Wang Ying once said that the film industry is dark) and how hard it is (a Hong Kong female star said that it is hard). (Yuan 30)

It is not uncommon to find stories of fans inspired by their stars to rebel against their families and pursue self-actualization. In addition to the above example, a female fan named Li Yuanfeng once "stole her parents' money and ran from Tianjin to the Shanghai Mingxing Film Company to meet the female actor Hu Die." Although the company did not accept her, her "love for the movie star remained undiminished and she could not stop thinking about joining the screen life." Eventually, with the help of her relatives in Shanghai, she would take the junior high school entrance examination in Shanghai and continue to try to enter the film industry after completing her education. ("Dianyingmi de xiaoguniao" 1). In another example, a 19-year-old female fan named Huang Wenying followed her introducer to Shanghai to pursue her dream of stardom. Her father searched for her in vain until "she returned to her hometown with her introducer in recent days". When her father arrived and confronted her, she "fought with her father and bit him on the left arm, bleeding profusely", and eventually even had to go to the police station to settle the matter. ("Huang Wenying huanzuo" 2).

Thus, the identification with the female stars and the desire to be a star, provides a certain practice of rebellion, whether or not the fans end up joining the film world as they wish. More importantly, we can also detect a certain change in the fan representation: In previous representations of fans, admiration and affection for a particular star have always been central. The audience's self and identity were relatively more marginalized, with some letters not even

mentioning the self. They now, however, describe the impact of a star, or group of stars, in general terms. The subject changes more from “you” to “I”, and the expression focuses on “how I feel and become a new self”, with the stars becoming marginalized and relevant only in relation to the fan’s own identity practices. The aforementioned fan letter talked in detail about her history of following stars since childhood, including various practical activities and changes in her mindset, before she began to briefly mention her favorite stars:

I have never forgotten Ruan Lingyu...I like Hu Ping’s voice, Chen Yanyan’s attitude, Li Lili’s liveliness, Yuan Shaomei’s beauty...Lu Ming is a young lady with a schoolgirl style, I love her purity, I love her generosity, I love her beauty, liveliness, and simplicity... (Yuan 30)

Although depictions of stars and fan selves have always occurred one after the other, fan representations that gradually weaken the unique presence of the star and emphasize the reproduction of identity about the self are crucial for the process of self-enlightenment.

Those examples above show the process by which fans negotiate differences with stars and construct new selves in star worship: first, the idea of self-improvement is accompanied by self-denial to achieve some kind of introspective vernacular enlightenment; then, the desire for a new way of life is stimulated and the virtual experience of integration with the life of the star is completed through fantasy; finally, the construction of a new identity, the rebellion against the family and self-actualization is completed through various attempts to “imitate and become a star”. The approximate distinction between these stages is intended to facilitate the understanding of the overlapping sensory-reflexive processes of vernacular modernity. It does not imply that practice does not include fantasy, or that fantasy cannot be regarded as a practice. Moreover, this series of processes involves more than the privatized imagination or individual practice; it involves the collective fantasy play and living practice of fans. This is not only because the widespread participation of a large number of fans has constructed a collective subjectivity that facilitates the exchange and reconfiguration of experiences—I would like to emphasize that we must be aware that each fan’s “admiration and fantasy”, “imitation and becoming” also involves “related and unrelated others”, i.e., a part of the population that is not yet personally involved in these practices or may not even be so-called “fans”.

...I was not able to be autonomous, I forget all about eating and sleeping. At school... while the teacher was lecturing, I was gawking at the picture of Ms. Lu Ming. So, I got the nickname “fan” at school, and almost the whole school (even the faculty) knew about it. My classmates called me “fan” and rarely called me by my original name. (Yuan 30)

...It’s funny and ashamed that my classmates at school gave me a nickname, Hu Jia, but in fact, I have nothing to compare with you...Ms. Hu Jia, what do you think when you hear it? (“Hujia xiaojie shoudao de xin” 8)

Hu Rongrong:

The three of us wanted to ask you for an autograph since we saw the film you starred in, but we didn’t know how to write. Last week, we went to the home of our classmate and saw that he was writing a letter to you, so we imitated him to write to you as well... My second younger sister found our pictures, my youngest sister cut the picture of you we wanted from the pictorial, and we three did our things... and when everything was done, I asked my youngest sister to ask my father for a stamp to send the letter to you... Please tell us where you go to school, how old you are, and miscellaneous things in the film world, and I hope to correspond with you from time to time. Is it ok? We went to school in Muzai, I was 12 years old in the fifth grade, my second younger sister was 9 years old in the second grade, and my youngest sister was 7 years old in the first grade...

Your group of little friends

(“Yiqun xiaoyingmi” 24)

Fans’ feelings and behaviors influence the perceptions of those around them, making others realize that some people in real life have become inseparable from the stars or more similar to stars. Fans’ perceptions and behaviors are also a form of collaboration and contagious imitation between classmates, friends, and families, and the “star culture” in areas outside the cinema such as school or home will attract more potential, soon-to-be-influenced people who will be spectators or reservists for the fan community. What is particularly noteworthy is that we can find many children in this shared horizon of experience. The enthusiastic group of schoolgirls in the above examples is

generally young, and many fans have been influenced by female stars since elementary school. The handwriting of the above-quoted letter sent by “a group of little friends” to the girl star Hu Rongrong is very childish [Fig. 3.3]. Some studies suggest that extraordinarily strong relationships between stars and fans tend to occur among teenagers and women⁶⁵. This has been confirmed in the above discussion, and we can also find an overlap between these two groups, both in terms of fan composition and star system. This group faced a stronger identity pressure, as they were excluded from the dominant discourse and the classical public sphere of adult, male and bourgeois culture. Thus, the participation of this group of girls, who combined the identities of women and children, was crucial to the organization of the experience of vernacular modernity and the construction of the proletarian public sphere.



Fig. 3.3 The letter and photos sent by “a group of little friends” to the girl star Hu Rongrong

Having discussed in detail above the public sphere constructed by the experiences and practices of female fans (including female child fans) under the influence of the female star system, I would like to conclude by briefly explaining two related topics to complete this section’s discussion.

The first topic concerns the presence of male stars. Although male stars have less attention, their limited influence acts almost entirely on female fans. Therefore, in examining the experience of female fans, I would like to briefly mention their role. If the intimacy with female stars promotes the self-enlightenment of female fans, then this process of enlightenment also presents in the relationship between male stars and female fans, in whatever distorted way. Although male stars have received less attention than female stars, the male presence that occupies the position of the object of desire would unprecedentedly open space for female subjectivity in a social experiential

⁶⁵ See Morin et.al 102-103.

horizon of vernacular modernity.

The male star Bai Yun once said that “ninety percent of the people who wrote to him were women, especially the most female students.” (“Yige yingmi xiegei Bai Yun de xin” 6). The male star, Jin Yan, also received one letter after another from a female fan, totaling nearly 20,000 to 30,000 words (Wang, Renmei 123); and according to him, he could receive as many as 500 love letters from female fans a day (“Jin Yan yu Wang Renmei” 3). Through the letters female fans send to male stars, we can find how they gain the alternative freedom to boldly express their desires, get pleasure, and even consume men in the frenzy of star worship that sweeps the nation. In the process, their behavior also subverted the pre-existing gender order.

...Mr. Baiyun! I’m so sorry, I kissed your picture, do you blame me?...When I saw you calling a jinrikisha to go to Da Guangming Theater on Hualong Road, I hastened to call one to follow you. After you came down, I rode in your jinrikisha home. When I sat on it, Oh! so comfortable. It is more pleasant than the touch of a loving mother and sweeter than the comfort of a lover... (“Yige yingmi xiegei Bai Yun de xin” 7)

Shanghai schoolgirls, too, have learned all the crazy forms of American movie fans...Gong Jianong recently received a letter from a woman...the content was truly fascinating, in which she admired his artistic talent as well as his healthy body. She said she dreamed of kissing him, she said the door opened and he came in, she said she pushed him on the sofa, she said his big mouth kissed her red lips...she wrote all the words that even we men cannot boldly write. Gong Jianong read it and simply blushed with shame... Everyone cannot believe that there is such a woman in the world after all. (“Gong Jianong qiyu jiedao” 3)

The above quotation demonstrates the unprecedented initiative of women in expressing their sexuality, and once women have found their fetish, they are not satisfied with just gazing at him but want to actually touch him. Thus, the entanglement between female fans and male stars is always mixed reality with fantasy. In addition to the above-mentioned female fans “stalking” male stars, an interesting example is that a fan named Chen Ningbi once came to Shanghai to see male star Jin Yan. Jin Yan not only entertained the fan but also seriously explained the reason “why he couldn’t

love her”. This story was later made into a movie by Lianhua Company, which is the story of the famous movie *Three Modern Ladies* [*Sange Modeng Nuxing*]. (“Changsha yi nuyingmi” 3). The unique experiences women gain through film and star worship are in turn extracted by the film to influence a wider audience. This recurring interplay between the consciousness industry and reality is also key to the formation of cinema’s public sphere.

Never has an experience been so explicitly tied to the discourse of female desire as that of star worship. Female fans can appropriate the power or some kind of privilege that men possess simply by allowing the expression and expansion of their desires. Female fans treat male stars as objects of desire projection, which allows them to break through the confines of feudal rituals, transforming from gazed-at female objects to viewing subjects, redefining their image and behavior outside of family life and motherhood. These experiences show how the public sphere of vernacular enlightenment is constructed when pleasure and gender politics are intertwined. This is similar to the female subculture spawned by Rudolph Valentino’s star effect that Hansen explores, which challenges the gendered economy that exists between the relationship of representation and reception and also promotes the formation of a female public sphere⁶⁶. This is also one of the efforts Hansen has made to challenge feminist cine-psychoanalysis.

The second topic concerns male fans. As far as the construction of the proletarian public sphere is concerned, we can imagine that male fans may be in an awkward position: on the one hand, the proletarian public sphere is more concerned with women, children, and other typical groups of people who do not have access to the bourgeois public sphere (of course, this public sphere does not exclude male groups). On the other hand, as “consumers” in a sense, i.e., those responsible for the commodification of female stars, they can even be obstacles to the construction of the public sphere. A newspaper at the time made a spicy satire of male fans’ admiration for female stars, comparing female stars to “pickle jars/salty meat jars” and comparing male fans to flies around them. (“Numingxing biru xiancaigang” 2). This unkind statement about female stars reveals, in a way, one of the fundamental reasons why female actors have been able to achieve stardom so quickly compared to their male counterparts: they are more successful in the process of commodification and have more people pay in a male-dominated consumer society. In terms of the degree of economic independence they have acquired, this is one of the reasons why they have not attained a

⁶⁶ See Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, Introduction; ch. 3; ch. 11-12.

corresponding sociocultural status. This is in line with the classical feminist cine-psychoanalysis, in which the ideal construction of cinema is a male construct, and the female star is reduced to a male fetish as the object of the cinematic gaze⁶⁷.

But if we take fans as a starting point to understand their consumption of stars, we find some phenomena that contradict the assumptions of psychoanalysis and discover those positive and transformative elements in the practices of fan groups. This is not to say that feminists are wrong to look critically at cultural consumption, but rather to hope that while maintaining a critical attitude, we can take seriously the potential for vernacular modernity and proletarian public sphere demonstrated by true representations of fans rather than hypothetical audiences. It is not objective enough, or too pessimistic, to generalize the significance of female stars to male fans as the workings of patriarchal capitalism. This particular presence of female stars still promotes a shift in the thinking and perceptions of certain male fans about the image of women and gender relations, although they are a bit narrow-minded. Unlike female fans who see female stars as their sisters and mentors, they see female stars as their “lovers”.

The love of my heart:

You know what? I'm still a college student... Although I'm twenty years old, I've never talked to any woman, much less fallen in love with any. It's not that I'm not willing to fall in love, but because in my mind, some of them are proud and some of them are vain, which tends to make me have no favorable impression of women. Now on the screen, I see your beautiful face, and from my friends, I know that you are indeed a standard modern woman, so I cannot help but be moved. (“Yingmimen xiegei ‘qiuxiang’ de qingshu” 6)

The above thinking and new views of male fans on the image of women are not profound, but at least they reflect a certain change in the perception of the female group. A letter written by a Japanese fan to female star Wang Ying shows more clearly the change in men's perception of women. In the letter, the male fan said that he had strongly opposed the statement that “women's hearts are made of iron”; because he believed that “women are more attentive and gentler than men”, and that “more women are infatuated than men, and even commit suicide for love”, and that “if women's

⁶⁷ See Mulvey.

hearts are made of iron, then men's hearts are at least made of steel", etc. The male fan thought that these descriptions, which today are stereotypes of women, were "constant truths", but he had doubts because of Wang Ying's "style" (ignoring his requests for visits, etc.) He wondered why Wang Ying did not reply to his letters in time. He could not understand "what kind of psychology it was" so that he could no longer "firmly believe in the "truth" that "women's hearts are not made of iron". ("Ribben yingmi xiegei" 14).

The behavior of female stars has undergone a generalized and expanded understanding by male fans, becoming a kind of re-conceptualization for all women, or at least the "standard modern woman". Men are realizing that women are no longer a "must respond" group and that they can and will ignore their expectations and demands. This new gender perspective also has developed into a change in the concept of marriage and family division of labor: If men's commitment to women in marriage was once considered a gift, now they realize through the presence of female stars that men must also be "young and beautiful, have a tender and considerate mind that can serve women, and a patient and submissive spirit" to gain the favor of some women and make them give you a chance to "make you her lover". But because of the income gap, "you can only do things with her that she loves to do," and "marriage to you is not an option." (Jin 3).

Taking fan representations as a starting point, this section examines the processes by which fans negotiate imperfect selves and idealized others, traditional ideas and modernity in the context of the broad cultural and social implications of the star system. The sensory-emotional power demonstrated by fan groups in the active practice of perception change and identity reconstruction is amazing. Their frenzied fascination, unconventional "crazy" behavior, and hysterical mood changes cannot be reduced to a mere spectacle of mass cultural manipulation. Given the range of fan experiences discussed above, these may be opportunities for renovation and practices of resistance. In this interpretation, even experiences distorted and permeated by consumerism still have the power of vernacular enlightenment: It allows fans to construct a new self-identity, imagine and practice new social concepts and lifestyles, and gain the oppositional power to rebel against their families and overturn the status quo. This public sphere of mass enlightenment will transform into a public sphere that places more emphasis on organizing the collective, breaking the discourse authority, and constructing mass discourse as the indirectness of the fan-star relationship gradually increases.

3.2 Entertaining and Critical Fandom Organizations: Conversation and Confrontation with the Authorities of the Film Industry

If, in the early days of the film industry, female actors were inevitably stigmatized as they entered the public sphere with unprecedented freedom, by the late 1920s and 1930s this negative image had shifted significantly. With the establishment of the Federation of Film Actors and the Film Guild, actors were given a formal affiliation and a clearer professional code of conduct, which distinguished them from “dancers” and “courtesans”. Stricter selection criteria for female actors after the 1930s allowed more women with higher education levels and superior family backgrounds to enter the film industry, making female stars gradually become modern models of independent women. In addition, benefit from left-wing filmmakers’ development and emphasis on the educational and intellectual enlightenment functions of cinema in the 1930s, cinema was finally allowed to be called a “true art,” and with it, the status of actors rose. Female actors were considered the “lucky ones of the time” and they symbolized the success of feminism— “women who have been oppressed for decades are now able to make their mark and now they can be proud”. (“Nv mingxing shi shidai” 1)

The reputation of actors had increased significantly, even those female actors who had previously been most criticized for their origins as prostitutes gained public understanding, and these experiences even became “memorable and praiseworthy hardships that precede success”, highlighting their “nobility of character”.

The Female Star’s Origin

Most of the female actors are from unclean backgrounds, and many are former prostitutes. But heroes are not afraid of low origins. Han Xin endured the shame of crawling through between someone’s legs (胯下之辱)⁶⁸to finally be able to enjoy the glory of ascending the altar and receive the appointment of general. Therefore, despite their humble origins, these do not undermine the noble character of the female actor. (“Numingxing de shenshi” 276)

⁶⁸ Han Xin was a Chinese military general and politician who contributed greatly to the founding of the Han dynasty. This idiom is used to describe a humiliating incident when Han Xin was bullied by a hooligan and is a metaphor for the hardships people must go through before they succeed.

In addition, the changing consensus of the film industry and audiences on the aesthetics of performance, namely the shaking of the principle of “turn-to-life”, has led to the redefinition of “performance” from a “repetition and naturalistic representation of everyday life” to a “skill to be learned” and an “artificially produced art”.

The Acting Art

...People think that making Vernacular Play or Shadow Play is just a matter of doing the everyday things in life, as long as one’s limbs and the five sense organs are intact. So, making a Vernacular Play or film is an instinct for everyone... it is so easy that it doesn’t require study or training. Yet, an untrained, unstudied performance is at best exploitation of the limited number of things that an actor is used to in her/his daily life. Such a performance is just being “oneself” ... but “oneself” is flawed, small, and not entirely trustworthy...The actor’s “self”, a person’s unique experience can never represent life, nor can it be a film...Imagine that people and things in life are ever-changing. If the actors do not try to examine and experience, to imitate and learn, but presume to take their incomplete selves to make do, they are taking the world too easily. The highest level of acting is to have all things in the mind, and all things in life (behaviors, thoughts, movements, and emotions), whether universal or special, concentrated in one person... (S. Hong “Biaoyanshu” 54-56)

Acting art, as anyone who is committed to the world of cinema, will admit, is an extremely difficult and important task. A film’s success or failure, all lies in the art of acting... Actors’ achievements in the film are never the result of overnight training or haphazard engagement, but a long period of training and a research-rich mind... In short, film acting is a matter of cultivation and quick thinking... (“Tan dianying juzhong”2)

If the “true-to-life” performing aesthetic allowed the private lives of stars to emerge as a “truth” and new knowledge with the help of print media, providing fans with a school of life for the vernacular experience of modernity, then the aesthetic concept of “performance art” portrayed the female actor as a group of people with extraordinary artistic talents and gifts, isolated from the fans and the audience as ordinary people. At the same time, female actors were finally recognized as

members of the literary community and no longer excluded from mainstream literary fields. In Chapter 1 we have discussed the strong ties between the film world and the literary world, with all the important literary genres greatly influencing the development of the film industry and making remarkable contributions to the localization of cinema. Given the frequent exchanges and the overlap of personnel between the film and literary world, it is not surprising that film female actors have entered and interacted with the literary field. The entrance into the literary world has added cultural glory to the image of the female actors, who have leaped from degenerate women at the bottom to intellectual women.

Female Actors and Authoress

...Since the gradual discovery of new stars over the year, we also have discovered several new stars who shine even brighter because of their beautiful and elegant writings. For example, “Magpie” Gao Qianpin and “Wildcat” Ai Xia who often write for this newspaper, Hu Ping, who has moved from *Mingxing to Yihua Company*, and Wang Ying, who shouts for women, are all masters of the art of writing... (“Numingxing he nvzuoja” 6)

The Literatization of Female actors

Ye Juanjuan, Hu Ping, and Diao Banhua are as good as each other. But they can also be divided into different schools. Ye is the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school; Hu is the New Literature school, and Diao is the Dancing Talent school (“Numingxing wenyi hua” 200)

Female Actors and Literature

Hu Die writes her autobiography, Ai Xia publishes a novel, Wang Ying is called a poet, Gao Qianpin’s *Crying and Laughing*, and Bai Lu learns English (“Numingxing yu wenzi” 27)

With the inclusion of stars as professionals, the mainstream literary community and the newly formed “cinema authority” began to demean fans. The film critics of the early Shanghai film period were intellectuals who were well-versed in the literary and artistic theories of various countries. They neither studied fans in-depth nor paid special attention to them and even saw them as a threat and mocked them whenever they were spoken of. As we mentioned above, the film industry’s

response to fans' desire for active participation had been negative overall. In a time of rising star status, they have placed greater emphasis on the professional barriers between fans and film practitioners that cannot be crossed. For example, some articles get right to the point and say that "from one to ten thousand people, it's never your turn to be a star!" (Hua 18-19). The fans' love and desire for the stars have not changed, but there have already been a lot of "professional organizations" and "professionals" between them. They have a certain prejudice against fans, believing that their presence "although may excite a few actors about their acting efforts, it mostly creates an obstacle, a poison, to the future of the art of cinema." (Su 12). They believe that "fans who are obsessed with the stars" have "invariably become sinners" and become "a stumbling block that hinders the progress of domestic films and kills the newborn domestic films." (S. Lu "Zenyang" 6). Under the influence of left-wing thinking, fan culture has been repeatedly criticized for its association with consumerism and commodity society under capitalism.

Slowly, you forget everything on the screen, forget the clever writers, the excellent directors, and even the stories they have played...so you become fans and the strongest supporters of the star system. You unconsciously abandoned the evaluation of the cultural content of the film and simply pursued the star value, which is an important institution in the capitalism of cinema and a major factor in destroying the cultural value of cinema... There was no star system in the Soviet Union. There were no fans, but there was a large, enthusiastic, research-minded film audience. (J. Zheng 18)

Film critics wanted to exclude "star fans" and hope their numbers to "rapidly decrease" so that the "real fans," or "viewers," can increase rapidly and "unite and become the basic army to promote the supervision of Chinese cinema." (J. Zheng 18)). In addition, the film publications also claimed to be "the organ of the real fans, to organize a wider group of 'real fans' to promote the movement of Chinese cinema". This has also become a means for some authoritative film publications, such as *Qingqing Dianying*, to advertise their professionalism ("Women shi yingmi" 3). In short, instead of catering to the "vulgar" interests of fans or satisfying fans' desire to get close to the stars, film publications are transforming into more professional and elegant art research publications. For example, the "Fan Group" section of *Dianying Ribao* responded to the ardent desire of fans as

follows:

Recently, we have been receiving letters from readers asking for more “fan introductions” so that those who wish to go on the screen can get more opportunities. This is certainly a good idea, and the editors think it is indeed a move to serve our readers. However, the space of *Dianyng Ribao* is too narrow, and it seems to be too wasteful to add more pages when wonderful articles can’t get one yet. Besides, we have already done a lot for our readers. (“Guanyu yingmi ziwo jieshao” 4)

We can detect a certain arrogance of professional critics in the editor’s statements, such as “wasteful” and “already done a lot”. Some publications even tried to discipline fans, for example, although the film magazine *Qingqing Dianyng* published a column with a large number of letters sent by fans to stars—which were part of the basis for the discussion in the first section—the name of the column was clearly sarcastic, called “The Idiots of the Fans”. Its purpose is to “expose the idiocy of fans so that fans, in general, can be awakened.” (“Chen Yumei nushi” 4). Some even believe that only “film critics” can be considered “real fans”.

Critics and Fans

...these people are at best star fans, and there is a big gap between them and real movie fans. By inference, who are the real fans? I’d say it’s the film critics. ...they not only pay attention to the movie but also to the writer, director, cinematographer, lighting technician, set designer, and all the staff, which is the real movie fan. This kind of movie fan is not those star fans... I hope there will be new critics to instruct the star fans more! (“Yingpingren he yingmi” 2)

Not only did the editors and corporate operators of film publications deliberately ignore or devalue the needs of fans, but they even “forced stars to isolate themselves from their fans to maintain a so-called mystique.” (“Youren zhuoshou choubai” 1). In fact, compared to the beginning of the star system, almost all fan activities were restricted. For example, in the early days, fans could meet, talk to, and get autographs from the stars in person at the film studios or even at the stars’ residences; however, with the standardization of the film industry, film studios are no longer places

to be visited, and it is difficult for fans to connect with the stars in reality.

Q: Mr. Editor-in-Chief... Several colleagues and I had great expectations and went to visit Star Company's new location, but we were disappointed... Why weren't we allowed in? Is there something shady going on in the company? ...Can you think of a solution for us? ...

A: ... the film company is an office, not a place of entertainment ... One way is to unite some people who want to visit and write a formal letter with a group stamped in the name of the office or group to the Star Company to request a visit, so probably you will not be refused again. ("Yingmi xinxiang: mingxing" 294)

The intimacy between fans and stars, brought about by the particular social context and performance aesthetics of the early star system, has been fractured. This is rapidly achieved by a change in the status of the star and the fan, with the former rising and the latter falling. Stars have acquired a public sociocultural status, so the film industry requires fans to engage with stars on a reciprocal position, in a "public-to-public" format. In the new social conditions, fans can only engage with stars more collectively, by packaging themselves as some kind of "official institution" or professional group.

The history of the movie fan club is almost as old as the domestic cinema. Not long after the creation of domestic films in the 1920s, enthusiastic moviegoers began forming organizations to exchange film knowledge and study screen art. For example, the China Film Research Association (Zhongguo Yingxi Yanjiushe), which edited and published the earliest film journal in China, was established in 1924. In addition, the Little Film Research Society (Xiaoxiao Dianyong Yanjiushe), established in 1924, also ran its propaganda publication, and not only hired film experts to give lectures but also organized many fan activities, including attempts to write scripts and rehearsals. The Film Watching Comrades (Guanying Tongzhihui) set up by the Chinese Photographic Society Pictorial (Zhongguo Sheying Xuehui Huabao) and the movie fun club of the magazine Diansheng provide space for members to express their opinions and views on film viewing and guide more viewers to make choices. These groups are movie-watching-oriented organizations, which serve more "movie fans" than "star fans", and more intellectuals or people in the literary field than the general public.

On the other hand, compared to the organizations centered on movie-watching, many movie star fan groups were casual. Fans had organized visiting groups in Suzhou in 1934: they “thought it was an unparalleled opportunity to see the stars in their true colors, so they initiated a tour of Lianhua Company photography, soliciting male and female fans to join...” (“Suzhou yingmi” 28). Another group, in Chongqing is said to have “made a deal with the Chongqing Central Film Studio that when they make an educational film, we can organize a visiting group to attend...” (“Kan paidianying” 6). As films gained greater popularity, and as more and more Chinese were becoming movie fans, many groups organized for other purposes have made it a wish to visit movie studios and meet the stars. “The current graduates of the Normal University... Our educational tour group arrived in Shanghai with the first wish of seeing some of the most prestigious stars on the silver screen. So, when we arrived in Shanghai on the second day, we decided to visit the first studio of Lianhua...” (“Lianhua yingpian” 2).

The development from individuals obsessed with stars to fan groups is the process of identity construction and self-awareness of fans in Shanghai, and the history of the gradual cultural maturation of fans. Contrary to what is often assumed, film studios rarely if ever initiated fan organizations for their stars, the vast majority of fan organizations were started by the fans themselves. Although film publications advised the fledgling groups to “promote the art of cinema” through serious study and discussion, most fans had another purpose in mind. Like the groups that banded together to chase the female stars, such as “Qiu Xin Society” by Nanjing fans, or the above-mentioned various “visiting groups” devoted to meeting stars, the typical fan collective was formed to praise, connect with, and support their favorite stars.

Among the various groups formed by fans on their own initiative, some began to trade their easy informality for greater seriousness and professionalism. The Fan Group, founded in Shanghai in 1934, was a typical example of this new breed of ambitious and meticulously organized group. Although occasional, casual groups continued to exist, the larger and more elaborate groups are better objects for the study of the proletarian public sphere. In the following, I will take the Fan Group as an example to explore how fans, long considered a “rabble,” organize themselves so—collectively and cooperatively—they could both reconstruct connections to stars and alternative vernacular schools that meet the emotional and behavioral needs of fans. More importantly, their active practice gradually evolved into a voice outside the “official”; they monitor and confront the

authorities of the film industry, creating a public sphere for acquiring discourse power and constructing mass discourse.

Although a few stars, directors, and other film professionals joined or supported the work of the Fan Group, it was “organized by people in general who love movies” (“Guanyu yingmi de zhongzhong” 3), and most of its members were ordinary fans. Newspapers at the time commented on the scale of the Fan Group’s organization and activities, stating that “many young literary youths are now eager to join the group, so its organization and scope of work are expanding day by day. (“Tantan jige xinxing” 3). The goal of the Fan Group was to “unite the film-loving people of Shanghai to study the art of cinema from the standpoint of the audience” and more importantly, to “seek proximity to the film world, as the Fan Clubs organized by audiences in Europe, America and Japan have done, which is still a first in China.” (“Guanyu yingmi de zhongzhong” 3).

The Fan Group actively prepared publicity constitutions, registration forms, work plans, etc., working on the official organ of *Fensi Zhoubao* (*Fan Weekly News*). They soon began selecting members. In *Fan Weekly News*, the group published the Recruitment Notice: they laid out a full list of the rights and duties of the members and even prepared an oath of initiation.

.....

- (2) Members of the group are expected to do their duty: under the organization of the group, to stand in the position of film viewers to advance the art of cinema and Chinese cinema.
- (3) The first thing we need to do is to get closer to the Chinese film practitioners.
- (4) The Fan group has an organ publication, *Fan Weekly News*, and will produce several more publications in the future as far as possible...
- (5) Formalities for joining the league: 1. fill out the volunteer form; 2. pay the league initiation fee of one yuan.
- (6) Pay the monthly membership dues of 2 jiao.
- (7) *Fan Weekly News* is for the members of the group. Each member will receive an autographed photo of the Chinese cinema practitioners they admire the most (regardless of the director, actor, or any other position).
- (8) The group is tentatively scheduled to invite directors, actors, and other film industry stars to give speeches; organize weekly visits to filming sites of film companies for 30 members of

the group...

(9) No gender preference.

(10) One will be expelled immediately if one acts against the group.

Application Form: I would like to join the Fan Group and work together under the organization of the group to study the art of cinema and promote Chinese cinema. Yours sincerely, Comrades of the Fan Group. (“Yingmi tuan zhengqiu” 30)

Unlike casual fans, who wrote an occasional letter to a star or sometimes perused film publications, the group members made a commitment, both to the group and to “the art of Chinese cinema”. Even the least involved club member was expected to pay dues. Being a group member implied a strong sense of identity and symbolized that a fan had passed beyond the stage of mere infatuation or devotional adoration. “If fans all over the world could organize themselves, they would be more numerous than any other group such as churches or YMCAs. The film is the youngest and most promising art, and fans are also the youngest and most promising people. Long live the fans!” (Jun 50). The analogy of the Fan Group to religious groups like the YMCA is in a sense appropriate, as they provide an unquestionable “group affiliation” and “spiritual support”. Through communication with others, new self-knowledge is constructed, and through the worship of stars/cinema, religious-like beliefs are acquired to achieve mutual group mobilization and cultural identity. This communication and identity are based on something like an action program, which not only fosters a certain degree of autonomy among members but also contributes to a social force outside the film industry.

The Fan Group’s action program was initially defined through two letters from film actor Zhao Yingcai, which the Fan Group saw as the “compass of organization and work” for members to heed.

...Suppose a pure fan expresses a little opinion about something, his purpose is also pure, but without power; although he said it, it is the same as not saying. What is the point? So, if fans want to do something and have some effect, an organization is the only best way.

(1) Whether outside or inside the film world...both can be comrades... There is no distinction between “big directors, big stars, big people, critics, writers” and “small fans, small audiences”.

(2) To do things in the strength and name of the group, and to avoid inconvenience, do not use the name of the individual at all. If necessary, sign the individual names of all persons in the group. This can make a firm attitude that is not shifted by personal circumstances, or personal emotions, and can dispense with the impact on individuals.

(3) To liaise with the public opinion organs of the film industry—publications and newspapers—and to echo with all audiences as the last strength to rely on.

(4) First, we need to remove the general impression of “small fans”. Why imperceptibly there is always the word “small” in front of fans? Big directors and big stars are also fans, and it is not impossible to produce big directors and big stars among the fans. The Fan Group needs to allow fans to get closer to the film industry.

(5) When we get some power, we can start the work of the Fan Group. Everything in the film world is in the scope of work...

(6) This organization should gradually expand to the whole country, creating ultimate power and the highest organ for the use of power. Not only is it the compass of the audience, but also it becomes the authority of the film industry, dominating the clean movement of the Chinese film industry forever. We need to give this power to all pure fans and viewers so that this group will be always powerful and not manipulated by anyone and develop to the highest peak of fan organizations.

The above is the greatest wish, but we can “view the big picture while handling the details” ... At the very least, can't fans write to Hollywood producers to rebuke and identify their misunderstandings about China? Couldn't we write to a star to correct his or her behavior? Or encourage them? Isn't it possible to advise the studios? (Zhao, Yingcai “Zaitan” 136)

The practice of blurring the gap between directors, stars, critics, fans, and audiences reflects a strong anti-elitist tendency. This is one of the most important strategies to gain their emotional identity for the fans who have to endure endless sarcasm and criticism. The organizational structure based on emotional identity and the principle of voluntarism not only helps to form a spirit of mutual support and love but also provides them with the opportunity and means to participate in the public affairs of the film industry. The Fun Group are aware that their voices do not have a decisive influence, which is why they emphasize that collective power is not only the “last power” but also

the “highest power”: “It is the organized group that produces the power that can be used; it is the common expression of the will of the majority that can have a high effect.” (Zhao, Yingcai “Gongming” 15). The very fact that fans formed a group, and that this group served as a fixed social and cultural organization, contradicts many widely held assumptions about film fandom. Far from passive spectators and naive dreamers, the Fan Group in the 1930s was intensely aware of the arrogance and monopoly of film professionals and publications and actively worked to change the extremely low level of participation these institutions had presupposed for them. Not only did they “unite and intervene in all the work within the film industry,” but they explicitly proposed to “defeat the existing authority and become an alternative authority” and “give this power to all ordinary fans and viewers”. This is important because the aim here is to generate a sense of power and will in the fandom, rather than to banish ordinary fans, and therefore can be understood as a democratic movement.

Had they been film studio heads, directors, or stars, their domination of the film industry would have been typical. Had they been critics or writers, oversight and criticism of the film industry have been routine. But the participants were movie fans, so the implementation of these preliminary action plans required some prerequisites, which were published in an earlier edition of *the Fun Weekly News*. Fans participating in the group will have to improve their quality and be prepared to give to the undertaking their time and energy. They advocate “replacing desire with knowledge”: “If we use the slogan ‘a trip with a male or female star’ to call, then must be a large number of respondents, and soon become a large army, but such an organization is incapable of being powerful and effective.” Therefore, the members need to be more than a mere group of irrational people with a crazy obsession, but to gradually become “a new kind of innocent and sound fan”. Although the average fan’s “financial, fanatic, and talent is limited”, each member of the Fan Group should strive to meet the following requirements: “more sincere and pure interest, knowledge of film-related expertise, the active attitude of thinking and research, and the unity of knowing and doing”. (Zhao, Yingcai “Gongming” 15). These demands may, to some extent, cater to the mainstream film industry’s critique of fanzines, but it is not a top-down type of preaching and discipline from the outside, but a self-reflection and enlightenment within the Fan Group. While attempting to establish autonomy from mainstream culture, the legitimacy of fans remains a pressing concern, and self-improvement is an answer. Those who participated in such efforts had acquired the personal skills

to take meaningful action and clarified their shared interests, collective identity, and public status.

Moreover, despite confronting the authorities of the film industry, however, the attitude of the Fan Group is not entirely closed and exclusive. The Fan Group realized that “our intellectual and material capacities are very weak, so we can only do so much. People who want us to do better, please help us in every way!” (Y. Ping 2). They consciously maintained contact with the film industry’s public opinion organs or critics to “echo all audiences” and gain greater power and universal recognition. They published and reprinted articles by certain professional filmmakers as one of the means of enlightening their members. These articles stimulated active discussion among the internal members and became a practice for constructing mass discourse. In this process, *Fan Weekly News* always maintained its independence and aligned itself with the position of the general fan base.

For example, although Yao Sufeng, the editor of *Meiri Dianying*, was one of the newspaper’s contributing writers, the Fan Group did not shy away from exposing Yao Sufeng’s film company operations and launching fierce criticism against him. Similarly, although the fan club has published some articles by film critic Shi Linghe, it has also criticized him on several occasions. This objective and independent stance was also reflected in the subsequent “critics and playwrights’ debate” led by both of them. Similar to the “soft cinema and hard cinema debate”, “the critics and playwrights’ debate” was another famous controversy in the film industry. To put it simply, it started when Yao, a playwright, was dissatisfied with critic Shi’s criticism of his film *Luliu Qianghua* (A Brief Life, 1934) and called for a campaign to clean up film criticism by removing “personal attacks” and “unfair criticism” and restoring the health and authority of film criticism. The controversy between the two was climaxed by the involvement of other critics and playwrights, and the proposal of a “clean movement” to regulate film criticism received a certain response.

Compared with the debates between professionals or intellectuals in the film industry, I am more interested in the participation and construction of public opinion space by the Fan Group. The organization and practice of the Fan Group have changed the situation of fans and audiences collectively losing their voices during the “soft cinema and hard cinema debate” period, and it can even be said that the “critics and playwrights’ debate” was climaxed and ended in the public opinion space of the Fan Group’s newspaper, *Fan Weekly News*.

The second issue of the first volume of *Fan Weekly News* published a special issue on “the

critics and playwrights' debate", which included articles from all sides of the debate. It published the opinions of the other nine critics on the movie in the order of the controversy. After sorting out the events for fans and collecting comments from all sides, *Fan Weekly News* called on fans to submit articles and encouraged them to express their opinions actively and freely. Subsequently, the third and fourth issues of *Fan Weekly News* published the comments of the group members, with the content evolving from a discussion of the movie itself to a general comment on the debate between Yao and Shi. Some fans thought that the debate between the two "must be able to give some guidance and direction on the current trend of Chinese cinema" and therefore "opposed to the mediation between Yao and Shi" (Mei 76). However, some fans pointed out that this was "a live drama, an exposure of an ugly scene that could not be uglier", and that the debate between the two has changed from a rational debate to "crazy invective, even to the point of throwing people's private affairs around for no reason". (G. Fang 75). In the end, the concluding article in the fourth issue of *Fan Weekly* seemed to accidentally announce the end of the debate between the two; after that, Shi Linghe and Yao Sufeng never again clashed in the press because of the film *A Brief Life*.

By the time these fans had set a goal, enlengthened and mobilized supporters, developed tactics, and entered the process of discourse construction, they had completed all of the steps required for activism. A major part of their campaign was "to confront and monitor the authorities of the film industry". In most art disciplines, academic criticism and mass criticism have certain differences and film is no exception. In the previous chapters, we discussed how the underprivileged film industry competed with the mainstream literary discourse to build its proletarian public sphere; along with the professionalization and the rise of the overall social and cultural status of the film industry, a new round of mediation between mass and elite culture, entertainment and critical studies around the film itself immediately began, which is the eternal theme of the public sphere of vernacular modernity. This manifested itself in the responses of the Fan Group in the face of rejection and disdain from other major and authoritative film publications. For example, the editors of *Min Bao* once wrote a "warning" to the Fan Group to stay out of the way:

...you don't seem to understand anything in the world, yes, let's say all shenanigans, such as hidden arrows and backstabbing, even denunciatory rumors and slander. You are still so naive and straightforward, boldly saying what you want to say. What a wild bunch of people! Here I

like your wildness and naivety, but more worried about you! ...for the sake of Gao Qianpin's boring words, some people serious up. It's actually not worth taking so seriously! If movie publications and critics take such a boring remark seriously, it's too boring, right? ("Mouzhong ren de anxi" 123)

The editor of *Min Bao* described the Fan Group as "naive" and "wild", a description that implies a biased definition of the Fan Group by the film industry: in the eyes of the industry, they are naive children who are ignorant of the survival rules and outsiders who know little about the expertise. In response, the members of the Fan Group replied as follows:

...to say that we have a wild naivety, we don't think so. We are just simpler and more honest, upright, and outspoken than you are! ...Regarding Ms. Gao's boring remark, our viewpoint is different from yours; what we value is not Ms. Gao's remark, but the fact that the remark refers to: is there something boring and nasty in film publications and film critics that should be removed? You must understand. The last thing we want to tell you is that we appreciate your warning! But we'll just keep on doing it honestly and straightforwardly until we can't. ("Mouzhong ren de anxi" 123)

We have no way of knowing exactly what kind of "boring remark" the female actor Gao Qianpin made, but judging from the Fan Group's response, it seems to be exposing some shady practices in the film criticism world. The editor of a major film publication sent a warning to the Fan Group to mind their own business and questioned the "professionalism" of the Fan Group; but believing in strength in numbers, group members banded together to not only defend the "freedom of expression" and re-establish the connection between stars and fans, but also take this opportunity to "purify the culture of film criticism", as well as assume the responsibility of public scrutiny. The men and women who joined the Fan Group loved the films and admired the beauty and talent of their favorite stars. But they distrusted company heads, publicists, and critics, who made the film world their home. These fans worked not only to celebrate actors but to protect them from an industry that is full of "shady and nasty things". Dissatisfied with the critics' domination of the film industry, the fans envisioned a more democratic world of cinema where the feelings and words of

actors, not to mention the force of public opinion of fans, actually mattered.

The collective power of ordinary fans that the Fan Group promoted was potentially progressive and deconstructive, as it found the power to reverse divisions and dissolve authority in the fanaticism and vitality of the fans. And because of this, the Fan Group faced many threats, as stated in the article “To the readers”:

Since its inaugural issue, this newspaper has never relaxed in its attacks on practices and personalities that hinder the progress of Chinese cinema. For this reason, many readers or lovers of this newspaper have given us many reminders, both verbally and in writing. For example: “the newspaper exposed a company manager Zhang’s despicable act...Someone has offered him a plan to wait for the opportunity to file a court case and use the power of the law to shut down the “fans”...Of course, the present is a group of ghosts’ rampant times, the rat in a country shrine and fox on town walls⁶⁹ jump up and down; the monsters and freaks also dance in the dark. However, we will never run away in front of them. Among the masses, we are cells, and in front of the great history, we are blameless! (“Gao duzhe” 194)

The “Manager Zhang” mentioned in the above quote refers to Zhang Shichuan, the pioneer of Chinese cinema, who founded the Star Film Company and made China’s first feature film, *Die for marriage* (1913), and was an authority on Chinese cinema. After the Fan Group published an article exposing the fact that Zhang Shichuan “angrily scolded hundreds of students and teachers at the Shanghai High School who were acting as crowd actors” on the set of the film, he became angry with and fired the photographic assistant of the star company who was also the picture editor of the Fan Weekly News and threatened to destroy the Fan Group. Zhang Shichuan claimed that the reason why the Fan Group published negative news about him was to “raise the status of the newspaper,” to which the Fan Group replied, “That is ridiculous. We don’t see Zhang Shichuan as high as he sees himself!” (“Zhang Shichuan” 92). Since then, the Fan Group has continued to expose some negative news about Zhang, so the conflict has escalated, causing Zhang to try to silence *Fan Weekly News* through legal means.

Indeed, *Fan Weekly News* was briefly discontinued because of its maverick style, but after its

⁶⁹ A metaphor for unprincipled thugs who abuse others’ power bully and exploit people.

resumption, it remained unchanged: "...it may cause some people headaches, but we don't care. In the past, we did it in the spirit of not selling friendships and not being afraid of threats. We said what others did not dare to say and remembered what others did not dare to remember. In the future, we will continue to compile this newspaper in the same spirit as before." ("Fuhuo de hua" 4). Idealistic yet practical, humble yet conceited, courageous yet cynical, the Fan Group was a collective in contradiction. The tensions they explode threaten the authority of the film world. Of course, the Fan Group's efforts were not always successful. The film industry always suppressed them, and their newspaper continued to churn out inaccurate reports that left a trail of blame. What is important, however, is that they keep trying.

To many researchers, the practice of the Fan Group convention might have seemed somewhat unusual if not astonishing. Most people consider fan organizations as completely frivolous, juvenile, and trivial. Yet as their practice suggests, the reality is much different. It was serious and highly organized; it was ambitious, hardworking, and devoted. Through it, fans developed friendships and formed an oppositional collective. This stemmed from their frequent dissatisfaction with the impersonal, authority of the film industry and their desire to reestablish a direct, intimate, participatory relationship with stars. The media's tendency to attempt to isolate stars from fans and exclude general fans led to their skepticism of media coverage and wanting to discover the truth by themselves. Members of the Fan Group sought to create an entertainment democracy in which their feelings and interests would be recognized and public opinion, rather than film industry authority would be valued. This aggressive competition for the right to speak made the practice of the Fan Group already rich in politics even if the objects of their admiration, the stars, were not yet overtly political.

On the other hand, even though they were diligent and serious, the Fan Group had another side—spontaneous, light-hearted, and even gossipy. The *Fan Weekly News* published articles from some well-known filmmakers or commissioning editors, but as late as the tenth issue, members of the editorial board were apologizing to members for the poor quality of the paper due to the lack of full-time staff and promising to "arrange for two people to give up their jobs and work exclusively on the publication of the paper". ("Qishi: chule xiang duzhe" 16). The newspaper published by the Fan Group retained its focus on the life and work of the stars, publishing many exclusive "special news" and "secret stories". It serialized "factual novel" written by "a certain person who is familiar

with the secret affairs of the film industry”, so that “readers will know who it is talking about at a glance” (“Zhongguo dianyingjie shishi” 190-191). They tried to engage members with more witty and creative content for their weekly newspaper.

The Fan Group was not only about activism and hard work. Although the Fan Group members put “studying the art of cinema and promoting Chinese cinema”, as the primary purpose, “proximity to Chinese film professionals”, “each member of the group will receive an autographed photo of the film crew every week”, and “visits to film studios once a week for members” in the aforementioned *Recruitment Notice* might be more attractive. Despite their apparent generosity, fans demanded a price for their efforts. The Fan Group maintained relationships with their idols, who provided them with autographed photos, and updates about their latest activities, and occasionally even met them in person. One newspaper recorded that “the Fan Group initiated film criticism tea parties and film lectures; many beautiful female stars socialized with the group and fans were delighted.” (“Tantan jige xinxing” 3). For many fans, this relationship with the actors, and the personal information that they provided, was one of the biggest rewards of the fan group experience. These intellectual sites of star life and schools of vernacular modernity, constructed through collective power, still allow fans to grow here. Their proximity to and communication with the stars still has the vernacular enlightenment effect of changing the perceptions and ways of fan life, as discussed in the previous section, only it is no longer based on personal intimacy and magazines. Fans managed to form collectives that become their own experts on the private life of their favorite star.

To the researcher of the classical public sphere or modernity, these fans have appeared remarkably confused and less meaningful. Yet in the vision of vernacular modernity and the proletarian public sphere, there was a logic to fans’ seemingly paradoxical behavior. The satisfaction of basic needs close to the life of stars and the film industry accumulated energy for the collective, cultivates professional, rational, and political fans, and provided the prerequisites for mass discourse construction and oppositional practices. This “middle path” in a sense is a manifestation of vernacular modernity that reconciles the contradictions between elegance and vulgarity, cultural consumption and artistic research, and theoretical topics and life details.

The Fan Group, as a more structured and formalized group, a more stable and public organization, is ahead of its time in the production of collective subjects and mass culture. It was not until the late 1930s and early 1940s that the film industry finally realized that separating fans

from stars was not smart and could be a hindrance to the development of the film industry. This was also made possible by the proliferation of Hollywood “fan clubs”, which quickly changed the attitude of local film industry members who were keen to follow Hollywood trends. Professional film magazines began to study and analyze the role of Hollywood fan clubs, and domestic Fan Clubs for popular stars soon began to be organized.

Chen Yunsheng Fan Club

Publishing - Gatherings - Correspondence - Talks – Collaborations, Rights abound

... Like the Fan Clubs of major Hollywood superstars, some feel the need to organize a fan club for Chen Yunsheng. A superstar should be close to her or his fans is a matter which no longer needs to be questioned. In the past, short-sighted people used to admonish movie producers to force their practitioners to isolate the star from her or his fans to maintain the so-called “mystique”. This ridiculously silly opinion has long been beaten to death by the living facts in countries where the movie business has progressed. In Hollywood, Fan Clubs of popular female stars have more than 120,000 members... They meet once a month and produce a publication once every three months. Fans can request to meet, talk, and correspond with them (stars), as well as other friendship activities such as cooperation in business. In this regard, the preparation of Chen Yunsheng’s fan club is a first in the Chinese film industry... (“Youren zhuoshou choubai” 1)

Although the above quotation claimed that “the preparation of Chen Yunsheng’s Fan Group was an innovation,” the activities listed in the article, such as publishing, meetings, correspondence, talks, and cooperation, had already been realized during the Fan Group period. In addition, there was a category of lecture societies organized by filmmakers that actively encouraged fans to participate. For example, the Chinese Film Vulgar Society (Zhongguo Dianying Gengsu She) is “dedicated to the well-being of film fans and those who have been left out of the film industry,” teaching various skills such as Mandarin, make-up, and action, without charging for registration or tuition. The instructors were all “celebrities in the film and theater industry” to select and deliver talents for the film industry (Q. Wang 3). Such organizations fulfilled the ultimate desire of fans discussed in the previous section, which was to “become a movie star”. They were a veritable

“vernacular school of reaching out and learning about the life of a star”. The film industry professionals also began to promote the establishment of service organizations, such as the Fan Service Club and Movie Star Club. Although these were only the most basic intermediary organizations, they were able to meet the widest range of fan needs, such as asking for autographed photos.

The Medium of Fans and Movie Stars

Now there is also a Fan Service Club in Shanghai, they print many special photos of the stars taken by experts, ask the stars to sign in bulk, and then send them to the fans who want them. Now because the material is expensive, each with postage charges 10 Jiao. (“Yingmi yu yingxing de meijie” 1)

...on the one hand to receive requests for photos from fans, and on the other hand to send autographed photos on behalf of the stars, as many movie stars have entrusted the agency to do so to save themselves the trouble. The purpose of the Fan Service Club is to serve both the movie stars and the fans. (“Zhongguo numingxing lianhe” 1458)

In addition, newspapers and film publications, which used to sniff at the fervor of fans in general and boast of their “professionalism” and “authority,” have had to follow the trend and join the ranks to serve the fans. Even *Qingqing Dianying*, which once called fan enthusiasm “idiotic”, started to organize tours of film companies, allowing “readers to take pictures with male and female stars as a souvenir” and promising “visitors the right to bring photos or autograph books to be signed by the stars”. (“Benkan faqi yingpian” 10). Moreover, the “readers’ meetings” actively organized by major newspapers and magazines are actually one of these types. Although they retain the name “book club,” they also help fans reconnect with stars.

To bring our readers and editors together, and to bring fans and movie stars into regular contact, the newspaper will organize a “China Art Daily Reading Club” ...We have always believed that this newspaper is for the general public, not the private property of a few editors or a few people. ...what will this readers’ club do? ... We will hold seminars on theater and film, on the

editorial policy of the newspaper, and so on. (“Ba bianzhe yu duzhe” 1)

These organizations may be called “semi-official” because they are initiated by people involved in the film industry. Compared with the practice of the Fan Group, these “semi-official” organizations may be a little less effective in some respects, but they all play a similar role to the Fan Group overall. Although these organizations are not formed spontaneously by fans, they are also able to meet the behavioral and emotional needs of fans, providing them with a field for exchanging experiences and gaining vernacular enlightenment about “Chinese film art” and the lives of stars. In addition, although fan-organized groups such as visiting groups for film production or fan clubs of a certain star are less active than the Fan Group in encouraging participation in the construction of the discourse, I believe that in a sense, the existence of these groups themselves is a kind of construction of mass discourse. For instance, the previously mentioned “Qiuxin Society” once published a “poem” in a newspaper, which read: “Young people are eccentric, watching the movie is not satisfying, because Ye Qiuxin’s name is good, we all organize the Qiuxin Society”. This kind of playful poetry was called “crooked poetry” by intellectuals of the time; it is the best manifestation of mass discourse as “jamming” dominant culture. The fact that these short-lived, rapidly disappearing but recurring organizations are difficult for researchers to grasp, does not mean that their influence in real life at the time can be ignored. Even the freedom and contingency of their participation and withdrawal mechanisms vividly illustrate the flexibility and vitality of the proletarian public sphere. Therefore, I think the practice of the Fan Group is a good example of the construction of the public sphere, but it is by no means a special case.

This section examines how the emergent fan organization has resisted any easy closure of fans’ dream/fantasy of approaching the film world in the face of the growing isolation of stars from fans and the emergence of authority in the film industry. The onset of fan organizations, along with the coming of age of the star system, radically redefined the meaning of the audience (fans) in cinema and resulted in the construction of a proletarian public sphere in the more realistic arena of vernacular culture. Fan organizations have used emotional resonance and mundane materiality to embellish collective attraction, politics of discourse, and identity. It disrupted the classic enlightenment style of the traditional public sphere which has aspired to pure rational cohesion and introspective efficacy.

3.3 The Dialectic of Entertainment Fans and Revolutionary Masses: Radical and Dramatic Execution of Political Beliefs

Max Weber's concept of charisma in the field of political science has often been borrowed by film scholars to discuss the phenomenon of stardom⁷⁰, especially its tendency to legitimize a certain ideology or political order without relying solely on coercive force. In the previous section, I mentioned that changes in star selection criteria, the art of cinema, and the concept of acting brought higher sociocultural status to female stars. In fact, female stars who were accepted into the literary world also gained a certain amount of political power as the literary world turned to politics. The stars frequently participated in a number of relief gatherings and socio-political activities. A great deal of detail about these activities could be found in the press of the time, where the socio-political lives of the stars were made public instead of their private lives.

Likewise, the aesthetic shift from "acting in character" to "acting technique" encouraged and required actresses to become "public people" so-called "have all things in the mind", and to play roles beyond their limitations. In this trend, there seemed to be nothing more groundbreaking than the reality of "revolutionary roles". Most actors assumed a social and public responsibility commensurate with their artistic and cultural status. More crucially, Shanghai in the 1930s had already prepared the most exciting political stage for actors. On the eve of the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Shanghai had become a society full of turmoil and danger. The tension, chaos, and high politicization of pre-war life made movie stars extremely sensitive to the political situation and ready to make political expressions according to the expectations of their fans and the public. More importantly, the political rather than personal image of the stars was meaningful not only to fans but also to all those seeking survival and a way out of the semi-colonial metropolis. In other words, as movie stars became political stars, the notion of fandom had been expanded from movie star fans to the captured general public. With the further politicization of stardom, not only did the proletarian public sphere continue to grow in size, but the already unclear dividing line between fans and the general public became even more blurred as they all enthusiastically engaged in the grand revolutionary cause.

A glimpse of the extent to which stars could serve the imagination and practice of politicization

⁷⁰ See Gledhill, "Charisma".

can be found in one of the most interesting events of political performance in the film industry in 1936, the series of “birthday celebrations with the purchase of a machine”⁷¹. To celebrate the 50th birthday of Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the National Government, and in response to the national campaign for the donation of planes, Zhang Shichuan and others initiated the “Film Industry’s gala for the birthday celebration and airplane purchase” [Fig. 3.4] (Shanghaishi dianyingjie gouji” 1). As a result of the meeting between the film companies, it was decided that a performance committee would be formed and that the program would be Ping Opera by popular film stars, directors, and producers from companies, to be performed at the Shanghai Jincheng Theater for two days on October 30 and 31. The ticket prices were set at 10 yuan and 20 yuan, and it is expected that the total proceeds will amount to more than 30,000 yuan, all of which will be handed over to the relevant organizations to show the enthusiastic response of the film industry. The unprecedented event was well-received by public opinion as the most positive patriotic action by film practitioners.

On the morning of the release day, the tickets were quickly sold out. On the day of the official performance, four newspapers, including *Shen Bao*, *Xinwen Bao*, *Shishi Xinbao*, and *Shi Bao*, ran huge advertisements with the slogan “Diamond Lineup, Unprecedented Feast” across the headlines, listing the names of 20 female actors, including Hu Die, Gong Qiuxia, and Xuan Jinglin, as the “Twenty Beauties in Sports Cars”. Another twenty male filmmakers were the drivers for “Twenty Beauties”, and from the list, all the celebrities in the film industry were included. The Jincheng Theater was packed, and the entrance was thronged with visitors and vehicles, making it a star-studded event, “one of the most memorable and meaningful gatherings in the film industry”. (Gong 507).

⁷¹ On the politics of Shanghai stardom, see Nian’s study of Chinese film actresses in the 1930s and 1940s, which illustrates the political performance and perform politics of Chinese film actresses under the framework of the history of the War of resistance against Japan, movie, and female.



Fig. 3.4 A photo of the Shanghai film industry at the opening of the grand parade to celebrate Chiang Kai-shek's birthday by purchasing a plane in *Meigui Huabao* (1936)

The public image of “Twenty Beauties in Sports Cars” is very complex. If we recall Liu Naou’s descriptions of the sensory material modernity⁷², we will understand the symbolic meaning of “sports car” here. The agitation of speed and time, and the fluctuation of emotions make these female actors undoubtedly the embodiment of consumerism or sensory material modernity, but at the same time, they are also the initiators and participants of a typical political movement. The startling combination between celebrities, military equipment, war, birthday celebrations, patriotic politics, and groupie mania makes us realize that celebrities can not only change the way people live their daily lives but can also easily intervene in the process of collective ideological construction, making people unwittingly involved in public social and political issues.

Therefore, I do not wish to argue that any of the above-mentioned actresses were somehow top stars or typical of their times, but rather that they all have raised some interesting questions related to the newfound politics of stardom in the cultural and historical context of Shanghai. For example, whether and how stars can provide important public spaces for fans and the public’s participation in the democratic political process. In other words, I do not intend to explore only the actual political beliefs or practices of a particular star in the 1930s. I am interested in another aspect of the political image of stars, namely, examining the processes by which stars have focused their energies on providing special meaning for some groups of people and helping them find a path toward political engagement.

The significance of celebrities with the multiple identities of writers, artists, and revolutionaries

⁷² See Chapter 1.3.1

arises mainly in two areas. One is news representation, and I will note how some of the articles in which stars express their political views offer a range of meanings and try to resonate with fans and masses in a particular and positive way. Secondly, in the practical activities, I will analyze how the political engagement of stars that overlap with the star-catching scene serves as a medium for the public sphere, a form of cultural and political currency that carries the messages to many who would not otherwise hear them and channel their emotional and behavioral investments. Politicized stars and their rabid fans tell an important story: the emergence of stars as a vital center of political life and the important role that the general public, including fans, plays in the political course. My cast of characters features two activists: Chen Yumei and Chen Boer, both of whom were a composite of film stars and political stars but represented positions closer to the former and the latter, respectively. They both threw themselves into the composite political movements of women's liberation and national salvation, creating an ambivalent practice that was both propaganda and mass enlightenment.

The difficulty in studying this vernacular political participation, however, is that it is difficult to find enough writings about this political participation and their personal feelings about it by fans or the general public. These people inherently lack the ability to write. And the fans seem to be simply unaware or insufficiently aware that their groupie activities have “modified” and that they have become involved in some kind of political movement. For fans, this type of activity remains a form of pilgrimage to the stars that is accompanied by sensual pleasure and emotional catharsis. It is more perceptible and worth recording than the political metaphors and realities it is enriched with. In this context, the holistic record of fan and general public involvement in newspapers and magazines remains a reliable supplementary source of information.

In the 1930s, there were many political movements with contributions from movie stars. They invoked anti-colonial sentiments, articulating nationalist themes such as the “National Goods Movement”—the boycott of imported products. After the Mukden Incident and the fall of Northeast China, China not only lost money from the huge export of commodities but also a large amount of money from the mainland for the purchase of Northeast China's commodities that went to Japan. The prevalence of foreign goods and the loss of capital aggravated the national crisis. At that time, the development of national products became a fashionable term in public opinion circles: the slogans such as “Promoting national products to relieve the national difficulties” became popular,

and many newspapers and magazines, such as the “National Products Monthly Newspaper” and “National Products Monthly Magazine”, were established. The National Government set up the “National Products Year”, held exhibitions of national products, and set up national products shopping malls and various national products groups to enhance people’s awareness of the use of national products. 1933 was the first “year of National Products”, followed by different themes such as “year of Women’s National Products in 1934”, “year of Students’ National Products in 1935”, “year of Citizen’s National Products in 1936”, and “Civil Servants’ year of National Products in 1937”.

At a time when the country was in such a desperate and urgent situation, the national government and enterprises devoted most of their efforts to light industries that did not require much capital, such as the textile industry. They wanted to produce not only economically viable national clothing but also a powerful ideological garment and asked movie stars to “try it on” first.

Asking Female Stars to Promote Nation-made Clothing

...All female stars please take a little responsibility... Anyone with a little passion says that promoting national products is the only way to save the country. Now as long as movie actresses promote domestic clothing, then Chinese women will definitely consider domestic clothing fashionable, and everyone will use national products... If the movie actresses promote it, then the domestic silk industry, and cloth industry, will immediately be developed and can reduce a great deal of money flowing abroad. It can at least save half of the life of the Republic of China. Can you not take up this responsibility, female film stars? (“Qing numingxing tichang” 2)

These emerging ideas about nationalism related to national products were always more likely to be associated with the countryside than to take root in the modern big cities. Shanghai, in particular, the semi-colonial “Paris of the East”, seemed to be naturally anti-localism. The government and media then had to turn to some of the most capitalist and modern spiritual “gods” for help. They were using celebrities to help fans and the public to understand, engage and deal with certain public political matters in the language and rules of personal charm and private emotions. This kind of vernacular political attempt was even given the great mission of “saving half of the life

of the Republic of China”.

Many female celebrities participated in the official campaign of the year of National Products of Women, including Chen Yumei, Hu Die, Hu Shan, Li Lili, Wang Renmei, Xu Lai, etc. (“Funu nianhuo yundonghui” 1). Among them, Chen yumei, who has long been dedicated to “saving the country through frugality”, has taken it upon herself to organize various activities. On the one hand, Chen compiled her ideas into the “Song of Frugality” and performed it in the clubs of her colleagues and at various military support events (“Guanyu Chen Yumei” 2; “Dongbei yiyong jun” 1). On the other hand, she appealed to women nationwide through authoritative media. For example, “Chen Yumei’s Message to Female Compatriots Nationwide” in Free Talk, *Shen Bao*, and “Promoting National Products and Women’s Frugal Movement” in a special issue commemorating the Women’s National Products Year, reads as follows.

Strong neighbors are wreaking havoc, and the country is still in trouble. In the autumn of this stormy year, the whole country is in an uproar, and all people are rising to save the country. But except for a few women who have shown some interest in the national salvation movement, our female compatriots are all cowering and do not care about the outside world. The modern women, who lead a luxurious and dissipated life, only know how to dress and feed themselves. They live in this society but are nothing more than parasites of consumption...I feel that frugality is a simple and effective way for us to save the country. Therefore, I dare to urge my female compatriots to pay attention to save unnecessary consumption... (“Chen Yumei jinggao” 12)

Everyone knows that economic aggression is worse than forceful aggression! We would never give our bodies to the enemy to be shot, but unknowingly and willingly give our money to the enemy. Isn’t that silly and ridiculous? If we advocate frugality, we can’t say that we don’t use foreign goods for food and clothing at all, but to live a simple life, we will mostly use national goods... I hope that all the female compatriots in China... break the concept of luxury and implement a frugal movement... (Y. Chen “Tichang guohuo” 47)

Chen Yumei argues that “to promote national products, women must first be frugal. Women in

the city, in particular, should be the first to correct the current problems and implement them”. Chen Yumei’s extra emphasis on women’s participation was in no way intended to constrain women; rather, her efforts to call on women across the country to join the salvation movement were more like a circuitous for women to gain social and political status that would lead to their liberation. In Chen Yumei’s argument, if women could reverse the social impression of being “extravagant” and “parasites” and participate in the salvation movement once monopolized by men, then they could gain social acceptance. In other words, she believed that for women, catering to the rising nationalism of the wartime society would enable them to gain access to political participation and “liberate themselves” while “saving the nation”. (Y. Chen “Tichang guohuo” 47).

Although some people suspected at the time that Chen Yumei’s rhetoric was merely to promote her new film, it turned out that Chen’s frugal campaign was not just a flash in the pan but lasted for quite some time. In fact, even if the frugal campaign initiative was linked to film promotion, such promotion was not one-sided, but mutually reinforcing. After Chen Yumei became famous for her frugality campaign, whenever her films were shown in theaters, the words “Frugal Star” were displayed on the screen before the screening. Stars surf the popular entertainment consumption, hitching their ideas to film publicity to reach a larger public. Moreover, in terms of the practice of Chen Yumei and her fans, the strategy of gaining political participation and rights through the national salvation movement did work. The female actors who participated in the frugality/ national products campaign not only gained widespread fame but also earned several official positions. (“Hu Die ren mingyu” 1). More importantly, after being elected as the sub-chief of the frugality campaign of Zhejiang Association, Chen Yumei could more easily promote her political ideas and attract public participation. She set up the brief rules for the campaign of “saving the country through frugality” and attracted public participation by “giving away signed photos” and promising that participants could “be a comrade or friend with Ms. Chen Yumei”. This perfectly satisfies the emotional and behavioral needs of the general fan base, as we have seen in the fan letters. In other words, she is first targeting fans who are engaged entertainingly and attempts to help them extend their engagement into politics, deploying existing emotions and forces in new ways.

(1) All compatriots of Zhejiang nationality, regardless of gender and qualifications, may apply.

(2) Applicants must abide by the following tenets of frugality: no gift of more than one yuan;

no high-priced cigarettes or alcohol...no more than 8 yuan per table for banquets; and use national products except for necessities without substitution.

.....

(4) Those who can recruit five members or more will receive a photo of Yumei; ten members or more will receive an autographed photo; if twenty members or more, it will add the date and name of the person dedicated to... (“Nuxing de jianyue yundong” 416)

Detailed rules on gift-giving, banquets, and household items are linked to the grand movement of national salvation. The star inspires fan participation by mapping a personalized embodiment of daily life onto an expanding understanding of cultural and political movements. Fans are often not invited to participate in the language and processes of mainstream culture and politics, which is often predicated on familiarity with expertise and debate. In contrast, the political engagement offered by stars embraces grassroots appropriation generating a new vocabulary and practice that have become part of fans’ lives to constructively teach them how to think and act politically. Although Chen Yumei, as the sub-chief of the Zhejiang Association, only invited people from Zhejiang Province to join, the impact of this campaign has spread to other regions. We can find a positive response to the campaign from the letter sent to Chen Yumei by a Shanghai fan.

When I read the article “Women’s Frugal Movement” in the 17th issue of this magazine, I was excited to have the opportunity to get a picture of you, but then I was disappointed when I read the recruiting brief... I saw you advocating frugality and thought you were my comrade, but my ancestry is Anhui Province, and the people you solicited are from Zhejiang Province, so I could not participate because of geographical reasons, which is one of my regrets... (Y. Fang 516-517)

The fan also suggested several other ideas to improve the frugality movement, including monitoring participants for compliance with frugality rules, reducing fees, and giving away photos to all participants. Fans also kept a close eye on Chen Yumei’s movements, writing to film publications to inquire about certain changes as soon as they noticed them:

Is Chen Yumei not frugal anymore? Chen Yumei has always been famous for her frugality...Recently, we often see her new outfit photos in the advertisements of Modern Clothing Company, so this is another style change, right? (Y. Hu 355)

Letters like these were taken seriously by newspapers and were published to inspire and monitor Chen Yumei to refine her campaign. Yet, these letters' representativeness is limited, especially given the bias of film publications against fandom at this time: not every letter was published, and not every letter was collected and preserved. This is only a very small number of the responses Chen Yumei likely received from her fans. Notwithstanding such limitations, such fan letters do attest to Chen Yumei's influence and demonstrate her success in inspiring her followers to pay attention to the Frugal Salvation Movement. Some more detailed descriptions of fan and public reactions can be found in reports from the time.

I must bow 300 times before Ms. Chen Yumei, because she has such a passion to promote frugality, which is a novelty in the film industry, and naturally cannot help but make people admire her. Now she has been shouting, and all people actually have responded... ("Hu Die de denglong qipao" 14)

...Chen Yumei's "saving the country through frugality" almost deafened the men and women of Shanghai. Men took off their ties, stuffed their suits in the garbage, and threw their leather shoes on the road. Why? They were awakened, they were awakened by hearing Chen Yumei's cry. The ladies took off their western cheongsams, slammed the powder boxes into the spittoon, and threw their high heels into the gutter. Why? They also woke up because of Chen Yumei's cry...There is no way to count the number of people from all over Shanghai who have been awakened by Yumei's cry of "saving the country through frugality". But as far as I know, the men include Ma Loufen, Zhang Zhenfeng, Ma Dongwu, Gao Tianqi, Xiao Zhengzhong, and other people in general; the women include Hu Shan, Lu Lixia, Yuan Meiyun, Chen Qixia, Lu Ye, and other people in general... ("Chen Yumei jianyue jiuguo" 3)

The Stars work by deploying elements of the clothing fashion world and their accumulated

meanings as metaphors for making sense of political issues. They often intervene and encourage others' intervention in the political and social sphere in this way. By subverting the external image and abandoning these "extravagant Western things" —ties, suits, and shoes for men, dresses, cosmetics, and high heels for women—people can immediately participate in the revolutionary movement to save the country. One can easily have a revolutionary experience simply by changing into a costume that fits a political symbol. One's ability to participate in a revolution or to make a political expression does not depend on whether one qualifies as or has been a "revolutionary" or a "politician"; rather, one is already a "revolutionary" and a "politician" simply by changing one's mode of dress. In other words, the new body image packaged by the "clothing revolution" has lowered the threshold for participation in a "revolution" or political expression. This idea of the "clothing revolution" has been seen time and time again, even in modern China⁷³.

The above quote also cited changes in the mental outlook of some people, such as "from an overly vain youth to a simple one"; from "a flamboyant, bad-habit-stained, withered youth to a radiant, glowing one"; and "from a drunken, vomit-inducing, disgusting youth to a likable one". Those who gained a "new life" donated the money they saved by giving up their bad habits to save the country. Thus, movie stars do more than just show us how to dress and look, they also have the power to alter the way people thought and acted. This effect coincided with the ideological propaganda of the "New Life Movement"⁷⁴ from 1934 onwards, and Chen Yumei's "Frugal Movement" naturally blended again with this official activity with strong political overtones. While filming in Wuxi, Chen Yumei sang the "Song of Frugality" on the radio to promote the New Life Movement, which also received an enthusiastic response from her fans. Among them, the most enthusiastic were always the schoolgirls. ("Benbao tekan qing" 3).

...The door was crowded with countless fans, and once they saw that she had arrived, they thundered with joy and watched her enter... "At this time when the New Life Movement is starting, we all have to beat the fashion and promote frugality, so we invite Ms. Chen Yumei,

⁷³ In the 1960s, especially during the Great Cultural Revolution, people wore clothes of the same style and texture, symbolizing society's determination to strive for equality. The clothes were monotonous and simple, without any ornaments, which symbolized the removal of the labels of social status differences; and the neutralized clothing meant that the body was de-gendered. It was believed that the disappearance of these external differences imposed on the human body would enable all people to "interact equally and freely" in society. Regardless of whether this idea achieved the desired results, the "clothing revolution" was indeed a unique means of expression of mass politics.

⁷⁴ See the New Life Movement discussed in 1.3.1.

who promotes frugality, to sing a frugal song...” Ms. Chen sang happily, with a gentle tone and sincere and profound lyrics, waking up people’s dreams, and everyone could not help but applaud vigorously. “I advise my compatriots to practice frugality... regardless of clothing, food, housing and transportation...” (G. Bai 1)

Chen Yumei’s “Frugal/National Rescue Movement” served as a forum to unite fans and the general public in Shanghai and even across the country for communication. These examples illuminated how stars allowed for shared information and knowledge and created a sense of community among people, as did the traditional public sphere, but at the same time closely related to the familiar realm of fashion and body image. It was this concreteness, including the innovation at the level of everyday life and the focus on women’s survival, that made her attempts—despite the somewhat subtle danger of being unable to avoid merging with official activities from the beginning and throughout—by no means merely political-ideological propaganda, but also had a popular enlightenment and emancipation aspect.

On the other hand, some stars had distanced themselves more and more from the film industry in the course of their political performances. A group of actresses surrounding the left-wing camp, such as Chen Boer, Wang Ying, Lan Ping, Wang Renmei, Li Lili, Lu Luming, Liu Liying, and others, on the one hand, used their star status to participate in anti-Japanese propaganda performances and engage in related social activities on the other. They formed a political group based on unique intimate relationships (colleagues, friends, teachers, and students) around a common left-wing circle—Shanghai University of the Arts, Shanghai Artistic Drama Society, Nanguo Society, The Chinese Revolutionary Relief Society, Diantong Film Company, and other community organizations or film companies. These actors, who stood out as political stars, even began to reject the title of film stars. They mobilized not only their fans but also the general public to follow their political ideals.

The most iconic was the famous actress Chen Boer, whose image was closely associated with her rather daring involvement in left-wing causes in the 1930s and early 1940s. As early as 1929, Chen Boer joined The Chinese Revolutionary Relief Society organized by the Communist Party. In 1930, Chen Boer joined Lu Xun in founding China’s Free Movement Alliance while performing in a play at the Shanghai Artistic Drama Society. She was one of only three women among the founders.

After the December 9th Movement, she was at the forefront of the rescue movement in Shanghai, establishing the Shanghai Women's Salvation Association and the Shanghai Film Industry Salvation Association. After the arrest of the seven members of the National Salvation Federation, she publicly signed a petition in response to Song Qingling's call to "save the country by going to jail" and asked to be imprisoned to take joint responsibility for the "Seven Gentlemen". At the end of 1936, after the outbreak of the war in Suiyuan, she led and organized Shanghai Women and Children Consolation Group, which rushed to the front line to perform defense dramas, propaganda for the "Anti-Japanese War", and comfort the soldiers and people at the front. In 1939, she formed an expedition for women and children behind enemy lines in North China, traveling thousands of kilometers from the Shansi-Suiyuan Border Region to the Shanxi-Chahaer-Hebei Border Region, and then to the Shanxi-Hebei-Shandong-Henan Border Region, conducting numerous expeditions, in-depth interviews, propaganda enlightenment, and mobilization practices.

It is necessary but rather difficult, to restore the complexity of Chen Boer's face as a movie star and revolutionary. Chen Boer's public image as a patriotic and progressive star has been carefully cultivated in (the left-wing) articles and biographies, party posters, and pamphlets. The image of patriotic actresses in public discourse is a mainstream propaganda strategy, but such a portrayal emphasizes the serious revolutionary image to complete the ideological propaganda while intentionally or unintentionally weakening the presence and entertaining practices of the fan public. The bias and neglect of the grand revolutionary discourse against the "little fan or the general public" still exists in today's mainstream film studies.

Nevertheless, if we want to discuss her influence on the general public, we cannot simply deal with her as a left-wing revolutionary or political figure. Indeed, Chen Boer's entry into the film industry in 1934 was not voluntary but was persuaded by left-wing film groups to work with them in an attempt to gain favorable publicity status. (Y. Wang 47). But this precisely shows the importance they attached to the movie fan base and the potentially influenced public. In starting with an expectation of fan empowerment, Chen Boer entered the film world. The public at the time was unaware of Chen Boer's close ties with left-wing figures and her membership in the Communist Party. If the various activities she initiated were hugely influential, it was in fact closely related to her status as a film star. Even left-wing filmmakers admit that "Chen Boer's great success in two films, *Taolijie* (Plunder of Peach and Plum, 1934) and *Shengsi Tongxin* (Revolutionaries, 1936),

quickly made her a popular film star, which created more favorable conditions for her to engage in open, legitimate revolutionary and progressive activities” (J. Cheng 25) [Fig. 3.5]. In the following, I will trace Chen Boer’s connection with fans in journalistic representations and practices, as a unique source for understanding “the lost fans and general public” in a history glorified/simplified as the great left-wing revolutionaries, to reproduce the public sphere that reconciles political enlightenment and mass entertainment.



Fig. 3.5 The left-wing actor Chen Boer

Chen Boer once published a rather insightful and critical article in *Women’s Life* for a wide (female) fan base. Chen pointed out the reason why women had become the center of the film industry: “Since modern society is a deformed male-centered society, with politics, economy and everything deformed by male rulers, it is only natural that the art of reflecting society, cinema, has formed a female center—specifically targeting women.” Chen Boer also analyzed the psychology of female fans’ admiration for female celebrities, arguing that female fans’ admiration for female celebrities stems from a “masochistic tendency to enjoy the gaze” or “sympathetic narcissism”—an idea that is in line with the famous paper “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” by Laura Mulvey, a film researcher who laid the foundation for the feminist cine-psychoanalysis.

First...women who exist in this (male-centered) society regulate the needs of this society...male viewers are directly attracted by the “dominant class” mentality, while female viewers are directly attracted by the subconscious “ruled class” mentality...women’s grooming

often follows the female celebrities' example because they subconsciously feel that the female celebrities' grooming is the beauty preferred by a large group of people. In other words, it is subconsciously recognized that such grooming is the standard of beauty that is adapted to the aesthetic conditions of the male-centered society. Secondly, women who are a little more aware... have realized the gender inequalities in society, have understood that they are in the "ruled category" and feel the pain of the ruled...but have no power to fight...so they will fervently sympathize with their "kindred spirits", the female heroes, the actresses! They will resonate with the joy and sorrow of the actress in the film, and they will find their imaginary heroines to worship...Thirdly, more progressive women have freed themselves from the shackles of the family and moved into society...But China's present society is a semi-colonial, capitalist, male-centered society...The positions women get are mostly unimportant, and capitalists hire women just for their low wages...so the "female-centered" new industrial films are considered by the uninformed women as the only object for women to fight for their social status. This can be seen in the enthusiasm of many female fans who want to join the screen.

...women need to work hard on all fronts to fight for freedom and equality, and if cinema cannot take responsibility and instead becomes an ideal kingdom to escape reality, then we would rather have no cinema! (B. Chen "Nuxing zhongxin" 64-66)

Chen Boer disliked movie star status, but she had never given up on her fans. For her, neither the development of the film industry nor the future of the stars was crucial; she was more concerned with whether fans in general and female fans in particular, who were addicted to the films and the stars, could awaken from the illusion of liberation in the film industry and achieve a deeper level of political and social liberation. This became a reality through Chen Boer's active practice, such as the positive response from fans when Chen Boer organized the "save the country by going to jail" campaign. Most of these fans were the aforementioned group of schoolgirls who saw the actress as their spiritual mentor and sister.

...When the female students in Suzhou heard that Chen Yumei had arrived, they visited and asked for autographs and inscriptions, and Chen wrote to all of them "patriotism is not a crime". ("Chen Boer deng fusu" 1159)

The news that movie star Chen Boer had arrived in Suzhou to campaign for national salvation was widely spread, and a large number of movie fans and young students came quickly to express their admiration and support for Chen Boer's fearless spirit of following Song Qingling and other people in the anti-Japanese patriotic struggle: they also took out souvenir books and asked her to sign them. Chen Boer signed all the souvenir books with the words "saving the country is not a crime" in big letters, confronting the reactionary policy of the Kuomintang authorities that "saving the country is a crime". (J. Cheng 26)

The act of these fans mobbing the places where the star visited and demanding autographs was typical of star-catching activities, but the slogans written by Chen Boer transformed them into a dramatic "vernacular political enlightenment" and revolutionary movement that effectively illuminated the public sphere rooted in interactive social space of stars and fans. Chen Boer and others were successful in their protest, and the Nanjing National Government was pressured to release the "Seven Gentlemen". And the fervent following of Chen Boer's fan groups—though some fans may have been there just to get autographs—was itself one of the bargaining chips that forced the national government to concede.

A similar overlap between the star-chasing activities and the political movement occurred in 1937 when Chen Boer led the Shanghai Women and Children Consolation Group to the Suiyuan Front to engage in salvation movements and condolences to soldiers. While passing through Beijing, Chen Boer was welcomed by all sectors of society. Even though Chen Boer emphasized that this reception was not "a warm welcome for a movie star, but a recognition of the significance and role of our action", this may not be the case. Enthusiastic fans awaited her on every occasion she appeared, whether it was an official welcome party or a private schedule. She also admitted that "performing was still our main job" (B. Chen "Suiyuan laojun" 10). An example is a scene when Chen Boer was invited to participate in the "Chinese College Girls' Fun Party", also known as the "Women's Lecture":

...Because it was a girls' party, the boys did not have the opportunity to participate, but they stood outside the door, where more than a hundred people were tightly gathered, looking inside, feeling powerless and frustrated. The items of amusement were the chorus of salvation songs

by all the participants and the chorus of military songs of salvation by seven people including Chen Boer... Just after they left the gate, they were surrounded by the boys waiting outside the door, who were holding souvenir books and asked her to sign them. Chen Boer's hand flew over the memorial books for twenty minutes... ("Funu jiangzuo" 17)

At the welcome party, Chen Boer and her group were also given special treatment because of her status as a "movie star". The organizers asked other participants not to sit with Chen Boer and her group so that the press could take pictures. Perhaps out of dissatisfaction with this special treatment or entertainment, several women representatives from Nanjing boasted of their experiences comforting soldiers and sarcastically said to Chen Boer, "Miss Chen, there is only one thing we are not as good as you, we don't act in front of the soldiers as you do". To this, Chen Boer responded, "... I am a Xizi⁷⁵, but I am a Xizi who plays anti-X drama⁷⁶ in front of the anti-X soldiers. If people who are not Xizi can understand the value of our acting and its social significance, then they should do their best to help us." (S. Wu 41-42). The conflict between Chen Boer and the other women's consolation delegation illustrates precisely how their practice differs from ordinary political activities. Chen Boer still remixes elements borrowed from film culture to engage fans and the public in a language that makes sense to them. Her efforts create vernacular political spaces that allow fans and the public to unwittingly shift from film-related forms of cultural participation to political engagement hoping to translate "voice" into "influence."

Afterward, since Chen Boer's team included several child stars, various university-affiliated elementary schools also jointly held a welcome party for them. The children's representatives from Chen Boer's team gave speeches:

Children are the future talents... We need the power of children to save China. Who says we don't have the power...we can't deny that children have a great social status and historical mission in modern times. Children! We have to unite the children of the country to be trained and to do the work. (S. Wu 42)

⁷⁵ Traditional derogatory term for actors.

⁷⁶ When magazines mention the word anti-Japanese, they often replace it with anti-X to avoid censorship.

The event had even more of an atmosphere of vernacular political enlightenment: “The reception was given by children, and the audience (about a thousand people) was also children; the master of ceremonies was a child, and the performers were also children, but the lyrics they sang and the drama they performed were not childish, and every line of their lyrics and every scene showed the high emotion of resistance to the enemy...” (S. Wu 42). Consequently, Chen Boer and her followers allow children to know who they can be as revolutionaries, what they need to learn, and what they should fight for, all key steps toward promoting social change. Their practice involves advocating for opinions and political values and even promoting actions, but by means that go beyond engaging in discussions and debates.

Chen Boer’s various activities in Beijing attracted at least 40 people to follow her and continue their departure to the front, most of whom were students from various universities. With the help of the authorities, they chartered a train and set off vast and mighty for Suiyuan. (“Chen Boer zai ping xianqi” 277). Since many women from Tianjin and Beijing joined, they also had a meeting on the train to discuss whether to change the name of “Shanghai Women and Children Consolation Group” (B. Chen “Suiyuan laojun” 6-7). The public performances they held at the front were a great success; thousands of people came in admiration, and the local wounded soldiers and the general public responded strongly: “The army commander did not look like a commander, the soldiers did not look like soldiers, and the civilians did not look like civilians; they were all linked together like brothers and sisters...This unified force caused extreme fear among the Japanese...” (B. Chen “Suiyuan laojun” 6-10) [Fig. 3.6].



Fig. 3.6 Chen Boer’s public performance at the front

The activities of the Shanghai Women and Children Consolation Group attracted close surveillance from the Japanese. They had seen what could happen if stars used their charisma to promote radical causes, especially communism and national salvation. Chen Boer's efforts alone could not have achieved this; the participation of her fans was crucial and necessary. In the process, they constituted a "public," a "group linked by common concerns" and, as a result, influenced and absorbed a broader "non-film fan" public. Many people deny the political power of movie fans because they imply an irrational, emotional, and even hysterical element. One who was a fan by definition could not engage in the political issues that require rational discourse, which, however, was exactly what they were doing through and around Chen Boer's practice. Because of this, when they passed through Beiping again from the front and prepared to perform publicly, the Japanese pressured the authorities to "outlaw anti-Japanese activities," "to expel anti-Japanese elements," and "to ban performances". They also sent plainclothes spies to monitor Chen Boer and her followers every day.

The consolation group was stranded in Beiping for a time. Chen Boer "used her reputation and influence" and "with the help of students from various universities such as Tsinghua University, Yanjing University, Peking University, and Peking Normal University, she finally performed successfully in the auditorium of Yanjing University. The audience was more than a thousand people and the atmosphere in the theater was extremely enthusiastic." (J. Cheng 27). The "reputation" in this case was still Chen Boer's fame as a movie star. No matter how much Chen Boer herself avoided her star status, local newspapers and magazines—such as *Yanda Yousheng*, edited and published by the alumni section of Yanjing University—would always introduce and publicize her activities with the title "Movie Star". The specific content of these events always included autographs and stage performances. ("Xiaowen: mingxiao" 20-21). A large percentage of the young students at various universities who responded positively to Chen Boer were themselves her fans.

Chen Boer's practice revealed the enormous potential of the mixed group of "celebrity fans and revolutionary masses", and her mastery of this demagogic power soon won her the approval of the Chinese Communist Party. After officially becoming a member of the Party, she was appointed to organize the "Observation Group of Women and Children in the War Zone". From 1938 to the end of 1939, she visited and inspected the lives of women and children in the war zone in North China, while engaging in activities to educate the people to fight against the Japanese. Chen Boer

carried out a lot of work in the local area, actively participating in and setting up various organizations such as cadre meetings, Democratic League organizations, anti-enemy support associations, childcare associations, sympathy associations, and Woman's Representative Assembly. If previously Chen Boer's approach was to politicize star fans as a medium and spearhead for political enlightenment and practice among the larger general public, Chen Boer is now reaching directly into the general public and fanizing them. The object of admiration for "new fans" was not only a movie star but also a revolutionary leader; their stage had also shifted from the metropolitan areas of the past to the remote rural areas of the pre-war era.

The practice of Chen Boer, who became a member of the Party, was clearly more ideologically propagandistic, and therefore more subtle and dangerous. Nonetheless, the same specific concern for the survival of the general public kept her intention of mass enlightenment intact. Chen Boer repeatedly emphasized that "mobilizing women throughout China to fight the war was not only for "national revival" but also for "women's own liberation". ("Chen Boer cong zhendi" 10-11). In other words, same as Chen Yumei, Chen Boer also used the elastic concept of the "saving the nation" as an all-purpose signifier to include other targets of activism. She noted that through the organizational mobilization of the resistance, in rural North China, "the men all joined the Farmers' Salvation Association, the women joined the Women's Salvation Association, the older boys were in the Youth Salvation Association, and the younger boys were in the Children's League, all living in their own groups, such families, no doubt, gradually relieved women from family oppression". (B. Chen "Sange xiaojiao" 15). The examples of "three foot-binding women" at the Third Congress of the Jin-Cha-Ji Women's Anti-Japanese Salvation Association vividly described how local rural women perceived the liberation brought to them by the "national salvation movement".

Before the war, I was so damned stupid. I don't know what it means to be a "human being", but today I see that my life in the past was no different from that of livestock. At that time, I served my in-laws and husband all day long, raised my children, cooked, washed, and mended. It was so busy that you didn't look like a human being anymore, and you weren't allowed to think about yourself. The war fought so well that many women became like human beings...The war between China and Japan has changed the minds of country women, and we country people know things that we never knew... This also allows us, country women, to have

our day, otherwise, we can't even be considered as Chinese... For example, we join the Women's Salvation Association and get our hands on anti-Japanese work...we are equal at home first. The husband, anyway, also participates in the Agricultural Salvation Association. This at least helps the wife to lift the inequality of the family ...our status has been improved, and the wife who cook meals and raises children also has a relationship with the state. No one calls me "old woman" anymore, but always the director and minister. (B. Chen "Sange xiaojiao" 16-17)

At this conference, Chen Boer also passed the "Linking Women in the Front and Back" proposal. From the beginning, Chen Boer sent back to the rear a great deal of information obtained from her visits and expeditions and published official reports of all their work and that of local organizations in various newspapers and publications in the rear. In one letter, Chen Boer recorded: "All the women's groups along the way welcome us warmly because they miss the rear so much. They repeatedly speak of the leaders of the women's community in the rear and ask us to convey their sentiments. This letter also represents the women of the entire North China war zone and sends you the highest salute of the national revolution!" ("Chen Boer cong zhandi" 10-11). The second delegate and the third delegate had a clearer statement about the changing status of women in society during the war, as well as the process of constructing a public sphere that promotes the female experience exchange and emancipation:

Chen Boer and her comrades come from the rear, which make me feel that women all over China are mobilizing against the Japanese...the "women's sisters" in the rear care for the "women's sisters" in the front...women in the war have to have close contact with the front and the rear, and women have to be united ...Our women in North China have been liberated and have become free, and no one in the village could see anyone wrapped around their feet anymore. We can see women's activities everywhere, working lively, running the mountain roads for publicity, a walk of 70 to 80 kilometers is nothing ... We should ask a few comrades of the delegation to tell the sisters in the rear of these circumstances ... (B. Chen "Sange xiaojiao" 19)

People always say that women are inferior to men, and I am very angry to hear this. Women have been imprisoned for thousands of years...but today women are coming out to do national affairs, doing things that are not inferior to men, and breaking the eyes of those who have always looked down on women...we must rise from the bottom, fight for the cause of women's own liberation, speak for women... Your arrival has made even those of us who only know how to do our work all day raise our heads and look around at the big picture. We know that women in the front and rear should be closely connected to promote strength and exchange valuable experiences with each other. Please make this communication this time! (B. Chen "Sange xiaojiao" 20)

Chen Boer's interviewees appreciated the political information and practices she provided about the film world and the rear in general, so they offered some of their own information and practices in return. To enlighten and mobilize women in the war zone and to guide and involve women in the rear (including fans), during the war, Chen Boer and her followers were devoted to connecting women on both the front and rear, "forming a great unity of women", achieving women's liberation in the name of patriotism. Acting as a bridge between the two sides, the practice of Chen Boer and her group fulfilled many public sphere functions, framing the arena for exchanging information, conveying values and ideas, forming and advocating opinions, and taking political action. Chen Boer and her group's practices made them a medium for the public sphere. It is as if a star is a form of cultural and political currency that can carry the messages to many who would not otherwise hear them and that can channel and set off people's emotional and behavioral investments. Of course, Chen Boer's work was not always successful; she described herself as having spent half of their recent arrival in the Northwest on the run and waiting. ("Chen Boer cong zhendi" 10). Chen Boer and others had to cross between the various war zones and the front and back, but at the same time, they led the masses of people on the front and back through the war front blockade.

The active participation and self-emancipation of rural women in the "national salvation movement" were still similar to that of the "fans" she attracted and organized to participate in the salvation activities before. As a movie star, even though Chen Boer never mentioned the specific circumstances of the movie or the performance in the article, she was still promoting and enlightening the importance of saving the country from the war by teaching singing and acting. The

vernacular composite form of “anti-Japanese propaganda” and film and theater performances was the same for both urban and rural audiences, who were caught in a strange overlap of celebrity entertainment with political activism. The space of their collective behavior and experience was still filled with the great energy of individual worship and sensualism. Here, stars and the general public, including fans acquired a new political identity as comrades of the revolutionary cause.

While there was a long tradition of the political activity of stars, being too political can destroy their careers. Around 1937, newspapers published news that Chen Boer might “give up her star position for the “patriotic cause.” (“Chen Boer reyu aiguo” 3). I examined Chen Boer’s political activities and beliefs at the height of her stardom and ended when she temporarily halted her film career to study in Yan’an, for she then became a revolutionary rather than a film star. Neither Chen Boer nor Chan Yumei discussed in this section represents a complete history of film politics. Other politically engaged stars are worthy of study, and many of their fans and followers have made brief appearances in this exaggerated and exciting history.

The proletarian public sphere based on the star system modeled and encouraged emotional statements and exchanges. It relied on the power of vernacular modernity to offer new possibilities for the public space of the city, for many cultural, political, and social issues in the process of modernization. And its practice in turn provided a perceptual-responsive field of vernacular modernity that could be shared by the public. A public sphere was formed where popular entertainment and social change intermingled, personal worship and public politics intersected, and political propaganda and democratic enlightenment reconciled.

Moreover, although this chapter discusses the formation and transformation of the proletarian public sphere based on the star system with a focus on star fans, its influence and scope are by no means limited to within fans. I wish to emphasize that the spaces where fans gather as well as the discourses informed by fandom discussed in this chapter are on the one hand a kind of proletarian public sphere, and on the other hand their experiences there can influence the more general discourse and contribute to the larger proletarian public sphere. This is not surprising, since fans are themselves part of the general public, despite their fervent and constant attention to the stars makes them agents and pioneers of enlightenment and practice for the general public; the general public, at the same time, can become fans of the stars at any time, whether fascinated by their artistic

expression, lifestyle, modern spirit, or their political images. In the first section, we learned how passionate fans affect the perceptions and experiences of their “non-fan” family, friends, and even the general population around them. These changes in perceptions at the level of everyday life are the amplifying effects of mass enlightenment and discourse. In the second section, we can identify the challenges that fan organizations have launched to news and academic discourse. The significance of these gradually formed and expanded mass discourses is not limited to the scope of movie fans, but also has an impact on the film world as a whole and even in society. In the third section, we can discover the contribution of celebrity fans to the political discourse. They act as a kind of catalyst and amplifier, on the one hand, helping and supporting the stars as a medium of political engagement to reach out to the countryside and war zones and to influence the broader public; on the other hand, along with the movie stars becoming political stars, the popularization of the fandom, or the fanization of the general public, proves that the “fan” has become a new social role and the empirical subject of the political public sphere.

Conclusion

Encompassing the contextualization in the complex network of vernacular modernism/modernity and historical practice associated with cinema as a sensory reflexive horizon, this dissertation proposes a revisionist history of Chinese cinema from the 1890s to 1930s by pursuing questions of the constitution and transformation of the mass/oppositional public sphere.

Employing the method of historical textual analysis, this dissertation focuses on the assembling process of the public—“mass groups” that are pervasive in Chinese cinema, including film readers, viewers, and fans—as the subject of different levels of the public sphere. Chapter 1 examines the conscious and representational public sphere constructed by film publishing, in which heterogeneous film readers can participate. On this basis, Chapter 2 argues that film viewing offers a form of engagement of more physical interactivity and exhibitionist immediacy. This engagement is freer from the constraints of textual form than film publishing and allows subjects in the public sphere to shuttle between representational space and reality. Based on the conclusion in the previous chapter that the film spectator’s experience, while extending to social reality, still depends on the dimensions of consciousness, Chapter 3 ventures into the experiences and practices of fandom generated outside of film texts and viewing. It depicts a sensory-reflexive field in a different cultural time and space, which is beyond the dimension of cinema as a representational space.

Therefore, my dissertation examines the film public sphere in chapter order on two spirally progressive levels: the representational space and the physical and social reality at the corporeal level. It explores the relationship between cultural projects, political institutions, and social activism. The findings suggest that experiential exchanges available to the public are not always convergent. They are placed by literary genres, filmmakers, stars, and other media practitioners in a mixture of diverse elements: The sensory material comforts enable radically alternative modes of knowledge transmission and modernity enlightenment, while being subject to Patriotism and Nationalism, and imbricated with traditional values. Furthermore, the film public sphere exhibits a recurring interest in molding sensory experiences for particular political commitments.

Through my discussion of these practices, I begin by noting that cinema is capable of constructing a public sphere for the masses because it recovers many elements of experience,

implicating the immediacy of the senses and the immediate effects of emotion. Its appeal often lies in the way it opens up and expands various unknown modes of perceptual and visual experience, as well as its ability to reconfigure indigenous or everyday experiences for modernity. This mass-mediated mode of experience is performative and productive, evoking more instinctive response than contemplative rationality.

For example, the appeal of cinema publishing to a mass audience derives primarily from the exhibitionist and sensual material pleasures of portraits, film stills, advertisements, etc. The neo-sensationalist film magazine is a typical example. Meanwhile, it also relies on the effect of “touching the heart” from the traditional ethical system and the emotional support of “interpersonal relationship” and “national characteristics”, which is represented by the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school. Similarly, the movie-going experience provides a field full of “bodily and exhibitionist spectacles” and sensual stimulation, of which nude movies are a typical example. Acceptance of these exhibitionist spectacles sometimes relies on nostalgia for traditional beliefs, such as the audience’s acceptance of early spectacle films that fully mobilized their imagination of traditional “Taoist immortals” in their minds. Finally, the fatal attraction of stars to film fans also comes from the cult and imagination inspired by the intimate relationship between the two, as well as the myth of sensual material enjoyment created by consumerism and capitalism. The left-wing discourse that has always permeated or paralleled these cultural practices, despite calling for a scientific and rational transformation of popular values and ideologies, has in fact always used inflammatory sentiments and overreaching “performance” tactics.

Secondly, this dissertation shows that the cinema’s recovery of many elements of experience and the production of new forms of perception provided a potential, semi-autonomous, and optional space of experience. It leaves ample room for different forms of interpretation, allowing for the participation of a heterogeneous public and the expression of their particular interests and fantasies. It allows the public to perceive non-identity and heterogeneity and gain the liberation of the field of sensory experience, thus making it possible to portray a world that is different from the status quo. This is precisely the most important issue of the proletarian public sphere. In other words, for the excitement and alienation of modern life, the film public sphere has the dual effect of simultaneously reflecting and detoxifying. By creating this new sensory mechanism, cinema is able to translate, mix and recreate discourses about modernity and enlightenment. It provides the public with a field of

pluralistic identification, thus fostering in the public the cognitive capacity to change its own destiny and the world. For example, film magazines, films, and film actresses provided women with unprecedented opportunities to imagine and become the “new woman,” promoting women’s self-enlightenment and rebellion against the extremely unequal family and social order. Including these women, these cinematic cultural practices also enabled more children, students, workers, and intellectuals to renew their social perceptions, awaken their political consciousness, and join the cause of democracy and national revolution.

The foregoing extrapolation leads us to further conclude that the formation of the public sphere no longer appealed to traditional ideas and rhetoric of enlightenment. Rather, it shifts the focus from the spiritual to the corporeal, from the individual to the collective, and from sublime beliefs to secular passions. Nor did it depend on grand, intermittent, festive forms such as intellectual debates, marches, workers’ marches, or student movements. It relied on the formation of a field of perceptual experience in everyday life: the circulation of sensory devices, and the proliferation of immediate experience among human beings, becomes a prerequisite for real social change. This public sphere was characterized by an unprecedented number and visibility of women, and an incredible exchange and collision of bourgeois intellectuals, so-called petty citizens, and ordinary people.

In other words, if cinema succeeds in constructing a public sphere for the masses, it does so because it provides a heterogeneous mass with a reflective vision that allowed people to imagine, experience, and create different strategies for survival within the general context of everyday life. Its realization of enlightenment, discourse construction, and social change does not require the ability to read things and events rationally, regarding them as symbols and images that are detached from daily life. Rather, it requires illusion, time, memory, emotion, imagination, and nonverbal interaction driven by perceptions and bodily sensations rooted in indigeneity and everyday life. Through the recovery of human faculties through technology and media, cinema gives new forms of expression and meaning to human beings under the pernicious influence of industrial capitalism and consumerism that dissolves humanity.

In conclusion, early cinema was the product of an entanglement between multiple forces. Its recreation of complex everyday experiences—including the uncanny combination of stimulating sensory material forms and nostalgic traditional indigenous elements with the strong convictions of the Enlightenment and revolution—challenged the taboos of modernist enlightenment discourse and

the bourgeois public sphere. It changed not only the criteria for deciding which experiences could be included in the public sphere and which remained in the private sphere but also gave rise to a new set of collective subjectivities. It is in this sense that we can say that cinema constructs a proletarian public sphere. The cinematic manifestation of the proletarian public sphere not only informs us of the content of modern public life that the cinema captures but also, more importantly, determines specific forms of communication and politics that the masses can understand and grasp. It defies any rigid boundaries between “high” and “low,” elite politics and mass culture, rational enlightenment and sensory entertainment, the modern and the traditional, and, finally, the culturally specific and the globally oriented.

More importantly, the possibility of such a cinematic public sphere, as revealed in this dissertation, suggests the necessity of rewriting the history of Chinese cinema to date. As mentioned in the Introduction, the project of rewriting the history of cinema has gradually gained a wide response in recent years. It is under the call of such a “re-writing” project that this study takes Hansen and Kluge’s research as a clue to put Shanghai cinema under the analytical gaze once again.

From the perspective of “rewriting film history”, my project focusing on the construction and transformation of the film public sphere bears three objectives: 1) to traverse the dichotomy between left-wing and non-left-wing cinema and the evolutionary conception of history resulting from this dichotomy still haunts present film historiography; 2) to explore the essential duality of cinema and its concrete historical manifestations; and 3) to contribute to the integration of theory and history of spectatorship and film culture. My project, hence, does not suggest a linear development history of cinema, but to the contrary, complicates the history of Chinese cinema.

First, I would like to begin with a brief introduction to the regrettable dichotomy between left-wing and non-left-wing cinema. In the official accounts of Chinese cinema, the left-wing film practice is rightfully considered progressive, modern, rational, serious, and instructive. As a refined art, it exhibits a striking homogeneity and oneness, committed to enlightenment, social criticism, and democratic revolution. On the other hand, the practice of non-left-wing cinema, even if it was highly successful at the time and developed a unique style of film theme and content, is not given due attention, but is severely denigrated and construed as inferior in the evolutionary chain of film culture, social and political history. It not only represents a lower aesthetic value but is also linked to the “pre-Liberation” and hence objectionable political and social system, such as semi-colonial

and semi-feudal society or Western capitalism and imperialism; without the Party's leadership, it conjures up meanings of cultural decadence, social degradation (vulgar, low brow, and over-indulgence in joy). Typical of this is the canonical yet by now much-criticized *The History of the Development of Chinese Cinema* published in 1963⁷⁷.

Their opinions have since been modified by a number of researchers⁷⁸. The efforts to rewrite film history so far have indeed unearthed neglected areas of research. Non-left-wing films have received certain attention, and both left-wing and non-left-wing films were re-evaluated. However, the dualistic historical consciousness and the internal division between left-wing and non-left-wing films are left essentially intact. The hegemony of left-wing films in terms of enlightenment, social criticism, and democratic revolution, or more broadly, politics, has not been completely reversed. As a consequence, the due attention to both kinds of cinema is undercut by their difficulty in engaging with both the political interest of non-left-wing cinema and the recreational interest of left-wing cinema, as well as the historical connection between them.

However, as made clear in this dissertation, what cinema offered was a public sphere of enlightenment with mixed elements. It is rooted in the new and immediate modes of perception (somatic, sensorial, material comforts, and emotional turmoil), the translatability and communicability of the novel relationship between body and technology, and the fragmented experience of urban life, as well as a localized response and deep reflection on all of the above. This multifaceted film culture constitutes a new perceptible world that allows people to find a passageway to modernity and publicness even in their everyday lives. Thus, the various oppositions extending from the dichotomy between left-wing and non-left-wing films, including enlightenment and entertainment, public politics and everyday life, revolution and commerce, refined and vulgar, modern and traditional, serious content and exhibitionist forms, as well as rational thinking and sensual enjoyment, may not be absolutely valid.

⁷⁷ See Cheng Jihua et al.

⁷⁸ The book *Dianying/Electric Shadow* written by Jay Leyda in 1972, is the earliest monograph on Chinese film history to question orthodox film history. In his book, Leyda has a conversation with Cheng Jihua. As to why the film activities in Shanghai and Northeast China after the Japanese occupation were not recorded in detail in the history of Chinese film development, Cheng Jihua believed that these "puppet films" are the product of collaboration between the Japanese imperialist invasion and a small group of traitors: "these films completely have violated the Anti-Japanese and patriotic spirit of the Chinese people at that time. In the pile of national defense films, these films should be condemned by every effort. They don't deserve to have their names in Chinese film history. This is a matter of principle (Leyda 139)". To this, Leyda responds: "I can accept condemnation, but I can't accept silence" (139). Leyda's work, as an ambitious exercise, has generated widespread interest in early Chinese film studies. For more studies of early Chinese cinema see Pickowicz; Lee; Y. Zhang; N. Ma *From Allegorical Nation to Generic Republic*.

Moreover, the strict distinction between left-wing cinema and other films is becoming blurred. My exploration proves that on the one hand, the left-wing film discourse also has demands for direct sensation (physical, sensory, material). Its use of traditional and national discourse, as well as its advocacy of radical action and emotional incitement of the masses, go far beyond the definition of left-wing film practices as a purely “scientific, rational, and refined art”. Yet, these elements have often been interpreted by previous film historiography as occasional “breaks” and “fragments” that can be overlooked when emphasizing the coherence and homogeneity of left-wing cinema. On the other hand, non-left-wing cinema also has the potential to stimulate an awakening of consciousness from sensory enjoyment and can equally contribute to mass enlightenment and democratic revolution. As a hybrid practice, or an interactive and fluctuating “continuum” composed of different vernacular styles, non-left-wing films and left-wing films actually have something in common in terms of composition and function, only the degree to which various elements are represented differs. Whether in the treatment of left-wing or non-left-wing films, interests such as political enlightenment and popular entertainment should not be regarded as disjunctive or irrelevant.

As a result, the evolutionary conception of history based on the distinction between left-wing and non-left-wing cinema has been turned on its head. In standard Chinese film historiography, the trajectory of the early film industry is clear, with an endpoint of reaching a “state of maturity” like that of left-wing cinema. However, once the heterogeneous masses were engaged, the sites of experience burst into uncontrollable tension. The so-called refined art and contemplative enlightenment created by left-wing cinema were not the inevitable fate of the medium. Cinema fluctuated between the two ends of history assumed by standard film historiography. Therefore, I try to illustrate Shanghai cinema from the 1890s to the 1930s through a set of perpetual dialogues. Dialogues are not only the exchange of experiences in the formation process of collective subjectivity in the public sphere, but also refer to the coordination of a set of conflicts: the emergence of a horizon of the social experience thwarted any attempt to create a higher standard for cinema, to draw a division among high modernism, popular culture, and elite politics within cinema.

This also brings to light the second question of rewriting film history: to re-establish the intrinsic duality of cinema by breaking down its internal dichotomy. Along with the dissolution of the oversimplified opposition between left-wing and non-left-wing cinema, I would like to show that there are two sides to any cinema: as an entertainment media with innovative sensory and

discursive mechanisms, it is capable of innovatively expressing and embracing modernity and publicness, while, as a profit-seeking industry (business), it may be complicit in political propaganda and a prop of mass deception. In fact, it is precisely because the two functional properties of cinema have always been inextricably tangled, but the dominant historiographical narratives and evaluations have been heavily colored in favor of the later victors—attributing the positive features to the left-wing cinema but the negative ones to early cinema and non-left-wing cinema—that I emphasize the necessity of seeking positive meanings of early cinema. This does not mean, however, that the negative aspects of early cinema do not exist. Whether enlightened, revolutionary, and democratic, or didactic, ideological, and propagandistic, it is too arbitrary to split politics and entertainment along the partition between left-wing and non-left-wing films.

In this dissertation, we can find that film publishing, film viewing, and the practice of stardom did contribute to the promotion of democratic politics, women's emancipation, and social revolution, but also with the implication of ideological propaganda, the pitfalls of consumerism and commodity society, and the appeasement of traditional ethical and moral systems. In other words, although I argue that cinema is a medium of modernity and publicity, a cultural and political currency, transmitting messages to the general public and directing their emotional and behavioral investments, there are situations in which this currency is not exchangeable, or not fully so. For example, the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies school of film magazines and spectacle films renewed people's worldviews but also offered nostalgia for Confucianism, Taoism, and other secular beliefs. The neo-sensationalist film magazines, nude films, and the myth of stardom promoted female enlightenment, but the dangers of commodification and sexual objectification of women were also evident. These may be understood as translated modernity, which emphasizes the conscious negotiation of local institutions with the forces of Western presence, but we cannot deny the possibility that it may evolve into a more negative conservatism. While the localization and acceptance of Western modernity are overwhelming, the upsurge of nationalism still triggers certain rejection and resistance to it. The statism-based New Life Movement's discipline of the "New Woman" is one example.

Meanwhile, this currency may devalue local cultural products and destroy their social and political climate. As serious, refined art, the continuity of tradition, and the politics of rational enlightenment in their infancy are replaced by the hedonism, consumption, and approachability of

cinema. While this currency does hold appeal to great numbers of the filmgoing public, in its complicity with ideological propaganda, it risks devolving into a crisis of fascist mobilization, instead of being active and oppositional sites for consultation and subversion. This tendency is demonstrated, for example, by the diverse left-wing discourse that orchestrated a series of actions unwittingly tainted with political propaganda. The radical women's liberation movement inspired by nude films was quickly appropriated by this propaganda. With those overly abstract and grandiose slogans, the cause of women's liberation was easily suppressed and merged by the national revolutionary discourse, eventually devolving into violence that backfired on itself. Fandom practices that resonate directly or indirectly with political and ideological propaganda are also under threat. Those exciting "revolutionary causes" are in some cases wonderful "political propaganda disguises", used by specific political parties without the public's knowledge.

This duality of cinema, although not fully acknowledged in the study of Shanghai film history due to the opposition between left-wing and non-left-wing films, is in fact not new to us. Benjamin, who was optimistic about mass culture, emphasized in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" the "redeeming significance" of replacing the aestheticization of politics with the politicization of art of mass culture such as film. But at the same time, he also showed his anxiety about the negative phenomena of violence, fragmentation, and flatness of popular culture⁷⁹. In contrast, Adorno, who was more critical of mass culture, established the cultural industry theory in his *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which criticized the mass manipulation/mass deception function of cinema. However, "Composing for the Films," co-authored with Hanns Eisler, and "Transparencies on Film," a critical essay inspired by Kluge's film practice, both pointed to the potential for critical reflection even in mass media based on reproduction technologies, recognizing the aesthetic value of "the re-creation of concretizing the subjective form of experience through technology"⁸⁰.

Then, in the more direct theoretical basis of this dissertation, Negt and Kluge's research, this "duality" can be summarized as the twin concepts of the "proletarian public sphere" and the "public sphere of production". As Adorno's disciples and third-generation scholars of the Frankfurt school, they organized and continued the insights on popular culture of Benjamin and Adorno, the first

⁷⁹ See Benjamin, "The Work of Art".

⁸⁰ See Adorno and Levin; Adorno and Eisler.

generation of Frankfurt representatives, in their theoretical works as a critical response to the public sphere theory of Habermas, the second generation of the school. As mentioned in the Introduction, in response to Habermas, Negt and Kluge first expanded the concept of the public sphere from “the public space formed by citizens’ acts of communication with each other” to “the social horizon of experience” that included the “context of living” of corporations, families, and the general public’s consciousness (1). Negt and Kluge argued that the bourgeois public sphere in the 20th century had lost its former status and was shrinking. Therefore, it became urgent to reconceptualize the public sphere in light of the material conditions and social environment of the modern world. The ultimate answer given by Negt and Kluge is the proletarian public sphere, which is also the subject of this dissertation.

To explain the proletarian public sphere more clearly, Negt and Kluge propose a mediating and contrasting concept, the public sphere of production. According to Negt and Kluge’s interpretation, with the shrinking of the bourgeois public sphere, it is the public sphere of production that at first inherits the hegemony of the former. Instead of relying on exclusionary mechanisms based on the division between “public” and “private,” it unifies all things in a single, all-encompassing system through the hidden means of production, circulation, and consumption. This public sphere of production, constructed by commercial, productive interests, dominates every corner of mass life; the consciousness industry processes people’s lived experiences as raw materials to produce standardized, automated patterns of thought/behavior. In the consumption of the pseudo experiences supplied day after day, the individual, who should be the subject of experience, is deprived of the possibility of self-expression and the opportunity of self-knowledge. Specifically, it is the mass media such as movies and television that assume this ideological function of “legitimizing the existing system of domination” and “blunting and paralyzing the mass perception”.

Such a critique is in line with Adorno’s theory of the cultural industry and the latter half of Habermas’s theory of the public sphere. However, Negt and Kluge do not end their argument with a thoroughgoing critique of mass media such as film, as the two mentioned above do. On the contrary, they argue that products can be attacked only with counter-products (103) and that the only thing that can defeat the consciousness industry is the consciousness industry itself. The key to reconstructing the public sphere is by no means a revival of the ideal bourgeois public sphere and the idea of rational enlightenment. Rather, the perception of the masses surrounded by the techno-

media of the consciousness industry must likewise be retaken through its counterpart, the techno-media with the masses as its subject.

That is to say, in the existing situation, one must use the productive institutions and powerful mechanisms of the public sphere of production itself to re-weave “the social horizon of experience” and transform it into the “oppositional public sphere”, i.e., “proletarian public sphere” by recovering a series of concrete elements of experience such as “memory, imagination, and emotion” (detailed in the Introduction by drawing on Hansen’s vernacular modernism/modernity). In other words, the more hegemonic the “status quo” is in the “here and now,” the only thing that can resist and critique it is the equally powerful counterpart. What we need to do is to dialectically reverse the desperate and broken medium into a utopian medium that foreshadows a new world. This is the so-called “redemption of the medium”.

A counter-public sphere that is based on ideas and discourses with progressive content cannot develop effective weapons against the combined elements of illusion, the public sphere, and public power. In this situation, the compensations that the classical bourgeois public sphere possessed, as compared with the public power relations, become increasingly ineffective. The only antidotes to the production of the illusory public sphere are the counter products of a proletarian public sphere: idea against idea, product against product, production sector against production sector. It is impossible to grasp in any other way the permanently changing forms that social power takes on in its fluctuations between capitalist production, illusory public sphere, and public power monopoly. (Negt and Kluge 79-80)

Such a theoretical foundation fundamentally explains why we cannot talk positively about cinema as the proletarian public sphere in a completely positive way. This is because the proletarian public sphere itself is metamorphosed from its inherently negative effects of consciousness industry and popular culture. Thus, in discussing the proletarian public sphere, my theme is about how cinema within the capitalist system of production was transformed into a perception medium for experiencing the other things; how it gained the possibility of salvation from the negativity and decadence of mass culture; how some utopian ideas of democracy or changes became a reality in what is even considered the negative historical situation and mediating conditions of a given

moment. My discourse naturally encompasses certain negative effects of cinema as the public sphere of production, both as a context for the emergence of the proletarian public sphere and as the degenerate form after its turn.

The duality of cinema, mass media, and the public sphere allows us to dissect the history of early Shanghai cinema in a more complex way. This is precisely why I have chosen to base the entire dissertation on Negt and Kluge's theory and, as an extension of it, Hansen's approach, among the numerous attempts to revise these histories. Therefore, what I tell is not an oversimplified story, nor is my rewriting of Shanghai's film history merely the "opposite" of the traditional "authentic history". Rather, this dissertation borrows from vernacular modernism and the theory of the public sphere to examine film culture in early mid-twentieth-century Shanghai, both to recreate some cultural phenomena that have been underappreciated in the past and to highlight the duality of film culture. My dissertation demonstrates that film history does not unfold linearly, but advances in the intertwining of multiple forces; it involves both direct correlations and divergences with publicness, modernity, or modernization processes.

A more historically informed study is accomplished in my dissertation to make up for the regret of Kluge's and Hansen's studies. At the same time, it highlights the third significance of this dissertation in rewriting the history of Shanghai cinema using the theory of the public sphere: to contribute to the integration of theory and history.

In recent years, theoretical and historical approaches in Chinese film studies have become increasingly polarized. On the one hand, some scholars take great pains to find the uniqueness and locality of Chinese film history, focusing on minor details and individual exceptions. They painstakingly try to prove that Chinese filmmakers have developed their own traditions beyond or apart from Hollywood influence: the aforementioned reverence for left-wing cinema in film historiography is also an attempt to explore a unique "Chineseness". On the other hand, some scholars tend to place Chinese film history in a global context, writing and explaining history with universal development theory. Emphasizing transnationality, these studies seek to move away from national and nationalist perspectives to rewrite film history, and to restore the suppressed voice and lost memory of the past⁸¹.

⁸¹ Rey Chow, for example, constructs several groups of opposite concepts, such as "Eastern /Western" and "cultural research / theoretical criticism" in her influential research. She believes that "eastern" and "cultural studies" are

These practices have led to the dilemma of rewriting the history of Chinese cinema. The former has been regarded as the evocation of “nationalism” of “Greater China”, especially in American and Canadian academia⁸². They argue that behind the habitual infatuation with “historicity” or “Chineseness”, there is a kind of cultural centralism, specifically, Chinalism, which marks an imaginary boundary between China and the rest of the world. In other words, it is a kind of unabashed sinochauvinism, showing the “Fascist arrogance and self-expansion and suffering from serious self-infatuation and arrogance of Greater China” (*Woman and Chinese Modernity* xvi). While the latter has led to the criticism of “American centrism” and “deconstructing the subject of the nation-state” in Chinese film research and historical narration (Lu et al. 46-54). The blind spot of these studies is the little attention to the Chinese research results of the research subjects. They are quite dissatisfied with the empirical methodology and consider the exploration of theory to be more delicate and worthy of esteem than the empirical analysis of data, facts, and texts. This neglect or deliberate rejection is one of the reasons for the bias in these studies.

These contradictions hovering over the opposition between theory and history undermine the objectivity and integrity of research. However, an either/or choice between cultural research/theoretical criticism, history/theory Eastern/Western, nationalism/cosmopolitanism, and particularity/universality seems unnecessary. Instead, the common merit of Kluge’s theory of the public sphere and Hansen’s theory of vernacular modernity utilized in this dissertation is that it not only allows but demands us to pay sufficient attention to the local social and cultural context. This allows me to extend the theoretical concerns of both to a deeper historical level, and to all aspects of life in the 1890s-1930s. At the same time, when I use an extraterritorially generated theory to analyze a given culture, I am able to provide a new perspective on the object of study and reveal problems that localized interpretations are reluctant to address or difficult to notice. New areas of research have opened up with the conjoining of theoretical and historical research methodologies.

In other words, I have attempted a study that better balances theoretical insight and historicity. My research builds on a direction of scholarship in the Western theory, which I hope to converse with from a particular non-Western specific historical perspective. This alternative genealogy of Chinese cinema thus spans a variety of distinctions, in terms of not only the cross-border interactions

special, rooted in specific history and culture, and burdened by them, while “western” and “theoretical criticism” are universal, transcendent, imaginative, and insightful. See Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity* xvi.

⁸² See Mitsuyo 100.

in film culture but also the historical context and current theoretical frameworks that situate our studies. It leads us to the following conclusions: modernity or modernist culture as a symptom of global culture has undoubtedly had an impact on Shanghai, China as well. However, as a vernacular modernity and a proletarian public sphere, it relies on a mode of creation and reception based on mass media that is both constrained by a specific local context and synchronized with the history of Western reception. It tells us that the enlightenment practice of Shanghai cinema is neither entirely based on nationalist imagination nor fully in line with the assumptions of Western theory. This history sometimes parallels and sometimes intersects with philosophical theories about the journey that modernity took in the era of industrial capitalism in the world context and presents it concretely.

Finally, the limitations of the current study need to be acknowledged. First, due to the constraints of the topic, I do not discuss the public sphere of production systematically and specifically in my dissertation. Rather, it is integrated into a discussion of the context, process, and transformation of the construction of the proletarian/ oppositional public sphere. One reason is that in the theoretical framework of this dissertation, it is as mentioned above, an intermediate or degenerate form, rather than the final form that should be pursued. The second reason is related to the focus of prior research. Negative historical narratives of early cinema have been relatively common in the study of Chinese cinema. Therefore, my emphasis on the two sides of cinema is intended not to ignore the negative effects, but this does not mean that it is to be explored as the subject of this dissertation. Beyond this, the study of film history involves a vast scope and a large body of material, some aspects of which are also inevitably not discussed or covered in detail in this study. This is also because these elements are not closely related to the theme of this dissertation, the reception of modernity, or the construction of the public sphere. Nonetheless, it is important to re-emphasize that this study in no way proves the theoretical view of the film public sphere through selective historical elaboration.

There is a more practical reason why this history is incomplete. Many firsthand materials, such as film publications and original films, were lost in history, and many precious sources are not allowed to be viewed or read. The reception and evaluation of film culture by readers, audiences, and fans should be further explored along with further excavation of future materials on the film culture in the Republican period. For example, although the readers' section of magazines is a good window into readers' reactions, such reactions remain more within the space of representation and

sometimes still require some kind of psychoanalytic assumptions. Some representative examples prove that the interactions between audiences and films in cinemas and the exchange of experiences on and off the screen are real and extend to multiple dimensions of reality. However, those collective behaviors and certain organizations of audiences outside the theater are not discussed in detail. The collective subjectivity and public practices of fans are the most concrete and historical, yet although fan writing is used as the richest source of information about these conditions, some of the letters published in magazines are not entirely reliable, as magazine editors may have crafted them. Although the exchange of experiences at the level of consciousness is one of the research categories in the proletarian public sphere, as future historical materials are discovered and made public, it may be possible to take this study deeper into the level of historical and social reality and to discuss in more detail how they illuminate each other.

In addition, research based on the public sphere theoretical framework offers many broader perspectives that are not discussed in detail because they are beyond the scope and capacity of this dissertation. This relates to the generalizability of this theory. Neither the proletarian public sphere nor the public sphere of production that follows has ever been limited to cinema. For example, the technological-mass media that Kluge has discussed and practiced alone include television and digital media. Kluge has argued that it is television that has become the new mainstream “medium of sense perception” (Negt and Kluge 101) with the development of modern society, and it is only natural that it should be the focus of discussion.

In fact, whether it is film or television, the medium that most decisively prescribes and defines the perceptual experience of the public at a given time and place is the key to a public sphere that has been radically redefined by “mass media”. In the 1930s it was cinema, after the 1980s it might be television, and at present, it may be, for example, digital network technology. The role of these media need not even be too clearly distinguished in some contexts; they can act as an all-encompassing web that together constructs the perceptual world of the modern world. In other words, the vision of reconstructing the public sphere offered by Kluge is not oriented only toward the past or a particular era. Rather, his theory encourages us to follow the trends of the times and the media to discover the “products” of the new forms of the industry of consciousness that dominate people’s lives and to use them as clues to create and update versions of “counter-products” with the potential for resistance.

This public sphere theory of media that can be adapted to different historical and contemporary contexts has full vitality. Not surprisingly, it has not only validity across time, but also a transboundary appeal. In the current era of digital networks, the role of the consciousness industry more easily transcends national and geographical constraints. They circulate in the international market as “commodities” and more frequently give rise to a variety of complex “translation” practices, despite the misunderstandings and misconceptions that may accompany them. The space of the public sphere nurtured by technology-mediated means is expanding along with the changes in media and technology. For instance, the recent concept of “Metaverse” depicts a virtual world constructed by digital technology that maps or transcends the real world and can interact with it. The future public living space constructed by such a powerful and vivid “consciousness industry” may be the new subject of the public sphere of proletariat/production.

In other words, the issue of the new public sphere may not be just about Shanghai/Cinema but about the World/Mass Media. Wherever in the world, by whatever means, if a certain technical medium acts universally on the masses in a given context, the dialectical public sphere bred by it will define the realm of people’s experience and perception. On the one hand, it shares with everyone the vicarious satisfaction gained through the pseudo experience of the consciousness industry, and on the other hand, it contains the opportunity for social change. Wrapped in the iterations of technology and media and the changing times and social environment, what we need to keep looking for is how to find opportunities for renewal in the decaying ruins. These are the issues to be solved in the future.

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