


Shen and Cinema in 1930s Shanghai

Ling Zhang  
*University of Chicago*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: [<clcweb@purdue.edu>](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)

### Recommended Citation

Zhang, Ling. "Shen and Cinema in 1930s Shanghai." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.2 (2013): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2226>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2226)

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 15 Issue 2 (June 2013) Article 16**

**Ling Zhang,**

**"Shen and Cinema in 1930s Shanghai"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss2/16>>

---

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.2 (2013)**

Thematic Issue **Asian Culture(s) and Globalization**

**Ed. I-Chun Wang and Li Guo**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss2/>>

---

**Abstract:** In her article "Shen and Cinema in 1930s Shanghai" Ling Zhang analyzes Xiling Shen's (1904-1940) film *十字街頭* (1937) (Crossroads) influence of foreign film practice and concepts from Hollywood and Soviet cinema in 1930s Shanghai. By an analysis of the film's cinematic style, Zhang explores the transcultural and transmedial possibilities and potentials in the context of cinema culture in the 1930s and the unruly energy and unique aesthetic characteristics embedded in the process of creative mimesis and transplantation. While in the 1930s Chinese cinema had an ambivalent and paradoxical attitude toward US-American and Soviet films, Chinese filmmaker Shen developed his own narrative and formal style in the process of a trans-cultural practice of visual reinterpretation.

## Ling ZHANG

### Shen and Cinema in 1930s Shanghai

In the 1930s Shanghai experienced an era of vibrant and diversified cultural productivity and creativity embodying transcultural and transmedial influences, tension, negotiation, and a multifaceted practice. At this time, Chinese cinema underwent an extensive "transitional period" from silent to sound film (roughly from the late 1920s to late 1930s) owing to various matters including economic, technological, technical, aesthetical, and socio-cultural. 1930s Chinese cinema not only emerged in the intimate and convoluted networks and relations with other forms of art and media such as literature, spoken drama, popular music, fine arts, photography, the phonograph, and radio, but also drew inspirations from and interacted with the intricate impact from Hollywood, Soviet, and European cinematic concepts, practice, and criticism, performing as an uneasy and dynamic Chinese expression of creative transcultural mimesis. Further, the severe social and economic situation resulting in socio-political conflicts and upheavals, the sense of national crisis under threat of foreign invasion (imperialist economic, territorial threat and military aggression), as well as anti-Japanese sentiments in mid-1930s, the Shanghai scenes of artistic production expressed social critique in (especially left-leaning) creative works across different media and genres. Modern technology and media transformed the visual and sound-scape in the city space of semi-colonial Shanghai and effected human subjects' sensual perceptions of the surrounding modern environment and audiovisual representations. This semi-colonial modernity embodied enthusiasm and unrest, sensation, and a sense of vulnerability coinciding with the social and psychic turbulence, a setting in alluring metropolitan Shanghai. The cinematic works produced there incarnated in cinema a sense of innovation and heterogeneity, as well as ambivalent attitudes towards the cosmopolitan city, urban entertainment, and colonial modernity.

Left-wing filmmaker Xiling Shen's (1904-1940) integrated in his film *十字街頭* (1937) (*Crossroads*) various narrative, stylistic, and sociopolitical elements such as romantic comedy, social criticism, urban modernity, melodramatic narration, journalistic discourse, and implicit political messages (see Ma 22-31). Shen studied fine arts and drama in Japan in the 1920s and worked as a stage designer for the Tianyi Film Company in 1931 and later went to Star Studio to direct films. His directorial works include *女性的吶喊* (1933) (*Outcry of Women*), *上海二十四小時* (1933) (*Twenty-Four Hours in Shanghai*), *鄉愁* (1935) (*Homesick*), *船家女* (1935) (*Boatman's Daughter*), *十字街頭* (1937) (*Crossroads*), and *中華兒女* (1939) (*Children of China*). Shen moved to Chongqing in November 1937 after Shanghai was invaded by Japan and died of typhoid fever in Chongqing in 1940. *Crossroads* was released in Shanghai on 15 April 1937 (see Hu 301).

*Crossroads* is about two young people's daily experiences and struggle in 1930s Shanghai, as well as their love story marked by misunderstandings. The hybrid and heterogeneous quality of the film is indebted to several US-American films which it possibly draws inspiration from including Paul Fejös's 1928 *Lonesome*, Frank Capra's 1934 *It Happened One Night*, and George Cukor's 1936 *Camille* (Hu 95-56). *It Happened One Night* was shown in Shanghai on 11 June 1935, lasted only five days, and met lukewarm reception (Hu 54-6). *Camille* was shown in Shanghai on 25 March 1937, lasted ten days, and was better received (Hu 95-56). However, there is a contradiction in accounts: according to Dan Zhao's (the actor who portrays the male protagonist Lao Zhao in *Crossroads*), he imitated Greta Garbo's performance in *Camille* when acting in *Crossroads*, but the latter film was made in 1936 thus before the release of *Camille* in Shanghai (Zhao 102). As in some other Chinese films made in the 1930s, the traces of Western film influence, especially of US-American films, seem ubiquitous. For instance, Yu Sun's 1933 *天明* (*Daybreak*), Muzhi Yuan's 1937 *馬路天使* (*Street Angel*), and Weibang Maxu's 1937 *夜半歌聲* (*Song at Midnight*), respectively, draw inspirations from (or paid homage to) Rupert Julian's 1925 *The Phantom of the Opera*, Frank Borzage's 1927 *Seventh Heaven* and 1928 *Street Angel*, and Josef von Sternberg's 1931 *Dishonored*, among others. However, Chinese films of the 1930s I am discussing should not be interpreted as crude copies or primitive imitations of the originals: they underwent a process of significant and complicated cultural transplantation and negotiation full of tension and precariousness drawing on the traditions of Chinese culture and narration. In addition, the Chinese filmmakers' artistic creativity and aesthetic propensities, the relatively underdeveloped cinematic technology and production conditions in 1930s China, Chinese

audiences' viewing habits and preferences, as well as the national sentiments and social contexts in a specific historical moment all contributed to the uniqueness and complexity of 1930s Chinese cinema in spite of their incorporation of technical and stylistic influences from foreign films.

According to Zhao, *Crossroads* was a result of collective efforts: it was co-written by Shen and left-wing film critics Linghe Shi and Chenwu Wang, and it was retouched by influential left-wing scenarist Yan Xia (98). Shi, Wang, and Xia are not credited, possibly because they attempted to avoid the nationalist censorship committee's attention and persecution owing to their leftist political inclination. The film is a combination of individual experience and social observation: it is inspired by the screenwriters' own experiences and that of their unemployed friends who were forced into exile from northeastern China upon the invasion by Japan in 1931. On the other hand, the film reflects the national sentiments of opposing the threat of economic and cultural invasion from the West and military aggression from Japan and was, consequently, favored by a large number of Chinese intellectuals, as well as workers (see Zhao). Japan's occupation of Manchuria in September 1931 and the attack on Shanghai in late January 1932 generated a sense of national crisis in China which appeared more significant than social or economic crises and impelled the political transformation of Chinese film industry including commercial film studios (even politically conservative or ambiguous ones) which recruited left-wing film professionals and produced progressive films appealing to Chinese audiences.

The political theme in *Crossroads* coexists with a Hollywood-style narrative, for instance a meanderingly developing narrative structure with deliberate delay and misunderstandings, as well as a somehow happy ending. At the same time, the influence of Soviet montage on the stylistic level can be identified and constructs an extraordinary and rich tension between the story and the form intensifying each other (see Chan; Pickowicz, *China on Film*). The foreign influence has been translated and incorporated into the Chinese filmic text in a specific Chinese socio-cultural context. Their influence over Chinese cinema had its own historical background: between 1896 and 1937 over five thousand foreign films, mostly US-American, were marketed in China (see Pickowicz, "Melodramatic" 298). Films by directors and actors such as D.W. Griffith and Charles Chaplin were widely popular in China by the early 1920s. Between 1933 and 1936, 1205 foreign films were imported, of which 1028 were US-American films, 85% of the total amount, while from 1905 to 1949 about 1600 films were Chinese-made (see Wang, Haizhou 62). The dominance of US-American cinema on the Chinese screen and its unidirectional flow facilitated its popularity and familiarity both among general Chinese spectators and film professionals, not only affecting their perception of cinema as a novel, modern medium, but inducing their imagining, imitation, or critique of US-American lifestyle and modernity. Moreover, the introduction of Soviet montage theory to China in the early 1930s impacted the stylistic reformation and innovation of certain Chinese films. Left-wing intellectuals Boqi Zheng and Yan Xia co-translated Vsevolod Pudovkin's books on film directing and screenplay writing into Chinese and introduced montage theory and Soviet cinema to Chinese audiences. Soviet cinema's creative employment of film language (especially contrast montage) exerted an influence on left-wing film practice in China and one of the most conspicuous examples is *上海二十四小時* (1933) (*24 Hours in Shanghai*), directed by Shen. More significantly, following the paradigm of Soviet cinema, left-wing scenarists and directors considered cinema a pivotal tool to awaken, involve, and mobilize the masses, with the progressive message being embedded in the ostensibly entertainment-oriented narrative form, as exemplified by *Crossroads* (on the influence of Soviet cinema in China, see, e.g., Barlow and Lowe).

Consequently, the hybrid character of *Crossroads* implies tensions among the progressive theme, integrated narrative, and precarious cinematic language. Left-wing film critics condemned the hedonistic and escapist tendency and bourgeois value system in most Hollywood films and considered them tools of imperialist cultural invasion that seduce and corrupt Chinese spectators. A fierce debate broke out between "hard film" and "soft film" supporters: the Taiwan-born, Japan-educated, Shanghai-based writer, translator, screenwriter, and film critic Na'ou Liu's claim that cinema is a pure art or entertainment and Jiamo Huang's claim that cinema is "ice cream for the eyes and comfortable couch for the mind" were bombarded by left-wing intellectuals during the turbulence of national crisis (Huang qtd. in Zhang 244). Although to some extent resistant to Hollywood cinema, *Crossroads* and some other left-leaning films consciously borrowed melodramatic elements from Hollywood and attempted

to establish a more coherent narrative structure and rationalize the film language, namely, camera angle and movement, analytic editing, and so on. The rationalization and standardization of Hollywood cinema reflect the process and result of Western industrialization and modernization, as well as the modern experience with "the rise of the machine and its transformation of the human environment, as well as the rise of the masses" (Gunning 301). As an emblem of modern urban experience in China, *Crossroads* signifies an asynchronous (or alternative/delayed) modernity with Western modernity crystallized on US-American screens since the very inception of cinema. Owing to different points of technological, economic, and socio-political developments which accentuated the fact that *Crossroads* and other 1930s Chinese sound films preserve traces from US-American silent films which are made almost one decade earlier, Chinese cinema of the 1930s resisted to develop a standardized film language. However, the said traces of silent cinema imbue *Crossroads* with an uneasy uniqueness, in which multiple temporalities — the artistic trace of the past/silent era, the sense of emergency and crisis in the present, and the uncertainty of both the national and cinematic future (and narrative modes (fictional narrative and disruptive documentary-style footage such as that in the textile mill and the newspaper sequences in the film) converge.

In spite of disparate approaches and intentions, *Crossroads* and, for example, Fejös's *Lonesome* share an ambivalent attitude toward modernity. On the one hand, they epitomize and are fascinated with the modern urban experience engendered by technological progress accentuated in the films' elated mood and cinema language. On the other hand, they are inevitably perturbed by the anxiety, alienation, and longing for affection which urban inhabitants endure in the modern environment. The latter certainly puts more emphasis on urban alienation and individual solitude in 1920s U.S., while the former accentuates collective experience and national salvation in 1930s China. Yet, however distinct their themes may be, the urban experience depicted in both films are spectacular, ravishing, and kaleidoscopic. New urban experiences including changes in transportation (for instance, the tramway, the train, and the automobile) and communication (telephone, telegram, and newspaper), as well as new modes of labor in the latter part of the nineteenth century (assembly lines and machinery in factories) all transformed the habits of large segments of the population in terms of the way they experienced and negotiated time and space (see Gunning 304). The rationalization and regulation of labor and daily life and the establishment of a new factory system and worldwide standard time created a kind of equilibrium which provoked subversion or rebellion characterized by excessive sensory adventure and indulgence (for example, the thrill and rapture Mary and Jim experience in the amusement park in *Lonesome*).

*Crossroads* created the modern urban mediascape, aroused new sensory experience, and ensured the mobility of the human body and the efficient dissemination of information across various times and spaces. The woman workers in the textile mill exemplify the mobility and migration of labor — from rural to urban space and the possibility of woman's economic independence in modern society. The female counterpart Yang working as an instructor in a textile mill and the male protagonist Zhao working as a proofreader for a newspaper suggest urban youth's intimate relations with modernity. Of course, modernity under a challenging social-political situation is vulnerable and unstable symbolized by Zhao's being dismissed by the newspaper and the factory Yang is working for being closed because of the short supply of raw materials and the smuggling of foreign goods. The energy of youth intermingles and is mutually redefined with modern industrial development, print culture, and the standardization of urban time and space. Zhao working a night shift in the newspaper office and Yang a day shift in a factory result in their not recognizing each other as neighbors, but the strict schedule also makes them regularly meet on the tramway whose route and schedules have been standardized (at 9am when Zhao gets off work and Yang goes to work at 6pm). Only when Yang loses her job and her daily life is rescued from the regulated schedules can she be in her lodging room simultaneously with Zhao.

The city space the young protagonists inhabit is displayed expressionistically both in *Crossroads* and *Lonesome*, as well as in Yuan's *Street Angel*. Superimposed with the film credits, the disorienting opening sequence in *Crossroads* consists of ten shots with the average length of eight seconds and linked by "wipes" depicting a defamiliarized and intimidating cityscape with tilted camera angles and abrupt movements. As Tom Gunning demonstrates regarding cinema's mechanical nature and popular appeal, "motion takes precedence and appears primarily as a destabilizing force" (300). Modern

transportation vehicles, moving bodies, and the spasmodic movements of the camera multiply and intensify the sense of mobility and instability. The first static shot with a high angle is identical with and corresponds to the tenth, composed of scores of automobiles, bicycles, rickshaws, and pedestrians crossing through a traffic concourse in different directions. Among the eight moving shots, seven are with a vertical camera movement lingering on Western style skyscrapers and one with lateral movement. The musical accompaniment is from Dmitri Shostakovich's *Fifth Symphony*, whose bleak tone "seems to preview the upcoming conundrum of the protagonist[s]" (Yeh 85). The cityscape as an urban spectacle — both to be gazed at and inhabited — and the energy of a foreign-flavored metropolitan city not only provide a vivid social milieu, but also suggest spatial hierarchy and symbolism.

"Crossroads" as a figure of speech interweaves the realistic and the metaphorical, individual suffering and national crisis. It serves as a metaphor for progressive young people vacillating between different directions. The final sequence of *Crossroads* echoes this opening metaphor presenting the four characters marching towards the cityscape shoulder-to-shoulder and suggests collective devotion to national salvation — although it is only a vague insinuation. The optimistic (and perhaps, abrupt) ending meets left-wing film critics' expectations and marks its contribution to the movement of the "cinema of national defense" which reflects the process of formation of national identity and consciousness initiated by the 上海電影界救國會 (Society of the National Salvation of the Shanghai Film Circle) in the Spring of 1936. The movement claimed to produce and promote films with a progressive message and exposing and critiquing the unjust side of the society and to strengthen the battlefront of resistance with the camera as a weapon (Wang, Chaoguang 59). In the urban geography of *Crossroads*, the space of the 弄堂 (*longtang*) (alley) in Shanghai appears as transitional connecting the public and the private, the traditional (for instance, the landlady's lifestyle) and the modern (the young people brought to the city by the process of modernization and urban development), the open and the enclosed imbued with a unique local flavor differentiating it from the metropolitan space of New York City in which Mary and Jim dwell in *Lonesome*. Unlike the high buildings located in the international settlements and inhabited by privileged people (mostly foreign residents and higher class Chinese), the *longtang* neighborhoods host ordinary Chinese people from diverse backgrounds including common urbanites, migrant workers, intellectuals, students, and drifting young artists and writers. According to Chen, some Chinese film production companies were also located in *longtang* neighborhoods in the 1920s and 1930s, including Star Studio, which produced *Crossroads*. The phenomenon of "cultural symbiosis" encouraged Chinese films made in that period to be more concerned with ordinary urbanites' taste and for the local space on screen to be more recognizable and empathetic (see Chen 90-96). The place is packed with clustered houses and vociferous peddlers and children with a vivid texture of everyday life and a sense of intimacy, but less privacy due to the spatial proximity between the dwellers. The spatial setting suits the filmmaker's creative intention in familiarizing the urbanite spectators with the environment and rendering the dramatic story. Zhao's and Yang's rooms are small knots in the urban maze in which the rooms, two-story buildings, alleys, and main streets are interconnected and traversed by all means of public transportation such as tramways, automobiles, bicycles, rickshaws, and so forth. The film constructs not only horizontal spatial relations between Yang's and Zhao's rooms, but also vertical counterparts between Zhao's window on the second-floor and the alley outside exemplified by the beggar scene and the scene of Zhao's friends Liu and Tang calling him downstairs, and created by a subjective point of view from Zhao's perspective.

The cramped lodging rooms Yang and Zhao inhabit are divided by a flimsy wooden partition. The spatial construction somewhat resembles the "wall of Jericho" in Capra's *It Happened One Night*. Although the two films are stylistically different, the narrative function of "the wall" in both films is not much distinct — to create a gender barrier and obstacle, they reveal real emotions/identities after a series of misunderstandings, misrecognitions, and postponements thus achieving unification signified by the collapse of the wall within the romantic comedy placed in the urban space. *Crossroads* deploys high angle shots to depict Yang's and Zhao's rooms providing a realistic four-dimensional spatial configuration from an unusual perspective. The spatial relations within the configuration are complicated by Yang's and Zhao's increasing mutual intrusion into each other's space. The incursion of objects (wet laundry, nails, bamboo sticks, pictures, Zhao's shirt, dolls, trash, frogs, and notes) and



gazes (Yang and her friend Yao and Zhao and his friend Tang, respectively, peep into the other's room through a hole in the makeshift wall) witness Yang and Zhao moving from passive reaction and hostility to active communication and affection. The accumulation of exchanged notes implies the passing of time and culminates in the final unification signaled by Zhao's tearing down of the wall. The boundary of gender has been transgressed through mutual identification of social class and forbidden pleasure triumphs when they step into each other's room with apparent excitement and amazement.

Outside of their confining rooms Yang and Zhao meet on the tramway each day without knowing that they are neighbors. Their encounter seems random, but is predetermined by their regulated schedules and the regulated route of the tram. As a mode of modern transportation, the tram provides the possibility of exploring the cityscape and a sense of mobility and adventure. More significantly, it creates a public sphere without arbitrary gender barriers, thereby providing a new modern space for young people to meet each other and nourish romantic relations. *Crossroads* depicts Yang's and Zhao's encounter on the tramway four times, three times in the morning (9:00 a.m.) and once in the afternoon (6:00 p.m.). Deploying various scales of shots (long shot, medium shot, and close-up) and camera movements (panning and tracking), the four sequences are endowed with rich visual rhythm and diversity. The first three times they only pass by each other when the tramway stops, the fourth time they are both on the tramway and have bodily contact because Yang is shoved by the crowd. Besides its narrative function of developing a relation between the two protagonists, within the fourth sequence there is a long shot following Zhao getting off the tramway, picking up the letter Yang lost in the street, and climbing back. Some parts of the shot are out of focus and it evokes a strong sense of immediacy and authenticity. Along with the real location shooting, the sometimes jerky camera work, and the curious looking of the passersby into the camera lenses, the tramway sequences reveal the vivid texture of street life in 1930s Shanghai almost with a documentary quality.

Just as the tramway as a medium of modern transportation provides a limited scale of social milieu, newspapers and magazines as modern communications media perform a significant role in modern everyday life and supply more detailed social information in a broader realm. In *Lonesome*, Mary and Jim read the same advertisement in the same magazine and decide to go to Coney Island where they encounter and fall in love with each other. In *Crossroads*, the newspaper plays both diegetic and extra-diegetic roles. It is related to Zhao's vocation as a newspaper proofreader and amateur journalist. Similarly, in Yuan's *Street Angel* the newspaper's important functions of narration and social critique are articulated in the character Lao Wang's occupation as a newspaper vendor. The "newspaper trope" was a popular mode of expression in 1930s Shanghai cinema and another case is Yu Sun's 1934 *體育皇后* (*Queen of Sports*). The phenomenon could be interpreted as the films' fascination and concern with modern print culture and its heavy influence on people's daily life and social reality. However, although partly incorporated into the narrative, the recurrence of newspaper headlines introduces into *Crossroads* a kind of journalistic quality, interrupts the narrative flow, introduces fluctuations in the narrative tempo, and provides explicit social and political references and thus represents turbulent, epic time. The newspaper headlines reveal a desperate social context that is difficult to visualize within the filmic text. For example, extensive unemployment, young people committing suicide (the news of Xu's suicide is read by Zhao and his friends at the end of the film), the Japanese invasion and news from the battlefield, among others. The headlines also clarify the reason for the closing down of the textile mill where Yang works: the result of lack of raw material and a market in northern China due to Japanese invasion and because of the widespread smuggling of foreign products. The stark and realistic newspaper headlines also balance the tone of *Crossroads* preventing its indulgence in seemingly light-hearted romantic comedy and articulating its social mission. Individual delight and affection are always dulled by the harsh reality and imminent threat of foreign invasion (military, economic, and cultural).

The newspaper sequences interrupt the narrative flow along with special visual effects (such as wipes, superimposition, and thought/dream bubbles) — which were widely used in silent cinema — and this breaks the illusion of a coherent and consistent diegesis the narrative constructs. As I mention above, *Crossroads* contains relics of silent cinema partly due to its quotation of *Lonesome*, a film made in the transitional period between silent and sound film: despite its attempt to construct a self-contained diegesis, there is a sequence displaying several tiny faces chattering via telephone as Mary frantically works the switchboard, superimposed on a giant clock on the screen. It may seem relatively

primitive in comparison with classical Hollywood cinema, which had already developed its own rationalized and coherent narrative and film language system by the mid-1930s. However, *Crossroads* embodies a paradox of modernity between the system of containment and control and a new, explosive energy and between the dialectical interaction of the forces of chaotic dissolution and those of systematic organization (see Gunning 309-10). The explosive and unrestrained energy exerted from the film externalizes the characters' thought and emotion and visualizes their hallucination (Xu's dreaming of his mother and Zhao's falling into the river tempted by the imagined image of Yang), imagination, and fantasy, sometimes with a humorous and playful undertone. No matter if the film is consciously resistant to the process of Hollywood-style rationalization or simply could not achieve the rationalization due to historical and technical limitations at both narrative and stylistic levels, its unruly "primitivity" contributes to its striking vitality.

Consciously borrowing skills and attitudes from US-American and Soviet cinema, some 1930s Chinese films including *Crossroads* bear different fruit from their archetypes in the process of cultural and visual transplantation and so in response to Chinese aesthetic traditions and Chinese audience preferences (see also Xiang <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss2/15>>). *Crossroads* has affinities with *Lonesome* in terms of narrative and stylistic levels to a certain extent with the indigenous set-up of spatial relations, formulaic plot twists, vivacious mood, and working class young people's daily lives full of both frustration and imagination. Objects such as dolls and pictures in the two films not only perform as crucial motifs and props, but also become signifiers of young people's affection and desire to break away from the anxiety, solitude, and boredom of modern daily life induced by repetition and standardization. Ironically, like most 1930s US-American films, *Lonesome* focuses on sustained temporal and narrative development and falls into the trap of rationalization of the Hollywood narrative mode with its happy ending and narrative predictability. However, with its enthusiastic display of carnivalesque spectacle in the amusement park, the characters' intoxicating sensory experience and abrupt tonal and emotional shifting (extreme excitement to sudden frustration and desperation, to abrupt enthusiasm again, also emphasized in *Crossroads*), *Lonesome* also exerts a strong inclination of primitivity. Moreover, *Crossroads*'s and *Lonesome*'s disparate attitudes toward entertainment are revealing: the amusement park and dancing hall the two working class protagonists patronize (as a means of alleviation of modern boredom in their leisure time) in *Lonesome* are condemned and in *Crossroads* figure as exemplary of bourgeois lifestyles because of their association with wealthy dandies and rascals (for instance, one dandy who frequents dancing hall buys Xu's college diploma and another harasses Yang at the gate of the factory in attempting to persuade her to see a film and a play in an amusement park).

Unlike *Lonesome*, *Crossroads* provides the spectator with an ideal vantage point from which to view the main characters' spatial relations and misunderstandings. The narrative incorporates coincidences (triple coincidences: they are neighbors and meet on the tramway as strangers, as well as outside of Yang's factory as journalist and interviewee), deliberate delay and refusal of recognition and repetition such as recurrent tramway sequences, the exchange of pictures/dolls and notes, and the rent trouble Zhao constantly runs into. Although containing melodramatic elements, the narrative structure of *Crossroads* is less focused than that of *Lonesome* and it seems more episodic, fragmented, and multi-layered thus going beyond Hollywood influences. As with the narrative, the stylistic aspects (including camera work and editing) of *Crossroads* are also different from the classical Hollywood style — which is generally logical, valuing denotative clarity, aiming to create an unambiguous, continuous space, action, and spatial relations, as well as re-orienting the spectator's viewpoint with analytic visual construction (shot-reverse-shot and analytic editing). The unfettered and shaky camera movements in *Crossroads* echo the mobility and vitality of youth and urban experience, their precarious living conditions and uncertain future, as well as the unrestrictedly lively mood permeating the film. The sometimes disorienting panning and tracking shots reveal space and modify the field of vision, as well as follow characters' movements attentively. The mundane and trivial everyday space performs a prominent role, interacting with the characters, with considerable duration. As Haizhou Wang points out, in borrowing Soviet montage theory the 1930s left-wing films prefer Pudovkin to Eisenstein, because they favor continuous long takes which maintain the continuity of time and space rather than deploying collision between shots and emphasize *mise-en-scène* within an individual shot and the relation of characters and their environments, as well as privileged camera



movement and medium and long shots. Another reason why Chinese filmmakers hesitated to employ Eisensteinian montage could also be avoiding the attention of censors with their explicit and revolutionary message, as in for example in Shen's *24 Hours in Shanghai*, which deployed Eisensteinian montage contrasting the class disparity in Shanghai and that met subsequently with severe censorship.

Borrowing parallel editing from *Lonesome*, *Crossroads* unfolds two narrative threads, respectively, following Yang and Zhao and the two converge in equilibrium at the end. However, the editing is less standardized and rationalized than classical Hollywood editing. Generally, in the prewar classics of US-American cinema "scenes were broken down just for one purpose, namely, to analyze an episode according to the material or dramatic logic of the scene. It is this logic which conceals the fact of analysis, the mind of the spectator quite naturally accepting the viewpoints of the director which are justified by the geography of the action or the shifting emphasis of dramatic interest" (Bazin 24). The analytic and neutral stylistic pattern disfavors mismatched screen direction and inconsistently angled eyelines, and forbids perceptible jump cuts and unmotivated cutaways (Bordwell 164). Interestingly, the dream sequence in *Crossroads* — Yang dreams of Zhao after reading the Chinese translation of Alexandre Dumas's *La Dame aux camélias* and observing Zhao's picture — which seems like a parody of a Hollywood musical, deploys a shot-reverse-shot formula, eyeline match, and sentimental music. Thus the cinematic language appears more standardized and suggests an imitation at all levels. Other than this sequence, the camera angles are freely changed and the 180-degree rule is violated, for example, in the scene of Zhao and Xu in their room and Yang and Zhao in the park one shot as casual cuts with the next in a reverse direction thus disorienting the spectator by displaying a confusing sense of the space and the characters' spatial relations. The sense of discontinuity is also intensified by occasional abrupt cutting from a long shot to a close-up: "the too violent impact of which would make the audience conscious of the cutting" (Bazin 32) and therefore the editing is in no sense "invisible." Curiously, there is also a conspicuous sequence with mismatched screen directions in *Lonesome*, when Jim is in subway and there is another man eating breakfast. This sense of "primitivity" by incorporating traces from silent cinema and the sense of "unregulated" in terms of cinematic style strengthens its vitality as a film text.

Based on the above analyses, I posit that US-American films serve both as model and foil for early Chinese cinema. 1930s left-wing films have an ambivalent and paradoxical attitude to US-American films: they criticize its moral and political aspects and at the same time make use of and emulate its artistic aspects. However, Chinese films of the period should not be simply considered crude duplications of US-American originals; rather, develop their own narrative and formal style in the process of trans-cultural practice of visual reinterpretation. Determined to carry a political message and utter the masses' voice, *Crossroads* adopts the mode of romantic comedy and is concerned with popular sentiment while struggling to achieve a kind of unique cinematic expression in spite of the obstacles it met under the crude production conditions and censorship. According to Shen, for the making of *Crossroads* he had neither adequate equipment nor sufficient capital. Background music and dialogue could not be synchronized with each other and in order to record synchronized sound one had to put several layers of cotton quilts to muffle the noise of the sound recorder. Chinese filmmakers in the 1930s suffered extreme hardship under such difficult production conditions and even more painful was the strangling and denial of creative freedom and expression. The restrictions of production forced out some innovative camera work, for example, the high angle shots in Zhao and Yang's room could be partially attributed to the shabby and congested setting and the unmovable fourth wall. Strict censorship impelled the filmmakers to be ingenious in outwitting or evading the censors and ensconcing patriotic fervor in a more subtle cinematic text. For example, hanging a portrait of prominent leftist writer Xun Lu on the wall of Zhao's room suggests the film's clandestine leftist inclination and commemoration of his untimely death in 1936. Shen's talent for improvisation also enlivens the style of *Crossroads* and to achieve this Shen let the camera linger on actors to see what would happen. Consequently, some shots were longer than planned. Shen enjoyed the process of filmmaking like an amazed child visiting a shooting location for the first time and his playfulness and gaiety transformed into the atmosphere of the film (Zhao 108).

As a sound film with unsatisfying sound recording conditions, Shen self-consciously employed the possibilities of sound as a device in creating a polyphonic and expressive acoustic space. The modern

sound concomitant with the advent of modern technology and urbanization (factory whistle, tramway bells, car honk, machine noise, and so forth) interweaves with human voices (the chanting of street peddlers, the yell of children, the drunk landlord humming a Beijing opera tune, Zhao singing a joyous song or playing the guitar) in lived space thus connecting disparate spaces and sequences and creating rhythm with human voices, sound effects, and background music. Although Shen employed "antiquated" visual effects from era of silent cinema, the contraposition of image and sound reinforced its rich dimension as a visual-audio text. If we consider cinematic language in classical Hollywood cinema as stiffened by the process of rationalization and standardization and partly deprived of its vitality to some extent, *Crossroads* is in comparison a technically immature cinematic text, mixing foreign influences and vernacular originality, complex while also primitive and vigorous. This awkward ambiguity results in *Crossroads*'s achievement as uneasy uniqueness with romanticism, optimism, and high idealism. This is evident in the strong sense of physicality and materiality of the cinematic body and the vivid representation of actors' bodies and their slightly exaggerated and excessive performance influenced by their stage experience: both Dan Zhao who plays Zhao in the film and Yang Bai who plays Yang were popular stage actors in the 1930s. Zhao was acting on stage while making *Crossroads* and the exaggerated theatrical style influenced his performance in the film and Bai played *Camellia* on stage before being involved in the film production (see Zhao). In *Crossroads*, Yang reads Dumas which seems like a take from the novel/spoken drama/Hollywood musical and this can also be understood as a self-referential element. All these significant constituents mark *Crossroads* as an energetic and vigorous filmic text in Chinese cinema's adolescence, the transitional era from silence to sound in Chinese film history before family melodramas with standardized film language pervaded Chinese cinema.

### Works Cited

- Barlow, Tani, and Donald Lowe. *Teaching China's Lost Generation: Foreign Experts in the People's Republic of China*. San Francisco: China Books and Periodicals, 1987.
- Bazin, André. *What Is Cinema?* Trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley: U of California P, 1967.
- Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985.
- Chan, Jessica Ka Yee. "Translating 'Montage': The Discreet Attractions of Soviet Montage for Chinese Revolutionary Cinema." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 5.3 (2011): 197-218.
- Chen, Shan. "The Cultural Tradition in 1930s and 1940s Chinese Cinema." *Chinese Cinema: Concept and Trajectory*. Ed. Wang Haizhou. Beijing: China Film P, 2004.
- Crossroads* (十字街頭). Dir. Xiling Shen. Shanghai: Star Company, 1937.
- Gunning, Tom. "Modernity and Cinema: A Culture of Shocks and Flows." *Cinema and Modernity*. Ed. Murray Pomerance. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2006. 300-10.
- Hu, Pingsheng. *Entertainment in Shanghai 1927-1937: Exploring Cinema and Other Art Forms*. Taipei: Taiwan Xuesheng P, 2002.
- Lee, Leo Ou-fan. "The Urban Milieu of Shanghai Cinema, 1930-1940: Some Explorations of Film Audience, Film Culture, and Narrative Conventions." *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*. Ed. Yingjing Zhang, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. 74-97.
- Ma, Ning. "The Textual and Critical Difference of Being Radical: Reconstructing Chinese Leftist Films of the 1930s." *Wide Angle* 11.2 (1989): 22-31.
- Pickowicz, Paul G. *China on Film: A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012.
- Pickowicz, Paul G. "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema." *From May Fourth to June Fourth: Fiction and Film in Twentieth-Century China*. Ed. Elle Widmer and David Der-wei Wang. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993. 295-306.
- Wang, Chaoguang. "Study on American Films in Chinese Market in Republican China." *Film Art* 1 (1998): 57-61.
- Wang, Haizhou. "Early Chinese Cinema's Innovation and Reference to Montage School." *Chinese Cinema: Concept and Trajectory*. Ed. Wang Haizhou, Beijing: China Film P, 2004. 57-65.
- Xiang, Adrian Song. "Hollywood and Shanghai Cinema in the 1930s." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.2 (2013): <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss2/15>>.
- Yeh, Yueh-yu. "Historiography and Sinification: Music in Chinese Cinema of the 1930s" *Cinema Journal* 41.3 (2002): 78-97.
- Zhang, Zhen. *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005.
- Zhao, Dan. (趙丹). 趙丹散文. 廣州: 花城出版社 (A Collection of Dan Zhao's Essays). By Dan Zhao. Guangzhou: Huacheng P, 1998.

Author's profile: Ling Zhang is working towards her Ph.D. in film studies at the University of Chicago. Her interests in research include film sound, cinematic time and space, early Chinese cinema and opera, and Taiwan New Cinema. Her publications include "Revolutionary Aestheticism and Excess: Transformation of the Idealized Female

Body in *The Red Lantern on Stage and Screen*," *The New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* (2010). E-mail:  
<[ling1@uchicago.edu](mailto:ling1@uchicago.edu)>