

379
N81
No. 7518

CHINESE LEFTIST URBAN FILMS OF THE 1930s

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Xin He, B. A.

Denton, Texas

August, 1998

He, Xin., Chinese Leftist Urban Films of the 1930s. Master of Arts (Radio, TV, and Film), August 1998, 91 pp., works cited, 24 titles.

This thesis explores the films produced by leftist filmmakers of the 1930s which reflect the contemporary urban life in Shanghai. The thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter I introduces the historical and cultural background from which the leftist urban film movement emerged, together with a brief summary of Chinese cinema history before 1930. Chapter II discusses the factors that triggered the leftist film movement - why individual dramatists and the film producers chose this style under the influence of leftist ideology. Chapter III discusses the themes and characteristics of leftist films. Chapter IV analyzes two representative films, *Crossroads* and *Street Angel*. A summary chapter explores the possible legacy of leftist films of the 1930s for present-day Chinese cinema.

379
N81
No. 7518

CHINESE LEFTIST URBAN FILMS OF THE 1930s

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Xin He, B. A.

Denton, Texas

August, 1998

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY	1
Significance of study	
Related literature	
Historical background	
Cultural background	
Brief history of Chinese cinema before 1930	
II. THE RISE OF THE LEFTIST FILM MOVEMENT	20
III. THE THEME AND CHARACTERISTICS OF LEFTIST FILMS	32
Factory workers	
Women's issues	
Patriotic films	
Leftist urban films compared with other film genre of the 1930s	
IV. AN ANALYSIS OF <i>CROSSROADS</i> AND <i>STREET ANGEL</i>	47
<i>Crossroads</i>	
<i>Street Angel</i>	
V. THE LEGACY OF LEFTIST URBAN FILMS	75
APPENDIX A	81
APPENDIX B	84
WORKS CITED	90

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The production of what came to be called “leftist films” in China began in the early 1930s and ended in 1937, right before China launched the War of Resistance Against Japan. These films are characterized as leftist based on the political leanings and affiliations of the main screenplay writers. Writers were singled out because films have been conventionally regarded in China as a form of literature. In leftist urban films filmmakers primarily were concerned with aspects of contemporary life in Shanghai (the primary base of the Chinese film industry at the time). Much like the Italian postwar neo-realist films, the Chinese leftist urban films reflect the “dark side” of the city. Stories concerning various aspects of urban life were told: intellectuals wrestling with social commitment, factory workers laboring under dangerous working conditions and long working hours, women caught in the contradictions of a modernizing society, together with profiles of street peddlers, newspaper vendors, prostitutes, and other low strata people. The perspective of this thesis is that leftist urban films explored Chinese urban life of the 1930s in ways that were new to Chinese filmmaking, and that these films were a significant contribution to Chinese society at that time.

Significance of the Study

The leftist films of the 1930s have a very important position in the film history of

China. Scholars in China have described the movement as the “first leap in Chinese film.”¹ There are some classic works in Chinese and world cinema history from this period, including *Street Angel*, *Crossroads* and *Song of The Fisherman*. In 1935, *Song of The Fisherman* was the first Chinese film to win an international prize (in Moscow). Some scholars have compared these films with Italian neo-realist films based on similarities of theme, content and purpose.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, films revealing urban social problems became scarce due to the strict censorship of the Soviet modeled, state-controlled film industry. In subsequent decades, films of the Fifth Generation directors, for example, who gained international fame in the 1980s, usually didn’t focus on modern-day China. Zhang Yimou’s *Raise the Red Lantern* and *Judou* were about feudalistic, rural China of the 1920s and 1930s. *Shanghai Triad* was set in the city during the pre-1949 era, and his *Story of Qiuju*, a successful film about contemporary China, is about rural western China. *Beijing Bastards* and *In the Heat of the Sun* are recent films about urban life in Beijing. But these modern urban films still account for a very small percentage of the films produced each year. That is, it may be argued that the films of the 1930s remained unsurpassed as chronicles of Chinese urban life.

Related Literature

In Chinese

Although the leftist films of 1930s clearly are important within the history of film in China, detailed research of the topic has never been undertaken by Chinese film

scholars. Articles and essays regarding the films of this era are scattered among numerous film magazines and academic journals. No book that focuses on leftist films has been published. The articles published in Chinese can be categorized into three types: anniversary review articles in memory of the leftist film movement; articles focusing on individual films and filmmakers; and biographies and autobiographies of screenplay writers and stars associated with the movement. Another feature of the Chinese-based literature is that all the materials are somewhat dated. The most recent article found was published in 1994. Most essays were published at least a decade ago. While western scholars increasingly turn to the study of pre-1949 Chinese films, Chinese scholars seem to be neglecting it.

The most detailed material concerning the leftist film movement is contained in *Zhongguo Dianying Fazhanshi (History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)* by Cheng, Jihua, in chapters three to five.² This book, published in 1963, provides an overview of the film industry, contextual analysis of individual films, discussion of the content of individual films, scripts, pre-production work, the cinematic approaches of individual filmmakers, and how the films were received at the time. Being a Marxist scholar, Cheng Jihua evaluated the films and the industry from the perspective of communist ideology, which was the only critical method allowed in China at the time the book was published. In spite of this, the detailed materials Cheng collected from 1950 to 1962 (some of which were subsequently lost in the Cultural Revolution), together with his discussion of individual films (from a literary perspective) makes this work the

most important for later scholarship on leftist film.

Zhong Dianfei, one of the most highly esteemed film critics in China, wrote in 1984 an essay entitled “Films: Trying to Contribute to the Progression of the Society and People.” He used a historiographical method to write this article, originally presented as a speech in a seminar on 1920s and 1930s Chinese films held in Hong Kong. In the essay, he describes how the progressive film movement developed. He writes about the changes in the film industry and in cinematic styles from the 1920s to the 1930s. His essay focuses on the social function of films during the era. In his view the films of that era became an important factor to help people, especially young people, to find a way out when the nation was facing foreign intrusion, and Zhong observes that the films were sympathetic towards the wretched lives of people caught up in war and poverty. He thought highly of those films:

The films of that era were not an experiment or creative work by individual filmmakers or individual groups, but a dominant film movement; it was not a wave but a torrent; the so-called Chinese neo-realist films described by foreign scholars is not just one or two but a cluster; the film artists were not one or two individuals but several teams; the films were not in one style but in various styles; the existence of those kind of films was not one or two years long but extended to the 1940s.³

“The First Leap in Chinese Cinema,” by Zhou Bing and Yao Guohua, focuses on the development and the contributions of the films of the 1930s. Zhou and Yao write about the founding of the League of Left Dramatists in the period. Many of the members of this League joined the film industry. The influence of foreign movies is mentioned in this article, especially Russian and American films. It talks about the

“three stages” in the development of leftist films. In the first stage, from 1930-1933, leftists entered the industry and rose to leading positions. They produced good films and created the first production cycle in 1933. In the second stage, from 1934-1935, the left filmmakers continued to work in spite of increasingly strict censorship by the government. Many filmmakers had to hide or change their names because of government persecution, but they continued to work. The Diantong Film Studio released four films within one-and-a-half years before it closed. *Goddess* and *Song of Fisherman* were produced in this era. Also, leftist critics launched a war in the film magazines against those who opposed leftist films. The third stage was from 1936 to 1937. The main theme of this period involved the production of films intended to encourage people to fight against foreign invasion. The authors of this article point out two contributions of the films. The first is that the leftist films changed the direction of the development of Chinese cinema and made it a part of the new cultural movement dating from the May 4th demonstration of 1919. The second contribution mentioned is that leftist films established a realist filmmaking tradition in China. The authors also mention that leftist films contributed to the formation of a national style of Chinese film.⁴

The two articles summarized above emphasize more the political content and social function of leftist films rather than their cinematic strategies. This is one of the general characteristics of leftist film studies in China, which emphasize political connotation over aesthetics.

One study was made of *Street Angel*, produced by the Mingxing (Star) Film

Studio in 1937. Feng Ming wrote two articles, “*Street Angel* and Italian Neo-realism” and “About *Street Angel*,” explaining the production process of the film. She explains how the idea for the film was developed, what is significant about the director, actors, and editor working on this film compared to their other works. She discusses the realist elements in *Street Angel* and tries to compare it with Italian neo-realist films.

In another essay, Ling Zhenyuan also compares Chinese leftist films with Italian Neo-realist films. He argues that the primary points of comparison involve theme and content. Both leftist and neo-realist films reflect on social problems. However, Ling also tries to show that the Chinese films are superior to the Italian films, saying that the former reflect the society more deeply and more widely - the Chinese films describe not only urban problems but also the hardships of rural life. But this may not be a legitimate criterion through which to evaluate films.⁵

The Gate of Hell is the actor Zhao Dan’s autobiography. In this book, he devotes one chapter to his experiences working on *Crossroads* and *Street Angel*. He talks about his performance in these two films, saying that he regretted his performance in *Crossroads*, for he felt it was too exaggerated. He was relatively satisfied with his performance in *Street Angel*. Much of this satisfaction, he said, owed to the director’s requirement of “a natural performance.” He also recollects aspects of the script, direction and setting selection in these two films.⁶

In English

There has been relatively little English-language scholarship dealing with Chinese

leftist films. There are general descriptions of leftist films in Paul Clark's *Chinese Cinema* and Jay Leyda's *Dianying*. Western-based Chinese film scholars like Chris Berry, Zhang Yinjing and Kristine Harris have written some articles on leftist films. But western scholarly study of leftist films to date is rather limited in comparison with the ever-expanding body of work concerning mainland Chinese film after 1949.

Patricia Wilson's "...I Sought the Jewel of Art" is an article on Zhao Dan. She discusses Zhao's roles in *Crossroads* and *Street Angel*. Zhao Dan says that the role in *Street Angel* is his favorite role. He recollects his experience in creating and playing the role in this article.

Kristine Harris' "The New Woman Incident - Cinema, Scandal, and Spectacle in 1935 Shanghai" covers a few aspects of the New Woman phenomenon, in relation to the 1935 Chinese silent film of the same name: how cinematic approaches, such as the narrative construction, editing and sound contributed in profiling Wei Ming (the film's main female character); a discussion of notions of New Woman and Modern Woman in 1930s Shanghai; how the film was received by the audience; and a discussion of how "Ruan Lingyu's own actions and role in the media circulation of her star image." Harris points out that in addition to a high education level, spiritual and financial independence, it was argued that a proletarian and revolutionary sense was necessary for creating a "new woman". This is something similar to Zhang Yingjin's conclusion in "Imagining the Modern Woman in Shanghai."⁷ In this article, Zhang explores the representation of women in Shanghai in films and books from the 1920s to the 1940s. He examines

cinematic configurations of the “modern woman” in Shanghai in three films of the early 1930s: *Wild Flower* (1930), *The Three Modern Women* (1933) and *New Woman* (1934). He discusses how cinematic strategies were employed to embody leftist ideology in films concerning women’s issues, and how the discourses of love and aesthetics were interwoven with discourses of political issues such as revolution and national salvation. He also discusses the influence of these films on the portrayal of revolutionary women in films after 1949.

Jay Leyda provides a very good account of what was going on in leftist film circles in the 1930s in his book *Danying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* published in 1972. Chapter 3 of this book, “Above and Under Ground 1928-1937” deals with leftist films. Leyda is very familiar with Chinese language film histories of leftist films, especially Cheng Jihua’s book. Much of the important information provided in Cheng Jihua’s book is relayed by Leyda. Leyda even seems to agree with the ideas of Chinese film historians, who emphasize the importance of the Chinese Communist Party in leftist film production. He devotes significant space to a discussion of the film activities of Xia Yan, leader of the Communist Film Group. Leyda also defines the leftist film movement as an “underground movement,” a phrase suggesting its close relationship with the underground communist movement of the period. He is highly critical of the Kuomintang government, calling it one of the most repressive political systems in Chinese modern history. He states that “for me the most dramatic, and the most astonishing period of Chinese film history is the maintenance of an active

underground movement in the film industry for almost twenty years.”⁸ It is very clear that Leyda’s perspective was affected by his personal political leanings. He was one of the few foreign scholars who worked with Chinese scholars at a time when only scholars with a communist political leaning could be admitted to China. Still, Leyda’s book provides groundbreaking and useful information on Chinese leftist films in English.

Paul Clark talks briefly about the pre-war leftist filmmakers in his book *Chinese Cinema, Cultures and Politics Since 1949*. He writes about the infiltration of the Film Group (Dian Ying Zu), as well as the major film studios such as Mingxing and Lianhua, by the Chinese Communist Party. He points out that audiences of the pre-war period had become socially and politically attuned, and that some studios shifted their production interest to progressive films. Still, he emphasizes that “the Communist Party and progressive filmmakers did not dominate the film industry; nor did those artists who were later called ‘progressive’ or ‘leftist’ necessarily subscribe to Communist ideology or Party leadership.”⁹

In another essay, Leo Ou-fan Lee also questions the Communist leadership in leftist filmmaking as described in Cheng Jihua’s book. Lee argues that although some leftist writers and dramatists had connections with the Communist Party, the Party actually was too weak organizationally to lead such a movement. Lee points out that the so-called leftist filmmakers were actually “conscience-stricken individuals who were unsatisfied with the environment and resort to social realism, motivated by humanistic concern for the plight of the Chinese people”.¹⁰

Historical Background

In the middle of the 19th Century, several European countries, together with Japan and United States, recognized and acted upon the impotence of Manchu Dynasty. They came into China and demanded economical, political and territory concessions. In 1842, after the Opium War, the Manchu government was forced to sign the Nanking Treaty with Britain and cede Hong Kong to the British government. In the following decades, the Manchu dynasty continued to sign many other unequal treaties with foreign countries. This finally threatened the existence of the nation. In 1911, the republican revolution broke out, overthrowing the Manchu government which had governed Chinese since the mid-seventeenth Century. Emperor Pu-yi of the Manchu dynasty abdicated and Dr. Sun Yat-sen became the president of the Republic. The ancient feudalist system which had dominated the country for several thousand years ended, as Sun promoted democracy, human rights, and national survival. However, as his power was rather weak, he was forced to transfer the Republican government to military people. For the next decade or so, the warlords fought with each other. In 1921 the Chinese Communist Party was founded in Shanghai. In the early 1920s the Nationalist (Kuomintang) Army, led by Chiang Kai-shek, and the Communist Party joined forces to destroy warlordism and founded the Nationalist government in Nanking, but soon the relationship between the two parties broke down. In 1925 Chiang Kai-shek killed many communists in Shanghai. The two parties began to fight each other. The second Civil War broke out. From 1925-1937, China was under the Republican leadership of the

Kuomintang's Nanking-based government. James E. Sheridan describes China in the 1920s and 1930s like this:

Under Chiang's government, there were two Chinas, one was the modern, semi-Westernized cities of the eastern coastal provinces, inhabited by an urban elite of Westernized intellectuals, businessmen, merchants, professionals, and official who had little contact with the life in the country side. The other was rural China, unchanged in its poverty, ignorance, and hardship, the helpless prey of local officials, warlords and conservative local gentry.¹¹

In 1931, Japan invaded and occupied the three provinces in northeast China, known as Manchuria at the time. Many families fled to the inner provinces. In 1932, the Japanese army attacked Shanghai. The Nationalist government reacted to this aggression by requiring the people to first fight the domestic enemy, referring to the communists, and then fight the outside intruders. It was five years later, in 1937, that the nationalist government finally proclaimed war against Japan.

Shanghai had been a market for inland trade and coastal trade for centuries before it became a port open to foreign trade. After Shanghai became an open port with the Nanking Treaty, it gradually developed into an international and increasingly modern banking, financial, commercial, industrial, and cultural center. On the banks of the Huangpu River, foreigners established an international settlement and a French Concession, which were isolated from the Chinese community and not subject to the laws of the Chinese government.

Gradually, the Chinese moved to the foreign settlements. Many of the young people received a western education. They either studied in schools founded by foreign missionaries or went abroad to study. These people often adopted westernized values.

Working as business people, lawyers, banking officials, and factory owners, they played an important role in Shanghai's development into an international metropolis.

The Shanghai of the Chinese was reputed to be ruled through a network of the underworld. The Nanking government had secret business with the forces of organized crime and made use of them to govern the populace in the foreign concessions. Tu Yueh-sheng, Godfather of the underworld who dealt in the opium trade, had a strong influence on all aspects of life in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s.

Thus, according to Betty Peh-T'i Wei, by the early 20th century, there were the three Shanghais, the Shanghai of the foreigners, of the Westernized Chinese, and of the Chinese.¹² Millions of Shanghai people, living among foreigners and ruled by gangsters, struggled for daily bowls of rice. According to Wei, Shanghai's factories harbored all manner of ills inherent to early industrialization, with low wages, long hours, and dangerous working conditions.¹³ Mainly women worked in textile mills. Because of the gangsters' power and the prevailing social disorder, unemployment, poverty, and prostitution were fostered.

On the other hand, Shanghai was also a center of artistic and literary achievement. In the 1930s, the Leftist Writers League was founded in Shanghai. People studying film, drama and the arts overseas often returned to Shanghai to work. Painters, dramatists, musicians and actors all over the country came to Shanghai and made contributions to the film industry.

Cultural Background

By the end of the 1910s, a young generation of intellectuals in China had been exposed to western history, philosophy and literature. They sought to abandon the old feudalistic traditions and institutions and seek fresh and vital ideas. They published magazines and held meetings in Beijing, Shanghai, and other major cities in China. On May 4th, 1919, about 3000 students in Peking University held a mass protest against imperialism and the government's betrayal of the country in the Versailles meeting. This demonstration began what came to be known as the May 4th Movement. Historian Chow Tse-tung points that the May 4th Movement included not only the demonstration on that day, but that the term is used to "designate the whole process of an intensified intellectual change from about 1915 to the early 1920s, embracing what contemporaries called the new thought movement, new culture movement, and the literary revolution."¹⁴

However, Chinese cinema of the 1920s stayed away from this cultural movement. The film studios ignored the radical social and cultural changes. They concentrated on producing entertainment films, which included musicals, light comedies, episodes from traditional fiction and opera, martial arts adventures, adaptations of butterfly novels, detective stories, and morality tales. Not only were many of the films adapted from classical stories, but the intertitles were written in a form of classical Chinese.

Xiao Zhiwei's article, entitled "Anti-Imperialism and Film Censorship During Nangjing Decade, 1927-1937" points out an important aspect of the Chinese cinema from 1927-1937. The major theaters in Shanghai were under the control of foreign

owners. Hollywood films dominated the market. In the 1920s and 1930s Chinese rarely appeared in Hollywood films; and when they did, it was usually as gamblers, drug-users, prostitutes, and other negative images. This infuriated the Chinese people. Because of the protests of the filmmakers and audiences in Shanghai, the Nanking government imposed censorship on imported films. Meanwhile, to protect the Chinese film industry, the government thwarted the efforts of the British-American Tobacco Co. Ltd. to monopolize the film industry in China. It also banned some American capitalists' plans to establish a film base, an "Oriental Hollywood" in Shanghai.¹⁵

A Brief History of Chinese Cinema Before 1930

China made its first film in 1905, when the Beijing Fengtai Photoshop made *Ding Jun Shan*, an excerpt from a Beijing Opera work starring the famous performer, Tan Xinpei. It was eight years later film that the first feature length film, *Poor Wife and Poor Husband* was made by the Asia Film Studio, directed by Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu. The story tells of the marriage of a girl and a young man, who have never met but are arranged to be married by their parents. The Asia Film Studio was owned by Americans, and they hired Chinese employees including Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu to make films which would be accepted in the Chinese market. Zhang's principle was that "the audience's interest comes first."¹⁶ Initially he produced commercial entertainment films without any social agenda. In 1913 and 1914 Zhang directed over a dozen short comedies influenced by the emerging Hollywood slapstick tradition and adapted from Chinese folklore and opera. He tried to attract viewers with

comedies like *King of Fun in China*, *Funny Love*, *Clerk Lost His Lottery*, and other films.¹⁷

However, these comedies failed to attract a substantial audience. In following the style of foreign comedies like Charlie Chaplin's films, they were considered novel at the beginning, but the audience soon grew tired of them.¹⁸ These films simply imitated the form of foreign films, and did not hold the interest of Chinese audiences, so the filmmakers started to insert more traditional Chinese values into their films. China as of the early 20th Century was a still feudalistic country. Confucianism had dominated society and culture for two thousand years. The main ideas of Confucianism hold that subjects should obey emperors, sons should obey fathers, students should obey teachers, and wives obey husbands. Economically China was an agricultural country with a limited amount of industry. Zhang Shichuan determined that his films based on "the audience's interest" would not work, so he started to follow Zheng Zhengqiu's filmmaking policy of "edifying the society." Zheng was one of the early drama critics in China. He said that the stage was a place to educate the people, and that actors were teachers of social education. Zhang approved of traditional moral values on the one hand, while on the other he favored reform of the corrupt and backward feudalistic society. As China was influenced economically and culturally by foreign countries, traditional values were challenged and gradually lost their dominant power. Zheng's films, then, were to reinforce what was good and to criticize what was bad about traditional values. When *The Orphan Saved His Forefather* was released in 1923, it was

a big success. With a theme of traditional morals overcoming evil forces, it provided a reassuringly conservative message.¹⁹

In the 1920s over 170 film production companies were founded. This was an era in which China was experiencing great social and cultural change. One advocate of change was the so-called New Literature movement, an offshoot of the May Fourth Movement, which also advocated anti-feudalist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist values. Writers of New Literature, for example, promoted writing in the vernacular instead of classical Chinese. Aspects of western literature, ideology, and philosophy which were perceived as progressive also influenced these writers. However, China's film culture at this point was not a part of this movement. Not only were many films adapted from classical stories, but screenwriters sometimes used classical Chinese intertitles to tell the story.²⁰

In 1928, the Mingxing Film Studio made a martial arts film called *Fire on the Temple of Red Lotus*. As this film made a huge profit, other film studios soon followed suit, and numerous "Fire on..." films were made. In all, 18 episodes of *Fire on the Temple of Red Lotus* were produced. Martial arts films were popular, typically featuring rebellious legendary figures who used martial arts and sometimes superpowers. Woman warriors were important characters in many of these films - in some instances, their kung fu was superior to that of male characters. These action-oriented films were exported to Southeast Asia, where many Chinese immigrants lived, and substantial revenues were generated in these markets as well.

Another standard genre was the “butterfly” films, namely, love stories. These scenarios were adapted from the substantial and popular print butterfly literature. Both martial arts films and butterfly films were entertaining and escapist forms that deliberately stayed away from contemporary social issues.

The indigenous film industry continued to grow. By the late 1920s, the dominant film genres were the martial arts films and butterfly movies which were seen by some critics and viewers as totally irrelevant to contemporary urban reality. These genres, though, had gradually come to exhaustion and were unable to satisfy the demand of audiences who were becoming increasingly socially and politically concerned. The country was in an unstable condition, facing contradictory forces in its ideological, political and cultural life - traditional values vs. western values, civil war vs. foreign invasion, the Communist Party vs. the Nationalist Party. Leftist films came into being against such an historical background.

Notes:

1. Zhou Bing & Yao Guohua, "The First Leap in Chinese Cinema," *Dang Dai Dian Ying*, 2 (1994): 32.
2. Cheng Jihua, *Zhongguo Dianying Fazhanshi (History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*, (Beijing: China Cinema Press, 1981), 171-575.
3. Zhong Dianfei, "Films: Trying to Make Contributions to the Progression of the Society and People," *Cinema Brochure* (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Press, 1987), 227.
4. Zhou & Yao: 32-37.
5. Ling Zhengyuan, "Comparison Between Chinese Leftist Films and Italian Neo-realist Films," *Shanghai Teacher's College Journal*, No. 1(1992): 110-117.
6. Zhao Dan, *The Gate of Hell* (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Press, 1979).
7. Zhang Yingjin, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 187-202.
8. Jay Leday, *Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audiences in China*. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972) 71.
9. Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema, Cultural and Politics Since 1949* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 10.
10. Leo Ou-Fan Lee, "The Tradition of Modern Chinese Cinema," in *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, ed. Chris Berry (London: British Film Institute, 1991), 8.
11. James E. Sheridan, *China in Disintegration - The Republican Era in Chinese History, 1912-1949*, London: The Free Press, 1975, 207.
12. Betty Peh-T'i Wei, *Shanghai - Crucible of Modern China*, Hong Kong, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, 4.
13. Wei, 128-132.
14. Sheridan, 121.
15. Xiao Zhiwei, "Anti-imperialism and Film Censorship During the Nanjing decade: 1927-1937," in *Transnational Chinese Cinema - Identify, Nationhood, Gender* Hsiao-peng Lu, ed., (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 35-57.
16. Cheng 57.

17. Cheng 57-59.

18. Cheng 57.

19. Cheng 60-63.

20. Cheng 64.

CHAPTER II

THE RISE OF THE LEFTIST FILM MOVEMENT

The discussion of the development of leftist film movement is significant, for it takes on several layers of meaning. First, the start of the movement shows that May Fourth ideas began to influence the film industry long after the May Fourth movement itself had ended, and thus marks an important period of transition in the history of Chinese cinema. Second, the ideology of the leftist dramatists and their perceptions of film as a medium were significant, as these became their guidelines to cinematic practice. Third, an explanation is needed of why film studios decided to cooperate with leftist filmmakers. Further discussion of the issues that Chinese and western film critics commonly consider in this context is also warranted: the “literary” tradition of Chinese film, the ideological identification of leftist dramatists, and to what degree the Communist Party influenced the leftist urban films. The rise of leftist urban films can be discussed from two perspectives: a consideration of the efforts of the leftist dramatists, and a consideration of the studios involved with leftist productions.

The New Cultural Movement in the early 20th Century in China, stimulated by the events surrounding May 4, 1919, had a broad and deep influence on the political, cultural and social life of the country. However, May Fourth thought didn't play a role in filmmaking until the late 1920s. As Paul Pickowicz points out, “most May Fourth literary

intellectuals simply refused to take the film medium seriously,” and “most regarded filmmaking as a vulgar commercial activity that had nothing to do with art.”¹ Cheng Jiuhua points out that Chinese cinema in the 1910s and 1920s was a commercial art form that simply rejected the May Fourth anti-feudalistic tradition:

The film industries were in the control of businessmen, and film was used as a tool to make money. Film productions were in the control of writers of butterfly literature and crew from Wenming Drama,² and their films were to embody their feudalistic ideas.³

By the late 1920s a number of writers and artists congregated in Shanghai. Lu Xun, who was considered the most important writer in the New Literature movement, also relocated to Shanghai from Beijing. An important activity of these writers and artists, many of whom later became script writers, film directors, and actors in leftist films, was the spoken drama (Huaju) practice. A few drama societies were founded in the late 1920s, providing a training ground for China’s most talented writers, directors and performers. These societies staged plays adapted from western literature by Ibsen, Maupassant, Moliere, and others. Many leftist filmmakers and performers were involved in drama before they entered the film circle. Even after they began to participate in film production, some of them continued to still work on the stage. The Shanghai Amateur Experimental Theatrical Troupe, for example, included many members working in the field of film, including actors like Jin Shan, Tao Jin, Wei Heling, Gu Eryi; actresses Wang Ying, Shu Xiuwen, Zhao Huishen and Sun Weishi; directors Zheng Junli, Zhang Min, Shi Dongshan; and dramatists Chen Baichen and Song Zhidi.⁴

Leo Ou-fan Lee points out that the development of modern Chinese cinema converged with that of the New Literature Movement (a part of the New Culture Movement) in the early 1930s.⁵ He talks about dramatist Tian Han's perception of film in the late 1920s. Tian started writing plays when he studied at a teacher's college in Japan. In 1921, he returned to Shanghai and went to work for publishing company. He edited a journal, *Southern News*, which provided criticism of contemporary drama, film and books. Meanwhile, he continued writing scripts. Because he had a strong interest in film and drama, Tian Han established the Southern Film and Drama Society in Shanghai in 1926. In his Inaugural Manifesto Tian Han wrote:

Wine, music and film are three masterpieces created by mankind, among which film is the youngest and most attractive form. It is capable of making dreams in broad daylight. Dreams are free action of our hearts. The distress we have from the oppression of our world can be fully expressed in our dreams...⁶

Dramatists like Tian Han demonstrated a great interest in film. This was a big change from the previous New Literary Movement practitioners who simply regarded filmmaking as a vulgar commercial activity. Tian Han started to shoot his self-funded film *Go to the Country* in 1926. It was a story about young intellectuals going to the countryside to inform peasants of the ills of society and to preach revolution. This was an entirely different thematic emphasis relative to the dominant commercial genres. However, due to a lack of money and technology, Tian Han was unable to complete the film. In fact, he had to sell his mother's property to pay the accrued debt. His other film projects were either unfinished or unsuccessful. In 1930, the Southern China Film and Drama Society was closed by Nationalist censors for political reasons.

Another film activity that intended to replace butterfly movies and martial arts films with new film styles was the production of socially conscious films by the Lianhua Film Studio. This is the perspective that Paul Clark has presented to indicate the association of the progressive May Fourth intellectuals with film work.⁷ Luo Mingyou, boss of the studio, and also a Christian minister, owned theaters and distribution offices all over China. He hired writers and dramatists who had received western education. Clark discusses the motives of Lianhua: "The Lianhua management must have felt that a market for sound films existed or could be created among educated Chinese, who seem in the mid-1920s to have drifted away from silent films as a vulgar medium."⁸ The socially conscious films of Lianhua attracted large audiences. In 1931, Sun Yu directed *Gu Du Chun Meng*, a film that tells a story of the corruption and family tragedy of a tax officer in the Warlord period. It broke box office records in major cities like Beijing, Tianjin and Shanghai. Cheng Jihua points out the many differences between the leftist-associated studios Lianhua and Mingxing, and companies which continued to produce martial arts and butterfly movies at that time:

Because most of the writers, directors and performers were bourgeois who received western education or petite-bourgeois intellectuals (college students, returned students from overseas and drama performers), they were different from the writers of butterfly literature who had superiority in film production and performers who got their start in Wenming Drama. [Lianhua filmmakers] were not involved in the production trend of martial arts films; They were away from the influences of Wenming Drama, broke the rules of traditional narrative structure of day-to-day account. They pay more attention to directing skills and the using of film language, and were able to bridge shots more smoothly [than butterfly and martial arts films]. Lianhua films provided a new visual attraction. Therefore, it is natural that, in a time when audiences started to detest martial arts films, these films were more welcomed by audiences, especially the

intellectuals and young students.⁹

The failure of his independent film activities and the closure of the Southern China Film and Drama Society had a direct influence on Tian Han's political ideology. Cheng Jihua talks about the process of Tian Han's transformation from "a petite-bourgeois intellectual" to a "Marxist soldier."¹⁰ In his article "Waking from the Silver Dream" published in *Cinema* in 1930, Tian Han criticized himself for regarding film as a kind of dream. He pointed out that film as a medium is in the control of the bourgeois, and it is therefore propaganda for the bourgeois.¹¹ In 1931, he joined the Communist Party, which was not an unusual decision for someone of Tian Han's background. The intellectual's obsession with the ills of the society and strong desire for social revolution often resulted in a turn to Marxist ideology, which was introduced to China in the late 1910s and became influential with the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. The underground branch of the Communist party in the Shanghai cultural circle, led by Qu Qiubai, also imposed a direct influence on writers and artists.

The term "leftist films" actually includes a wide array of films. It mainly refers to films produced by dramatists and artists associated with the Leftist Dramatists League; however, it also includes other socially conscious films, especially Lianhua films made by directors like Sun Yu and Wu Yonggang that had no connection with either the Communist Party or the Leftist Dramatist League. The term "leftist" is itself a vague term. Generally speaking, it suggests "revolutionary," "proletariat," and "communist." The opposing word was "rightist," which stands for "anti-revolutionary," "bourgeois,"

and “capitalist.”

The Leftist Dramatists League was founded subsequently after the Leftist Writer's League and followed the same principle of creating proletarian literature. In September 1931, the League proclaimed its “Action Guidelines,” which argued that members should also consider film production in addition to drama; that in addition to script writing and participation in film production, members should raise funds and make films themselves; that they should organize a Film Criticism Association, and promote progressive performers and filmmakers in their work; and that they should build a proletarian film movement and challenge previous Chinese film practice. The principal audience of the films should include country peasants, the urban proletariat, and middle class urban residents.¹²

Although many members of Leftist Dramatists League were communists such as Tian Han, Yan Hansheng and Xia Yan, the Communists had never been in leadership positions in the League. Cheng Jihua's assertion that the Chinese Communist Party had guided and organized film production has been questioned by western Chinese film scholars like Paul Clark, Chris Berry and Leo Ou-fan Lee.¹³ As a matter of fact the Communist Party was in a position to seek the cooperation of the Leftist Dramatists League and film studios. The influence of the Communist Party should not be underestimated, as the Film Group, established under the leadership of the Communist Party, included major playwrights like Xia Yan and Tian Han, and leftist films certainly do embody leftist ideology. However, the Party never assumed a leading role as

described in Cheng Jihua's book. This is because the Party, as Lee points out, "was too weak organizationally to provide the kind of leadership which later was to dictate the contents of art and literature;"¹⁴ and film production, to a large degree, depended on the activity of studios, which were still owned by capitalists.

Soviet films had a strong influence on Chinese leftist films in terms of cinematic theory and ideology. In 1926, the Soviet Consulate in Shanghai asked the Southern Film and Drama Society to organize a screening of *Battleship Potemkin* for the film and drama circle in Shanghai. Many years later Tian Han recalled this screening:

Many of my friends were rightist or had an attitude of art for art's sake. ...Though they were not happy with the propaganda content, they were overwhelmed by its production and performance. They admitted that the film conveyed an unprecedented power and beauty, which was the power and beauty of the rebellious mass."¹⁵

In the early 1930s, Russian films were allowed to be publicly screened in Shanghai, providing more chances for drama and film practitioners to study them. Tian Han published a special issue of his magazine *Southern Monthly* in July 1930 which included translated articles from many languages on Russian cinema.¹⁶ In another article, Tian wrote that film, like other art forms, is a tool with which the bourgeois express their ideology if the bourgeois control it; if it were in the hands of the proletariat, it would be used to educate people and organize the workers and peasants; and the Soviet Union is the country which knows best how to use this tool.¹⁷

Another important activity of that time was the production of newsreels and documentaries which chronicled the War of Resistance to Japan. Paul Clark argues that

the aggression of the Japanese army had caused a general re-orientation of Chinese intellectual and cultural life,¹⁸ and changes in film circles formed one part of this intellectual transformation. Films like *Blood War of Resistance to Japan*, *War of Resistance of the Army of the 19th Route against Japan*, *Mourning Ceremonies of the Soldiers*, and other films were made by Mingxing, Lianhua and other small studios in Shanghai. These patriotic films were welcomed by the audience at the time.

The Mingxing Film Studio had used a lot of money to buy imported sound equipment. The Japanese occupation in northeast China in 1931 made Mingxing lose an important part of its market, though, and the bombing of Shanghai in 1932 further worsened its financial crisis. To save itself, the studio banked on the commercial success of another butterfly movie, the fourth episode of *Ti Xiao Yin Yuan*. However, it turned out that the audience, stimulated by a patriotic sentiment, had drifted away from this genre, and the studio didn't get its money back.¹⁹

Zhou Jianyun, the studio head, asked his friend Qian Xingcun to put him into contact with some leftist dramatists. Xia Yan, Zheng Boqi and Qian A'ying were invited to write script for the studio. These three writers were Communist Party members. They were told by the Party leaders to accept this job and use this medium owned by capitalists to speak for the oppressed of the proletarian class. The infiltration of the leftist dramatists represented a significant change in the production policy of the Mingxing Studio. The decision-makers of the studio had realized that socially conscious films would be the major film trend in the coming years. Zheng Zhengqiu, the studio head,

stated that films are responsible for the progression of the society. He proposed that film production should follow the policy of “anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism and anti-feudalism,” a sentiment which closely coincided with the thoughts of the May Fourth New Culture Movement.²⁰ Another studio boss, Zhang Shichuan, called this change “an inevitable step.”²¹ Meanwhile, the Mingxing studio proclaimed publicly that “the wheel of the history is always rolling forward. If the film circle fails to catch up with the times and make a contribution to the development of a new culture, it will be discarded by the times.”²²

The first leftist film produced by the Mingxing studio was *Wild Torrent*, with a screenplay by Xia Yan. The story concerns the social struggle in a rural area near the Changjiang River during a flood. It was the first “shot-by-shot” scenario script of Mingxing studio. Before this film the directors didn’t work from detailed, written scripts but only general outlines. Leftist dramatists introduced detailed, written scripts to film production. Further, they made an even more important contribution to film production by injecting the ideas of the May Fourth tradition into the Shanghai film circle.

The rise of leftist films marks an important period of transition in the history of Chinese cinema. Entertaining and escapist films styles hence declined, and there were more and more films reflecting contemporary social problems. Most leftist filmmakers were influenced by Marxist ideology in addition to May Fourth ideas. They started to produce films which they thought would target specific audiences, especially rural peasants, the urban proletariat, and middle class urban residents. Major film studios in

Shanghai had discovered the potential market for leftist films, and therefore they were willing to cooperate with leftist filmmakers. Chinese film production had entered a new period.

Notes:

1. Paul G. Pickowicz, "The 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema," in *From May Fourth to June Fourth*, Ellen Widmer & David Der-wei Wang ed., (Cambridge, Mass., London, England: Harvard University Press, 1993), 296.
2. Wenming Drama emerged in China at the end of the 19th century. Practitioners of Wenming Drama used traditional forms like Beijing opera to reflect the current political and social issues of the time. The beginning of Wenming Drama is regarded as a progressive art form by Chinese film historians. Wenming Drama turns to family issues after the 1910s, and is then regarded as an entertainment art form catering to audiences. Cheng, 20-23.
3. Cheng Jihua, *History of Chinese Cinema*, (Beijing: China Film Press, 1981), 56.
4. Patricia Wilson, "'... I Sought the Jewel of Art': Introducing Zhao Dan," *Chinese Literature*, Fall, 1979, 77.
5. Leo Ou-fan Lee, "The Tradition of Modern Chinese Cinema," in *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, ed., Chris Berry, (London: British Film Institute, 1991), 7.
6. Cheng, 112. Also see Lee, 7.
7. Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987), 10.
8. Clark, 10.
9. Cheng, 120.
10. Cheng, 120.
11. Cheng, 119.
12. Cheng, 175-179.
13. Clark, 10. Chris Berry, "Poisonous Weeds or National Treasures," *Jump Cut*, No. 34, 1989, 87-94. Also see Lee, 7.
14. Lee, 7.
15. Cheng, 137.
16. Cheng, 141.
17. Cheng, 141.

18. Clark, 10.

19. Cheng, 200-201.

20. Cheng , 202.

21. Cheng, 202.

22. Cheng, 202.

CHAPTER III
THE THEMES AND CHARACTERISTICS
OF LEFTIST URBAN FILMS

While leftist films at times focused on rural people and issues, this project concentrates on leftist films with an urban setting. These films chronicle what the filmmakers, who were urban dwellers themselves, witnessed in their daily lives, and are primarily concerned with the experiences of middle and lower class city people. By early in the nineteenth century, Shanghai had grown into an economic, political and cultural center. Zhang Yingjin describes the Shanghai of the 1930s:

It was a place of higher education and Western enlightenment, a place of career opportunities and financial speculations, a place of romantic fulfillment and sexual adventure, and a place of revolutionary activity and national salvation, as well as “Paris of the East”, the “capital of the tycoon,” and the “whore of Asia,” Shanghai covers a wide range of cultural images in modern China.¹

As the largest metropolis in China, Shanghai drew migrants of different social and cultural backgrounds. Domestic and international investors came to the city to take advantage of business opportunities and financial speculation; refugees fleeing from the occupied northeast part of China stayed in Shanghai temporarily; bankrupt peasants from neighboring areas came to the city to work in textile factories with other poor city dwellers; and educated women stayed in Shanghai to seek job opportunities. It was against this rich social and political background that the leftist urban films were set.

Much like the later Italian neo-realist films, leftist films in China also seemed to grow out of a troubled time. Three types of leftist urban films representing the thematic emphasis of this movement are to be discussed in this thesis: films on factory workers, films which deal with women's issues, and films which address the theme of national salvation.

Factory workers

A number of Japanese factories, especially textile mills, were established in Shanghai following the Sino-Japanese Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895. Other countries soon demanded to establish factories as well. In addition to these foreign ventures, Chinese-owned factories ventures were soon founded in Shanghai. These businesses recruited a vast number of jobless city dwellers and bankrupt peasants from the rural vicinity. As Betty Peh-T'i Wei describes:

Traditional means of support such as farming and transporting good had become scarce, if indeed they still existed at all. Incessant warfare and natural disasters had plagued China at the turn of the century and throughout the early decades driving men from the countryside. Those who were able to find any job at all considered themselves fortunate.²

Factory workers usually endured long working hours, dangerous working conditions, and low pay. Child labor was common.³ The condition of factory workers was therefore one of the immediate concerns of leftist writers. In the early 1930s Xia Yan published his short novel *The Contract Workers*, which was considered an exemplary work of leftist literature. Xia Yan was a returned student from Japan. He joined the Communist Party in the 1920s. He was an important writer of the leftist Writers League. After the Film Group was founded, he was assigned as the leader of the

Group by the Party. In *The Contract Workers*, Xia Yan revealed the ills of factory life - child labor, filthy living condition, no safety policy, abuse of workers by their supervisors. Following his film scripts for *Wild Torrent* and *Spring Silkworm* which focused on country life, Xia Yan wrote *24 Hours in Shanghai*, his first script reflecting urban life. It was produced by the Mingxing Studio in 1933, and directed by Shen Xiling.

This film chronicles the chain of events occurring over a single day, centering around an injured child worker. The story begins at 4 PM. When Zhou, boss of the factory, hears that a child was injured on the job, his reaction is rather indifferent: "It is because he was not cautious. No more word about it!" He forgets the matter quickly and picks up the phone to call his wife. The injured child is brought home. It is a grievous moment for his family, for they are too poor to afford a doctor. Their neighbor, Lao Zhao, worries too. Chen Da, the boy's brother, goes to his wife, who is a maid in Zhou's house, to try to think of a way to raise money. The film returns at this point to Zhou and his wife, who are discussing ways of entertaining themselves at that night. His wife finds an excuse and leaves by herself. She goes to a horse race with her young boyfriend. Meanwhile, Zhou dines with his mistress in a restaurant, as the boy is dying at home. To save the boy, Lao Zhao goes to Zhou's house to steal some money. The next morning, Zhou's wife finds that her money gone and has Chen Da arrested as a suspect. The story ends at 4 PM, with the boy's death, Chen Da's wife's dismissal from work, and his friend Lao Zhao's imprisonment. Meanwhile, Zhou's wife plans again

how she will spend her evening.

According to Cheng Jihua, *24 Hours in Shanghai* followed the leftist film guidelines set in 1932 by the Chinese Film and Culture Association, which asked filmmakers to feature the social contradictions of contemporary life in China, and to unfold them explicitly to audiences.⁴ The theme of this film, clearly, is class conflict. There are two story lines - the boy and his family, and Zhou and his wife. With parallel editing used to show the simultaneous activities of each family, the film inevitably implies that the misfortunes of the boy and his family have been caused by the exploitation of the capitalists. The capitalist class is portrayed as ruthless, having no concern for the injured child worker. Their forms of entertainment - gambling, lavish dining, even moviegoing - were considered too luxurious and beyond the scope of most city people, not to mention the poverty-stricken workers. Strong contrasts between the miserable lives of the poor and the debauched lives of the rich are achieved by the intercutting of scenes from Zhou and his wife's life with the poor family's effort to save the injured boy. Furthermore, the contrasts add up to an accusation and condemnation of the capitalists, as it is demonstrated that the money they spend on secret lovers, food and gambling is earned through the exploitation of workers.

Cigarette Beauty, another film featuring factory workers, was produced at nearly the same time as *24 Hours in Shanghai*. The protagonist, Chen A'da, is a bankrupt peasant who comes to Shanghai and works in the Dazhonghua Cigarette Factory with his family. The film chronicles a series of incidents (unemployment, brother's arrest, family

tragedy) in Chen A'da life, and ends with Chen's changing from an obedient worker to a rebel against his oppressors. The film argues that factory workers are becoming increasingly aware that rebellion is the only answer for their suffering.

Cheng Jihua points out that *Cigarette Beauty* has a realistic tendency in presenting the background of urban life:

Bankrupt peasants flee to the city; poor city workers are losing their jobs; foreign industry damages domestic industry; domestic capitalists transfer their crisis to urban workers by exploiting them more severely, reducing their salaries, increasing their working hours and firing workers. These phenomena were typical in the contemporary society.⁵

Cheng Jihua points out that the purpose of *24 Hours in Shanghai* was to reveal the sins of capitalists who exploit workers, the corrupt lifestyle of the bourgeoisie, and the sufferings of poverty-stricken factory workers.⁶ And he says *Cigarette Beauty* aimed to explore the life of struggle characteristic of factory workers.⁷ Characters in both *24 Hours in Shanghai* and *Cigarette Beauty* seem to be fixed in a kind of stereotype. Leftist films were likely to oversimplify real life situations by setting the characters in certain modes - the entrepreneurs and their families were ruthless and debauched, while workers were miserable, poverty-stricken and powerless. Compared to *24 Hours in Shanghai*, however, characters in *Cigarette Beauty* are more developed. There are gradations of personality between the obedient Chen A'da and his rebellious brother, and Chen A'da is portrayed with some complexity and experiences personal transformation. However, both films in general clearly are intended to embody the leftist ideology, and the characters are profiled to represent their class rather as individuals with

distinct personalities.

Women's Issues

In the first few decades of the 20th Century, the status of women had been one of the primary concerns in Chinese films, literature, drama and journalistic writing. Women became a dynamic force in social and cultural life in the early 20th Century as they were being liberated from some areas of patriarchal control. For the first time women could be married according to their own wishes, had opportunities to be educated, and could work with males. However, the society was still male-centered and male-dominant in many ways. Both men and women were concerned with and caught up in the ills of contemporary society. The so-called independent, free life in China's growing industrial cities was both an attraction and a danger especially to women. The predicament of these "New Women" was a point of convergence for various discourses in different media. Zhang Yinjing points out these reasons for the new interest in the "New Woman" in cinema and literature:

First, New Women constitute a new, productive, yet in many ways disruptive force in modern Chinese society; second, the sheer number of literary/cinematic configuration of new women from the 1910s on points to a site of cultural production in which new ways of re-examining traditional Chinese values are being explored; third, invariably tied to modern cities where new opportunities are offered them, new woman are configured both as new object of modern knowledge and as a new subject potential social change.⁸

The Three Modern Women and *New Woman* are the two most representative films on this theme produced by leftist filmmakers. *The Three Modern Women* was scripted by Tian Han, directed by Bu Wancang and produced by the Lianhua Film Studio in 1933. It

profiles the lives of three women in the life of the protagonist Zhang Yu: Yu Yu, a “bourgeois” lady, by inviting Zhang Yu to a dance hall and theater, introduces him to a bourgeois, corrupt lifestyle. Zhou Shuzhen, Zhang Yu’s abandoned fiancée, works as a telephone operator in Shanghai after the Japanese occupation of her hometown. She grows into a dedicated proletarian fighter and encourages Zhang Yu to take up his responsibility at this moment of national crisis. Meanwhile, Chen Ruoying, who is infatuated with Zhang Yu, kills herself when Zhang rejects her love. The film ends with the unification of Zhang Yu with Zhou Shuzhen. Through Zhang Yu’s words, Tian Han expresses the definition of the New Women: “Today I realize that only the most self-supportive, most rational, most courageous, and most mindful of public welfare can be the most modern women!”

As scriptwriter Tian Han later acknowledged, class analysis played a crucial role in identifying what was considered “modern” in *Three Modern Women*: only the proletarian (represented by Zhou in her self-identification with workers and her conscientious work for national salvation) was to be included in the category of modern.⁹ Zhang says that both in the case of Zhou Shuzhen of *The Three Modern Women* and in that of Li A’ying of *New Woman*, characters serve “as a conscience voice for leftist ideology.”¹⁰ An ideal Modern Woman is portrayed as an enthusiastic participant in the revolutionary cause and national salvation movement. Even their love stories, as Zhang Yinjing points out, are “re-oriented as part of the discourse of revolution and national salvation.”¹¹ The configurations of the proletarian, revolutionary women can be read as

a discursive means of addressing leftist ideology by leftist filmmakers.

New Woman, a film directed by Cai Chusheng, screenplay by Sun Shiyi and produced by the Lianhua Film Studio in 1935, chronicles the struggle of a female music teacher and aspiring author, Wei Ming, in her pursuit of personal and economic independence, only to find her life destroyed by the evil forces of society. By including an important supporting character, Li A'ying, a progressive female worker, the filmmakers provide a reference for what a New Woman should be. The song at the end of the film furthermore expresses this idea:

New women are the masses of women producers;
New women are the labor of society...

In this setting, gender configurations overlap class configurations. As Zhang Yinjing points out, "New Woman" is a term interchangeable with "masses," "labor of society," and "vanguards."¹² This stereotype of woman became more common in the films produced after 1949, in characters such as Xing Chunhua of *Stage Sisters* (1964), Lin Daojing of *The Song of The Youth* (1959), and Wu Qionghua of *The Red Detachment of Women* (1971). The tradition, as a matter of fact, can be traced back to leftist films like *The Three Modern Women* and *New Woman*. According to Zhang Yinjing, "historically speaking, the rhetorical strategies for configuring the revolutionary woman as one who cares little for her gender difference in the post-1949 Chinese films were in fact tested out in the cinematic configurations of modern women in the early 1930s."¹³ It was as early as the 1930s that this stereotype of revolutionary women began to take shape.

Patriotic Films

The national emergency of the 1930s affected China in two ways: internally, civil war, poverty, and class conflict had resulted in great chaos within the country; externally, Japan bombed Shanghai following its occupation of the north-east provinces; and, after a temporary suspension, invaded north China. The aggression of Japanese army, which was considered the most dangerous threat to the survival of the country, aroused a strong sense of urgency throughout China. The nation was swept by a strong patriotic sentiment. Films featuring patriotic themes were welcomed by audiences at the time. According to Chris Berry, the filmmakers “represented contemporary social problems and participated in the growing call for national unity in the face of Japanese attack at a time when Chiang Kai-shek was still following a conciliationist line with the Japanese.”¹⁴

Though there are films that especially focus on the theme of national salvation, most leftist films incorporate reflect this patriotic theme. The Japanese aggression was the larger contextual background from which films concerning issues of factory workers, women and intellectuals were developed. In this chapter, two films of patriotic theme, *National Salvation* and *Feng Yun Er Nu*, are to be discussed.

National Salvation, scripted and directed by Tian Han, was the first film produced by the Yihua Film Studio. The owner of the studio, Yan Chuntang, was originally an opium trader. He invested his money in film production when he found the business was profitable. Through his association with the Tian Han, Yan Chuntang soon developed a team of leftist writers, directors, and performers in his studio. The Yihua

Studio became an active leftist film center for a time. *National Salvation* is about the pre-war life of the lower class people of Shanghai. Characters include two people from occupied provinces, a factory worker, and a woman abandoned by her rich husband. It was about how these people work, go on strike, are fired and driven out of their house. Upon finding their new home, which they build themselves, bombed by the Japanese, these men and women join the army of volunteers to fight against Japan.

The theme of national salvation was a convergence point for leftist filmmakers to address domestic and external crises. The ending of the film - to be unified and fight against the intruders, seems to be the solution Tian Han suggests for both crises. The War of Resistance is addressed in the film as an outbreak of the furies of the masses toward both domestic oppression and foreign intrusion.

This film was originally entitled "The Homeless Chinese," then "Where Are We Going," before it was named "National Salvation." The changes of the film's title also imply Tian Han's growing awareness of the powerful theme of patriotism and self-salvation.

Feng Yu Er Nu was produced in the Diantong Film studio in 1935. Originally a company selling film equipment, Diantong changed to a production studio with the influx of a group of leftist talent after 1933. In 1934, Diantong produced its first film *Plunder of Peach and Plum*, written by Yuan Muzhi. *Feng Yu Er Nu* was written by Tian Han, screenplay by Xia Yan, and directed by Xu Xinzhi. It features the process of transformation of a poet Xin Baihua from a petite-bourgeois intellectual to be a soldier

fighting in the north China front against the intruders. The film song, "March of the Volunteers," composed by left-wing musician Nieh Er, became very popular after the release of the film. It encourages a strong patriotic sentiment among both soldiers and civilians. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, it became the national anthem.

Leftist Urban Films Compared with Other Film Genre of the 1930s

After the rise of the leftist film movement, butterfly movies and martial arts films gradually lost their market. They became an exhausted genre in the 1930s. Two primary styles of films other than leftist films existed in the 1930s. One was the films made by relatively "conservative" filmmakers such as Zheng Zhengqiu and Zhang Shichuan; the other style, called "Soft Cinema," more self-consciously criticized leftist films.

Zheng Zhengqiu was one of the first Chinese filmmakers to make fiction films. His most important contribution to Chinese cinema was that he had introduced Chinese literary narrative structure as well as Chinese ethical values to film. In his early years, Zheng argued that the social function of cinema was to edify society. He preached what was considered good and evil in a traditional Confucian orthodox mode. As of the early 1930s Zheng was one of the influential people in the Mingxing Studio who welcomed the leftist playwrights.¹⁵

In spite of his positive attitudes towards leftist films, Zheng Zhengqiu was nevertheless a conservative person who still favored traditional Confucian ideas. Zheng's views are reflected in his *Sister Flowers*, produced in 1933. This film is about

the lives of twin sisters, Da Bao and Er Bao. The twin sisters were separated when they were children. Er Bao marries a warlord and lives a good life, while Da Bao stays in the country and marries a poor carpenter. Because of natural disasters and wars Da Bao and her family flee to the city. Da Bao finds a job as a maid in Er Bao's house. Er Bao doesn't recognize her sister and treats her cruelly.

In *Sister Flowers*, Zheng portrays the great disparity between the poor and the rich; he traces the sufferings of the poor to the ills of contemporary society (natural disaster, wars, class oppression), which is much like the leftist film style. What made Zheng's films different from the leftists' was that Zheng still looked for traditional values to solve social problems. *Sister Flowers* has a happy ending - Er Bao finally recognizes her sister and mother, she repents, and provides a good living for them. The conflict between the poor and the rich is compromised; traditional family values play a role in the transition of Er Bao's attitude; class struggle is rejected; poor people can turn into rich people overnight. The ending was criticized by leftist critics, who pointed out that the ending catered to the taste of urban residents who were on the one hand unsatisfied with the society, but on the other hand had illusions of a return to stability without the need for radical change.¹⁶

Soft Cinema was another genre in the 1930s. From the beginning to the end of the leftist film movement, leftist critics were in a constant debate with Soft Cinema critics. Leftist critics provided a strong force supporting leftist films, offering discussions of particular films, criticizing films that were not considered progressive, and defending

leftist ideology in numerous publications. According to Xia Yan, leftist critics accomplished a remarkable achievement in promoting leftist films.¹⁷ Soft Cinema critics argued that leftist films were merely propaganda, and that they were not artistic. Soft Cinema critics claimed that film should be “soft”; that film should be “ice-cream for the eyes and a sofa for the heart,” meaning that it should be entertaining and relaxing. They questioned whether filmmakers had the responsibility to make audiences aware of social ills and the national emergency. They argued that “the exposure of the miserable life and violent class struggle would hurt the weak nerve of the audience.” Leftist critics considered these ideas very reactionary.¹⁸

The quantity of Soft Cinema films was very small and was not considered sufficient to support these critical opinions. Only a few melodramas, horror films and detective films fitting the soft cinema description were made from 1934 to 1937, including *Smiling Forever*, *Blue Gem Horse*, and a few other films.¹⁹

Leftist urban films aimed forthrightly to reveal urban social problems. They were truly revolutionary in terms of ideology and themes. Leftist filmmakers were concerned with the lives of middle and lower class urban people, and addressed a variety of issues concerning different aspects of urban life, and were actively seeking solutions for social problems and the national crisis. In this sense leftist urban films surpassed other contemporary film genres. The characters of most early leftist films fall into certain modes intended to embody leftist ideology. Leftist filmmakers injected a strong revolutionary sensibility into their films, and leftist criticism was a strong force

supporting this kind of film production. In the late period of the movement, filmmakers produced two brilliant films which are considered exemplary leftist films, *Crossroad* and *Street Angel*. These films will be discussed in the next chapter.

Notes:

1. Zhang Yingjin, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature & Film*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 189.
2. Betty Peh-T'i Wei, *Shanghai: Crucible of Modern China*, (Hong Kong, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 132.
3. Wei, 128.
4. Cheng Jihua, *History of Chinese Cinema*, (Beijing: China Film Press, 1981), 217.
5. Cheng, 223.
6. Cheng, 219.
7. Cheng, 221.
8. Zhang, 189.
9. Zhang, 205.
10. Zhang, 204.
11. Zhang, 204.
12. Zhang, 203.
13. Zhang, 207.
14. Chris Berry, "Poisonous Weeds or National Treasures," *Jump cut*, No.34, 1989, 92.
15. Cheng, 235-236.
16. Cheng, 239.
17. Xia Yan, *Recalling Old Dreams Lazily*, (Beijing, China Cinema Press, 1984), 128.
18. Cheng, 395-412.
19. *Smiling Forever*, screenplay by Soft Cinema critic Liu Naou and directed by Wu Cun, was produced by the Mingxing Studio in 1936-1937. *Blue Gem Horse* was produced by the Mingxing Studio, directed by Xu Xinfu in 1935.

CHAPTER VI

AN ANALYSIS OF *CROSSROADS* AND *STREET ANGEL*

Leftist filmmakers were mainly involved with the activities of specific studios including Mingxing, Lianhua, Yihua and Diantong. Among them the Mingxing Studio was the most important base of the leftists. Mingxing started to recruit leftist talents in 1933, hiring writers like Xia Yan and A'ying. The years 1933 and 1934 constituted a prolific period for leftist filmmakers at Mingxing, with *Silk Worm*, *Wild Torrent*, *24 Hours in Shanghai*, *Tobacco Beauty*, and other films produced. Because of the strong revolutionary sensibilities of these films, Mingxing ran into trouble with the Nationalist government censors. Some films were banned or had scenes cut, and Xia Yan was forced to leave the Studio.¹ In reaction to this pressure, most of the Mingxing films of 1935 were entertainment product, but some leftist films were still produced, such as Shen Xiling's *The Boatman's Daughter* and *Nostalgia*. As leftist films had established an audience, the Mingxing Studio continued to hire leftist artists. In 1936, Zhang Shichuan, the head of the company, borrowed capital to build a second studio. Leftist filmmakers like Yuan Muzhi, Shen Xiling, Wu Yinxian, Chen Bo'er and others were hired. In the following year, the two most popular Mingxing titles, *Crossroads* and *Street Angel*, were released.

By the time the *Crossroads* and *Street Angel* were produced, Chinese filmmakers

had become familiar with sound film production techniques. Chinese audiences saw sound films for the first time in 1926, when a couple of short American films premiered in Shanghai's Baixing Theatre. At the end of the 1920s there were a number of theatres in Shanghai and other big cities equipped with sound film projectors screening imported sound films. In 1930, the Mingxing Studio made one of the first Chinese-produced sound film, *Sing-song Girl Red Peony*. The studio met with technical problems in the production as well as financial problems in connection with purchasing sound equipment. Though the recorded sound was not very good, this sound film was still well received by the public.²

Progressive filmmakers and dramatists had shown great interest in sound film production. Cheng Jihua points out that "progressive filmmakers and revolutionary artists thought that sound film could be better understood and accepted by the audience, therefore they welcomed the coming of sound films."³ Sound films were regarded as a good propaganda tool to spread leftist ideology. Xia Yan thought that sound films would replace silent films in a short time. Another filmmaker, Meng Chao, thought that the sound film, like other art forms, would not merely be a popular entertainment; it would be a very good propaganda tool and would be widely accepted by the audience. Shen Xiling thought China should make its own sound films and that sound films would be a successful mass medium.⁴

According to Leo Ou-fan Lee, the coming of sound films to China brought "the film medium even closer to spoken drama."⁵ In 1934, leftist filmmakers made their first

sound film *Plunder of Peach and Plum*. It was successful, with good synchronization of sound to visual images, and effectively used sound effects and music.

Plunder of Peach and Plum was said to be very much a collaborative work.

Collective effort was the norm in leftist film production. Usually screenplay writers were inspired by their discussions with other filmmakers; writers and director often exchanged opinions on scripts; writers and directors would create film roles designed for particular actors; and actors' improvisations and on-the-set suggestions would usually be welcomed by directors. Cheng Jihua points out that camera operators, artists, musicians, and sound engineers also made great contributions to leftist films.⁶ The filmmakers of *Crossroads* and *Street Angel* also showed this collaborative working habit.

Crossroads

Director Shen Xiling originally studied the arts in Japan. After he returned to China, he became a stage and film director. In 1933, he was assistant director of Zheng Zhengqiu's film *Sister Flowers*. In the same year, he directed his first film, *Outcry of Women*, which was about the lives of women contract workers in Shanghai. Many of Shen's early films focus on the miseries and suffering of lower class urban or rural people, including *24 Hours in Shanghai*, *The Boatman's Daughter*, and *Nostalgia*. In 1936, he started to make *Crossroads* in the second studio of the Mingxing company.

Shen Xiling had a close affiliation with the New Earth Theatre Group. This organization was under the leadership of the Leftist Drama League, and most of its members were film people at the time. Some of the members who had come to Shanghai

from the occupied northeast provinces were Sha Meng and Lu Ban, who played the roles of Liu Dage and A'tang in *Crossroads*. Zhao Dan recalled that how Shen Xiling was inspired to make a film about young intellectuals:

Shen Xiling came to the New Earth Theatre Group quite often. He noticed that young people here had the same goals and had good relationship with each other, but each one had a distinct characteristics. He heard some sad stories of the hardships Lu Ban and Sha Meng had encountered on their way from their hometown to Shanghai. Shen was thus inspired to produce a film revealing the common emotions of the contemporary young people: on the one hand, the patriotic sentiment is growing; on the other hand, as they are losing their study and job opportunities, they suffer, hesitate and don't know what they are going to do. Thus he gives the film the name "Crossroads."⁷

The social activism of young intellectuals is one of the important themes in leftist literature and films. In the late 1920s, Lu Xun published his collection of prose and novels entitled *Hesitation*. This collection includes stories of young intellectuals wrestling with social commitment. The word "hesitation" is intended to reflect the state of mind of the young Chinese intellectual in the 1920s and 1930s. Most of them found that the real world was far removed from the ideal world which existed in their minds. They felt frustrated that they were unable to improve the chaotic situation of the country. In the early 1930s, the situation became more complicated when Japan started to invade China. The invasion directly threatened the country's existence. Chang Kai-shek initially followed an appeasement policy with Japan. Because of the uncertain future of the whole country the young intellectuals were uncertain of their own fate, too. *Crossroads* was one of the films dealing with the concerns of young intellectuals.

The younger generation's sense of "mission" is mentioned at the beginning of the

film, in a conversation between Lao Zhao and Xiao Xu. Xiao Xu is very pessimistic and has tried to drown himself in the Huangpu River. Lao takes him home and looks after him. He says to Xiao Xu, "I think that we are on a certain kind of mission. Though I cannot tell what the mission is, I feel that we do have this mission. Before we finish our mission, we should not take our own lives."

Lao Zhao and his three good friends have just graduated from college. None of them finds a job initially. They choose different paths: Liu Dage returns to the north to join the army; Xiao Xu returns home to see his mother, a trip paid for by money he earns by selling his diploma to a rich person; Lao Zhao and A'tang stay jobless in the city. Lao Zhao's landlady threatens to have him arrested if he doesn't pay the rent he owes. Thus Lao Zhao starts to look for job, as he fears he will become a homeless beggar like the one he sees on the street one morning.

Soon Lao Zhao finds a proofreading job in a newspaper agency. He also works as a journalist for which he does not get paid. He writes reports on city smugglers, the situation of silk mill workers, and the suicides of young students. He fulfills his "mission" by writing these stories that reveal the dark side of society, but his sense of social responsibility is regarded as strange among most people he encounters. One of his colleagues can not understand why he works so hard at a job for which he receives no salary.

The love story of Lao Zhao and Xiao Yang is the funniest part of the film. As neighbors Lao Zhao and Xiao Yang often "fight" with each other. Lao Zhao often

throws trash into Xiao Yang's room, while Xiao Yang writes notes to blame him. As Xiao Yang works in a textile mill in the daytime and Lao Zhao works at the newspaper agency at night, they never have a chance to meet each other in their residential building. They see each other each morning in a bus station, where Xiao Yang boards on the bus to work and Lao Zhao returns home. Lao Zhao rendezvous with Xiao Yang in the park, but Xiao Yang doesn't tell him where she lives. Meanwhile, Lao Zhao continues to be a bad neighbor. When he finally finds out that Xiao Yang lives next door to him, he nearly falls down.

Xiao Yang is an important character in this film. Her story can be read as a point of convergence through which *Crossroads* addresses urban women's issues and the problems of factory workers. One of the "New Women" who seeks economic independence, she has come to Shanghai from her hometown to work in a silk mill. The landlady tells Xiao Yang, "It is not simple for a woman to work in Shanghai." The gangsters in her factory try to bully and exploit her. Xiao Yang and other factory workers lose their jobs at the silk mill.

Shen Xiling doesn't emphasize Xiao Yang's status as a factory worker. He emphasizes her rather as "a petite-bourgeois woman" who becomes disillusioned when confronted by harsh reality. Petite-bourgeois was a term used by leftists in China (and elsewhere) to describe self-indulgent people who like the bourgeois lifestyle and don't care much about social change. Xiao Yang comes to Shanghai because she wants to forget someone she loves in her hometown who has already married. After several

encounters with Lao Zhao, though, she falls in love with this handsome young man. There is a scene which shows Xiao Yang's dream: while she reads one of Dumas' novels, she dreams that Lao Zhao and she become the characters in the novel.⁸ She dreams that she wears a hoop skirt and lives in a beautiful place; that her prince comes, kneels down and courts her. Her dream looks naïve and ridiculous when in reality, her prince is a poor young man living next door, and a hostile neighbor as well. Xiao Yang's factory goes bankrupt and all the women workers lose their jobs. Xiao Yang's dream of being economically independent and her fantasy of being courted by her prince evaporates. This is a recurrent motif of leftist films: the petite-bourgeois will be disillusioned, and some of them will join the struggle of the proletariat.

Crossroads shows that these young people at last become aware that the only way to survive is through struggle. After Xiao Yang loses her job, Lao Zhao is fired by the newspaper agency. Walking on the street with A'tang, Lao Zhao meets Xiao Yang and her girlfriend. They learn that Xiao Xu committed suicide on his way back to Shanghai, thus setting a negative example for these other young people. Liu Dage, on the other hand, is fighting on the northern front, thus establishing a positive model. The film ends with the four characters walking hand in hand, firmly resolved that they are going to take the high road and join the fight against Japan.

After its Shanghai's premiere in 1937, *Crossroads* was warmly welcomed by the audience. Its success lay largely in its humorous, comic style. It is very interesting to

note that while most earlier leftist films deal with social problems in a serious, tragic way, the last two films of the leftist movement, *Street Angel* and *Crossroads*, include numerous comic scenes and one of them has a hopeful ending. Both Shen Xiling and Yuan Muzhi, director of *Street Angel*, had discovered that the comic style would be more easily accepted by the audience, and that it would not harm their serious theme. Anyone who has watched *Crossroads* might remember the scene which shows how Lao Zhao dresses himself in a decent way so that he can go to work. It is the first job he has had in a long time. He tears a small strip of cloth from his white shirt and puts it in the pocket of his dark suit as a decorative handkerchief. He dyes his white shoes black so that they match his dark suit (we presume that he only has one pair of shoes). While he is dressing, he hums a song joyfully. He is full of happiness because he feels that he will be able to support himself and doesn't need to be worried about being evicted by the landlady anymore.

But Lao Zhao's happiness proves temporary, as he is soon fired. The position of the protagonist in this film, as in many other leftist films, doesn't change much. He remains poor, jobless. The difference in *Crossroads* is that the filmmakers seem to assume a more optimistic attitude toward the fate of their characters. The story on the whole is a comedy. Major characters are portrayed as optimistic, cheerful people in defiance of their troubles. As the lyrics of the song Lao Zhao hums say:

Even though I have no money,
I shall also eat a bowl of rice and live a room,
I won't care about the weird face of the landlady...

There are also many funny scenes which show the “war” between Lao Zhao and his neighbor Xiao Yang, who are in love with each other but don't know that they are neighbors. The comic style and positive ending of *Crossroads* are very different from director Shen Xiling's previous films such as *24 Hours in Shanghai*, *Nostalgia*, and *The Daughter of Fisherman*. As Cheng Jihua points out:

In *Nostalgia* and *The Daughter of Fisherman*, Shen Xiling presents his obsession of not being able to find a way out during a time of national crisis and persecution by the Nationalist government. In *Crossroads*, however, he shows that the way is to rebel and struggle. Not only does he present Lao Zhao, a character who changes from a hesitating intellectual to a devoted fighter, but also he presents Liu Dage, an ideal hero who is praised in the film.⁹

Compared to other leftist films featuring the lives of intellectuals, such as *Plunder of Peach and Plums*, the style of *Crossroads* is also different. *Plunder of Peach and Plum*, made in 1934 (and Yuan Muzhi's first film), tells the tragic story of a college graduate. Tao Jianpin, the protagonist, aspires to make a contribution to social progress after graduating from college. He works in a shipping company. When he refuses to collaborate with his corrupt boss to overload a cargo ship, he is fired. He and his wife soon exhaust their small savings. To support his family, Tao works as a laborer in a ship building company. His wife becomes very ill after giving birth to their child, and desperate for money to pay for medical treatment, Tao steals money from his boss. The story ends with the death of his wife and Tao's imprisonment. This film levels a clear accusation at the corrupt social system as the cause of this tragedy. Director Yuan Muzhi was pessimistic about the fate of people in Tao's situation.

Crossroads also deals with the life path of young Chinese intellectuals. However,

Shen Xiling was more optimistic about the fate of his characters. They were portrayed not as victims of the evil society but as happy and resolved fighters.

The role of Lao Zhao was played by actor Zhao Dan, who later played the lead role in *Street Angel*. As the story of *Crossroads* was based to a considerable extent on the real-life experiences of the New Earth Theatre Group members who were hired to act in the film, they were actually playing versions of themselves. Even the name Lao Zhao was close to the actor's name. Zhao Dan talked about this experience in his autobiography *The Gate of Hell*: "The roles in this film, as a matter of fact, are ourselves, so what we need is to play the role of ourselves."¹⁰

Shen Xiling provided minimal guidance to the performers, allowing them to develop their roles with considerable autonomy. According to Zhao Dan, Shen appreciated the ideas of the actors, and put no restrictions on their performances:

Sometimes he would stand beside the camera and watch us performing. He would forget his responsibility as a director and acted like a visitor coming to the studio or a child watching actors performing. He felt fresh and fascinated.¹¹

As the roles in the film were based on the actors' lives and the director gave them considerable license, the actors felt quite at ease. Many of the comic scenes were worked out through improvisation. For example, there is a scene showing Lao Zhao's happiness after he finds a job. After he hums a song, Lao Zhao reclines on his bed to go to sleep. Shen still wanted to see what was coming next, so he didn't ask Zhao Dan to stop. The actor had to continue to act. He had nothing to do but kick off one of his shoes, to excellent comic effect.

Shen's use of set design, camera movement, and editing created an artistic visual effect which were innovative relative to other contemporary films. He also conducted some valuable experiments with the use of sound effects in *Crossroads*.

At the beginning of the film, there is a 40-second shot showing the residence of the protagonists. The camera tracks from outdoors to indoors slowly, stops in front of a wall where framed photographs of the characters hangs, pans to the left to give us a close-up of the first portrait, Liu Dage's, and pans to the right showing each picture in succession. This shot effectively introduces the main characters and their environment. In another scene, when Lao Zhao returns home, he finds that his washing-pole laden with wet clothes was demolished by his neighbor, and his room is a mess. Shen cuts to a high-angle wide shot to present the chaotic situation of the room.

Shen Xiling used much location shooting in *Crossroads*. It is film with a strong Shanghai flavor. The film starts and ends on the bank of the Huangpu River, which can be regarded as the most prominent symbol of the city of Shanghai to many Chinese. In another shot composition, Shen put a running rickshaw in the foreground, while in the background a bus moves through the frame. This single shot illustrates graphically Shanghai's status as a semi-industrialized city with technologies of different historical moments juxtaposed as a part of everyday life. Also, in the film A'tang works as a designer of store window displays, which could be seen only in big cities like Shanghai at the time. Shen also visited a silk mill, where he filmed the factory's machinery and the workers on the job. This kind of workplace footage was rare in Chinese films.

Shen's achievement in *Crossroads* also lies in his successful experiment with sound effects. He used sound as a narrative tool. In one scene, Lao Zhao and A'tang come to Xiao Yang's factory. The first shot shows Lao Zhao and A'tang arriving in the factory. On the soundtrack is the siren, meaning that the workers' day is done. When Shen cuts to a crowd of workers coming out of the factory gate, the siren fades away, and we hear the talking of the workers. While this conversation was recorded as a jumble of sound, some lines were made to stand out, e.g., "How much did you earn today?" Xiao Yang is seen walking out. Then a man humming a song is added to the background sound. It is recognizable as the sound of a gangster, as gangsters in Chinese films usually hum a song with sexually related content. Then two gangsters appear on the screen. With several layers of sound effects Shen Xiling gives the audience a sense of the environment of the factory and economically introduces characters.

Also, in the shots showing the streets of Shanghai, Shen added many sound effects, including the bell of a streetcar, the bell of the rickshaw, and the voices of people on the streets. All of this helps to establish in the film a more naturalistic sense of Shanghai as a distinctive urban environment.

Street Angel

Street Angel was written and directed by Yuan Muzhi, and produced by the Mingxing Studio when the leftist film movement of the 1930s was drawing to its end. After its Shanghai premiere in July 1937, it was welcomed warmly by audiences. As the last work of leftist filmmakers in the 1930s, *Street Angel* was said to mark a new level of

maturity in scriptwriting, directing, and performance.¹² One critic at the time described it as a miraculous flower blossoming in the world of cinema.¹³ However, one month after its premiere, the leftist film movement was suspended due to the outbreak of the War of Resistance against Japan.

Yuan Muzhi started his career as an actor in one of the drama societies in Shanghai. As he successfully played various types of characters on stage, he was known as “a face of a thousand men” at the time.¹⁴ In 1934, after Yuan went to work for the Diantong Film Studio, he wrote his first script *Plunder of Peach and Plum*. This film concerns about the disillusionment of a young intellectual who aspires to make a contribution to society after he graduates from college. Yuan played this young intellectual, his first film role. *Plunder of Peach and Plum* was greatly influenced by stage drama, with limited scene transitions, and long, stage-bound monologues by the characters. Yuan’s performance was much like a stage performance.¹⁵ He read lines slowly and used exaggerated gestures. In 1936, after Diantong was disbanded, Yuan joined the Mingxing Studio and starred in *One Heart for Life and Death*, a story of the revolution during the warlord period. He played two roles, a revolutionary and a patriotic young man coming back to China from Southern Asia.

After his performance in *One Heart for Life and Death*, Yuan Muzhi started to work on *Street Angel*. The conception of the film was inspired by Yuan’s observation of the night activities of the people in a tavern, where he often drank and talked with Zhao Dan and other friends. In *The Gate of Hell*, Zhao Dan describes how the project was

developed collaboratively:

It was a film about the lowest strata of society in Shanghai. It was about the city poor, the newspaper vendors, and the fruit hawkers, itinerant barbers. I played a young man who was a trumpet player at weddings and funerals in a rough brass band. He was not a musician. It was just a way to make a living. There were two women in the film. One was a prostitute and the other a young singer in the taverns. The film was about these people, the most despised of society. Yuan Muzhi, the actor and director, Nieh Er, the composer, Zheng Junli, the director, Tang Na, the critic, and myself often used to meet in a certain tavern named after Cyrano de Bergerac. The son of the proprietor became very friendly to us. If we could not pay the bill, we could have credit. Sometimes, if we could not pay the bill, he would lend us money. In the tavern, we talked till dawn. It was here we met the night-life people, the prostitutes, the garbage collectors, the news vendors. That's how we got the inspiration for the film. Yuan Muzhi wrote the script and directed it. He said we must make a film about those people.¹⁶

During the production process, Yuan often went to brothels, public baths, barbershops, and teahouses in Shanghai to watch people “performing” the real life roles he wanted to profile in his film. Yuan sought a strongly a naturalistic atmosphere and setting for this film, which meant that he had to break away from the influence of stage drama on directing and performance. The lead female role, Xiao Hong, was played by Zhou Xuan, who was an unknown actress in the Dancer and Singer Troupe at the Lianhua Studio at the time. She had acted in only one film before *Street Angel*. Lianhua's boss wanted to replace her with a famous actress Bai Yang, but Yuan insisted on using Zhou. Zhou Xuan's life was rather similar to the role of the film. She was parentless, and had made a living by singing since she was a child. She was a gifted singer and actress, and after starring in *Street Angel*, she became very popular.

In dealing with characterization, Yuan Muzhi drew on the life experiences of the performers. Zhao Dan discussed this strategy:

We took the material from real life. Also the characters were fitted to suit us actors. Wei Heling, for example, in real life was a rather silent man ... In the film he played a news vendor, a rather silent man like himself, who managed to have lucky breaks. Into my part went some of my personality as seen through the eyes of Yuan Muzhi. I was clever, but I was always being fooled by Wei Heling. Yuan didn't theorize. He just let us play straight from life...¹⁷

The role of the jobless person was played by a primary school teacher, a non-actor. Yuan selected him mostly because he had an unusual appearance suited for a comedy-inflected role. This actor could not speak standard Mandarin, so the director made him speak with a stutter in the film. Thus a cornerstone of Yuan's aesthetic in *Street Angel* was that actors and actresses should play versions of themselves in order to attain a desired naturalness in the performances. This had proved to be an effective way for directors and actors to develop naturalistic and vivid film characters. Shen Xiling also used this same style in *Crossroads*. Both Yuan and Shen had come from a stage drama background, and they brought from their stage practice a strategy sometimes used by playwrights, in which they wrote roles for particular actors. As the actors played a version of themselves, they felt more at ease, which was especially beneficial for the non-professionals in the cast. *Crossroads* and *Street Angel* brought instant fame to performers like Bai Yang and Zhou Xuan. Many years later during the Cultural Revolution, Zhao Dan and Bai Yang were persecuted by Jiang Qing, Mao Tse-tung's wife, who was also an actress in the 1930s in Shanghai. She accused 1930s filmmakers of making films for "big stars." As a matter of fact, many of the performers didn't

become stars until they appeared in these two films. Zhao Dan defended the practices of the day in his autobiography by pointing out that the strategy of screenplay writers writing film roles according to the real-life characteristics of performers was actually a heritage of stage drama. He argued that classical Chinese playwrights also wrote plays based on the personalities of particular actors.¹⁸

The story of *Street Angel* concerns the lowest socioeconomic strata people in Shanghai: Xiao Chen, a trumpet player, lives in a small alley in a poor area of the city. He has four close friends: a newspaper vendor (Lao Wei), a barber, a fruit hawker and a jobless man. Next-door to Xiao Chen and Lao Wei's apartment are two sisters who fled from their occupied hometown in northeast China. They are under the protection of an evil erhu player and his wife. The elder sister Xiaoyun is forced to become a prostitute, and the younger sister, Xiao Hong, sings in a tavern with the erhu player. Xiao Chen and Xiao Hong fall in love, but the erhu player plans to sell her to a gangster named Gu Chenglong, who becomes infatuated with her after he listens to her singing in the tavern. Xiao Hong comes to Xiao Chen for help. They go to a lawyer's office, but find that they are unable to pay the required fee. Finally, Xiao Chen helps Xiao Hong escape, and they live together with Xiao's other sworn friends. A few days later Xiaoyun, pursued by the police, comes to join them, too. One day the erhu player discovers their new place, and subsequently reveals their whereabouts to the gangster. Xiaoyun helps Xiao Hong run away, while she stays behind to stop the gangsters. In the end, Xiaoyun is killed by the erhu player.

Except for the tragic ending, *Street Angel* is a comedy telling the story of a group of passionate and virtuous lower class people who have a positive and humorous attitude toward life in the face of harsh realities. The seemingly simple plot is set against a rich and complicated social background. The portrait of this background is threaded through the whole story, and is added to the film in the form of a song or through bits of conversation. The film was produced at a time when the Nationalist film censorship organization prohibited the depiction of anti-Japanese themes. However, many directors still managed to convey these sentiments indirectly. Yuan does so through a song featured at the beginning of the film. Xiao Hong returns to the tavern after watching from the balcony as Xiao Chen plays in a wedding parade. She is scolded by the erhu player for neglecting her job, and she becomes quite unhappy immediately. At the request of the patrons in the tavern, Xiao Hong starts singing the "Song of Four Seasons."

The window is full of green when spring comes
 The girl embroiders a pair of Mandarin ducks under the window
 Suddenly a burst of ruthless clubs
 beats the ducks and separate the two

The willow twigs grow long when summer comes
 The girl drifts to the Changjiang River
 There are good views on both sides of the river
 But they are not as beautiful as the field where sorghum grows out of the green curtain
 of tall crops

The lotus flowers are fragrant when fall comes
 The girl dreams of her hometown every night
 But when she wakes up, she cannot see her parents
 She can only find the bright moonlight in front of the window

The girl sews the winter coat and is ready to send it to her love
 With blood and flesh they build the great Great Wall
 She is willing to be lady Mengjiang¹⁹ of ancient times

With lyrics by Tian Han and music by He Luting, “the Song of Four Seasons” is regarded as one of the best Chinese film songs. Through a symbolic description, the song tells of a girl who flees from her occupied hometown and settles in Shanghai. That the girl embroiders Mandarin ducks means she once had a family in her hometown; “ducks” are driven away because of the “burst of ruthless clubs,” meaning that the Japanese invasion breaks up the family. The girl goes to the Changjiang River, but she misses her northern hometown where there are fields of sorghum. In winter, she sews a coat and hope it can be sent to her lover who is fighting the Japanese on the northern front.

There are often symbolic images in the lyrics used in ancient Chinese poems and legends: mandarin ducks, the bright moonlight, and Lady of Mengjiang were quite familiar to Chinese audiences. They were used in this contemporary song to describe the emotions of present-day people in exile, whose feelings can echo those of their ancestors. The visual presentation of the song uses rhetorical devices which are to an extent similar to those of modern-day karaoke and music videos; images related to the content of the lyrics (bombing, fleeing, the Changjiang River, etc.) dissolve in and out of in the singing sequence in the tavern, intercut with medium close-ups of Xiao Hong and appreciative patrons. Tian Han develops a flow of emotions in the lyrics: from the pain and suffering of losing land, finally to a nostalgic feeling, and to a patriotic sentiment.

With the “Song of Four Seasons,” Yuan Muzhi achieves two purposes: to introduce the characters (Xiao Hong, the erhu player, Gu Chenglong), and to draw the larger historical background against which the story is set.

The opening credits serve to establish a sense of geographical and social place. The film begins with shots of neon lights on hotels, restaurants and dancing halls flashing in nighttime Shanghai. There is a series of shots of Shanghai in the daytime, with people walking in the street and a tall, modern office building in the background. The opening credits also include a couple of shots of churches, which were typical buildings in the foreign concessions. When the credits for *Street Angel's* villains, Gu Chenglong and the erhu player are shown in the opening credits, the music shifts to a gloomy tone, with corresponding pictures of some intimidating lion statues situated in front of a gate. Chris Berry points out that these shots echo the famous rising lion montage in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, although the context of use is somewhat different here.²⁰ In *Battleship Potemkin*, the rising lion montage symbolizes the growing power of the rebellious mass. In *Street Angel*, however, the similar visual images were used to represent the opposite – the intimidating evil force.

Gu Chenglong, the erhu player and the lawyer are representative of the evil forces in Shanghai: gangsters had the power to interfere with the lives of ordinary people; procurers made money from prostitutes; lawyers demanded high fees that poor people could not afford. In characterizing these figures, Yuan Muzhi transcends many previous leftist films in that he individualizes these characters while also establishing them as

social types, thus avoiding the oversimplification of characters commonly seen in other leftist films. This can be attributed to Yuan's concentrated observation of real life and his emphasis on the naturalness of performances. Each evil person in *Street Angel* has his own distinct personality: the erhu player is very humble to his customers, while the lawyer is arrogant; the gangster speaks in a sincere tone when he tells his companion that he likes Xiao Hong; their strong southern dialects, moreover, achieve a humorous effect.

Another way for Yuan Muzhi to draw the contextual background was through the strategic use of newspapers as an element of design. Newspaper articles concerning current issues are posted on walls in the background of some scenes, and while the characters don't discuss these articles, the background political and social context is further entangled with the plot of the film, and is presented in a natural way. These on-screen headlines reveal the chaotic situation of the city as well as the countryside. There is a report on the Japanese invasion ("National Disaster is Impending"), and a report on prostitution in the city ("Adopted daughter sues procuress"). At times, the coordination of background headlines and foreground action is more overtly symbolic: the news headline "Silver Exported" matches with Xiao Chen's magic of spitting out a silver coin. All of this featured news concerns corruption and turbulence, and is presented in a ironic tone, representing the filmmakers' despair of and satire concerning the Nationalist government.

In the opening shot of the film (following the credits), the camera pans down from the top of a tall, modern office building to a literally subterranean level, with a subtitle

that reads "Shanghai, the lowest layer," thus quickly establishing the social status of the characters. In the scene that follows, the major characters, Xiao Chen, Lao Wei, and Xiao Hong, appear one after another in a wedding parade through the slum neighborhood. A Chinese folk music band appears in the parade with a western music band, implying that Shanghai is a city of traditional Chinese cultures mixed with western influences.

The word "angel" is an imported term. It is translated as "Tianshi," meaning "heavenly ambassador." In the Chinese language there is no equivalent word for "angel." The phrase "Street Angel" refers to people of the lowest strata, (i.e., the sworn brothers, the singer and the prostitute), and to describe them as "angels" works as ironic praise in this context. They are the despised and neglected people of the metropolis. Their rooms are shabby; the newspaper vendor mends his walls with out-of-date newspapers. The fruit hawker is asked to leave a restaurant by a snobbish waiter. The jobless dumb person does nothing but sit on a street corner and sleep. The barber loses his job when the shop is closed. All of these people are ignorant of the high class world of the city. In the scene in which Xiao Chen and Lao Wei visit the lawyer's office, they discover a world which is very different from theirs. They see a self-closing door, a heater, a water dispenser, and a glue pot for the first time in their lives. They are very curious. These characters represent the situation of the vast majority of lower class urban people, who live in a world isolated from Shanghai's social and economic elite, and they suffer constantly from poverty and unemployment.

However, Yuan Muzhi doesn't profile the characters as pitiful victims. Instead, Yuan and the performers attained a high level of richness and authenticity with regard to characterization. Characters are more developed than in other leftist films, in which they are commonly used mainly to represent ideological positions. Low strata people in most leftist films usually appear either as helpless, wretched pawns, or as victims who become revolutionaries. In *Street Angel*, the characters are significantly more "round," appearing as passionate, humorous, and determined human beings.

The relationship among the five sworn brothers are very important to the film's narrative. Yuan perspective on these characters was inspired by the real-life relationship among himself and his close friends Nieh Er, Zheng Junli, Tang Na, and Zhao Dan. They were known as five sworn brothers in Shanghai film circle at that time.²¹ Yuan's emphasis on brotherhood and mutual support was different from previous leftist films, in which characters often struggle in solitude and isolation. In *Street Angel*, the five sworn brothers rely on their friendship to carry them through extreme hardships. Among the five, Xiao Chen is the central figure. Most of the activities center around his love affair. The fruit hawker volunteers to spy on Xiao Hong when the gangster takes her out; the newspaper vendor takes Xiao Chen to a lawyer's office to look into the a possibility of a lawsuit.

Xiao Chen's words to reassure Xiao Hong demonstrate his faith in the brotherhood: "Go back home first. I have sworn brothers. My sworn brothers will definitely help me." After he sends Xiao Hong home, he blows his trumpet, which is a

signal to call all the sworn brothers together. The following sequence is played for comedy. The brothers immediately stop their work and gather at Xiao Chen's apartment. When they line up in Xiao Chen's place, they salute, this can be regarded as a humorous but telling symbol of their loyalty and devotion to a "noble cause." The process through which the brothers plan the escape is shown from the point view of Xiao Hong. As she runs to her window, the curtain of the window in which the brothers have convened is closed, blocking her direct view. However, through the curtains, Xiao Hong sees the shadows of the brothers gathering around Xiao Chen, who looks like a general in his band musician's uniform. All of them hold up their fists from time to time to celebrate their great plan, and the music also takes on a triumphant tone. Xiao Hong looks puzzled at first, but gets excited as the shadows of the figures hold up their fists more frequently. Yuan Muzhi presents these actions such that they are intended to be inspiring to the audience. What he emphasizes here is not so much the plan itself but an image of proletarian strength and solidarity.

There are two love stories in the film, one involving Xiao Chen and Xiao Hong, and the other involving the newspaper vendor and the prostitute. The romance of Xiao Chen and Xiao Hong provides the major storyline in *Street Angel*, which is significant. Leftist films usually deal with the harsh realities involving themes of working class dilemmas, women's issues or national salvation. Love stories are considered as supplements to these themes. For example, in *The Three Modern Women*, Zhang Yu's three romances are intended to reflect his personal growth. In *Feng Yun Er Nu*, Xin

Baihua's love story is used to describe in a negative way his indulgence in a petite-bourgeois life style. *Street Angel*, however, seeks a more universal appeal by dealing with themes of friendship and love, as well as matters of ideology. Both love stories in the film involve people of the lower classes. Xiao Chen and Xiao Hong make a living by performing. Xiao Hong sings in the tavern while Xiao Chen plays the trumpet for wedding parades in the nearby street. They are neighbors, and in the set design, their windows face each other across a narrow alley, thus forming a stage for the love story. As Xiao Hong lives in the erhu player's home, she has to keep her relationship with Xiao Chen a secret. She uses the reflecting light of the mirror as their contact signal. After Xiao Chen receives the signal, he comes to his window to perform magic, and Xiao Hong is very happy. Xiao Hong also can come to Xiao Chen's room by way of a wooden plank stretched between their windows. A comic effect is achieved when we watch both of them taking the risk of falling down to use the bridge.

The core of their relationship is the theme of love in "a troubled time." The two lovers struggle to break free of the tyranny of the erhu player and the gangster. They experience misunderstanding and pain, and eventually come together for a free life. The other song featured in the film, "Song of the End of the Earth," is added to reveal the theme of romance.

In the end of the earth and the corner of the sea,
we look for each other.
The girl sings a song and the boy plays it.
Love is deep for a couple in a troubled time...

The song appears in the film twice. The first time is in the context of a happy situation as the lovers meet in front of their windows. Xiao Hong is cleaning the bird cage while singing happily, and Xiao Chen plays the erhu to accompany her. The scene intercuts frequently between the characters, showing their affection for each other through facial expressions, eye contact and small gestures.

The second time Xiao Hong sings the song is in the tavern. By this point, Yuan has introduced a melodramatic crisis into the love story. A misunderstanding between the two lovers arises after the gangster takes Xiao Hong out and buys a piece of cloth for her. Xiao Hong shows it to Xiao Chen to please him. But Xiao Chen is annoyed that she went out with the gangster and throws the cloth out of the window. The crisis climaxes when Xiao Hong and Xiao Chen meet in the tavern. Xiao Hong feels very sad when her lover takes out a coin and asks her for a performance, as though he was just another customer paying for a service. Her performance in this setting expresses the sadness of a young girl drifting in the world and the pain caused by the misunderstanding of her lover. To enhance this climax Yuan Muzhi flashes back briefly to the scene in which the song appears the first time, thus starkly contrasting the emotions of the characters. The resolution of this misunderstanding is provided in the following sequence, when the erhu player prepares to sell Xiao Hong to a gangster, thus forcing Xiao Hong to ask for help from Xiao Chen. They are reconciled. The plot reminds us that in *Crossroads*, Lao Zhao also writes reports on Xiao Yang's experience in the factory even when he is in love with her. One again, the romance is connected with a social theme more characteristic of

leftist filmmaking. That is, leftist filmmakers brought the ideological commitment within the romance and melodrama.

In contrast to the film's previously comic tone, the ending is tragic. The gangsters pursue Xiao Hong and Xiao Yun to their hiding place, and kill Xiaoyun. The film ends with a scene in which Lao Zhao and his friends sit in a dark room, mourning the death of Xiao Yun. Tony Rayns points out that *Street Angel* ends on a note of grim pessimism.²² The ending suggests that Yuan Muzhi was actually pessimistic about the future of lower class people. The sudden change from a comic tone to a sad emotional tone is deliberately jarring to the viewer, who previously has been enjoying a "serious comedy" but suddenly realizes that the lives of these "street angels" can be ruined by society's dark forces at any moment. Yuan does not provide any solutions to the problems he portrays. The ultimate resolution is left to the audience. As Rayns points out, "the audience is required to complete the meaning [of the film] by responding."²³

Street Angel and *Crossroads* marked a new level of maturity in leftist filmmaking. Both of them were successful with the audience, as the directors adopted a comic style which was more acceptable to the audience. The films are marked by valuable achievements in characterization, visual style, and the use of sound effects. Meanwhile, leftist ideological commitment is also stressed. *Street Angel* and *Crossroads* arguably represent the highest achievement of leftist filmmakers in the 1930s.

Notes:

1. Cheng Jihua, (chief ed.) *Zhongguo Dianyng Fazhanshi*, (Beijing: China Film Press, 1981), 308-310.
2. Cheng, 156-158, 161-164.
3. Cheng, 160.
4. Cheng, 160-161.
5. Leo Ou-fan Lee, "The Tradition of Modern Chinese Cinema," in *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, ed. Chris Berry, (London: British Film Institute, 1991), 7.
6. Cheng, 384-385.
7. Zhao Dan, *The Gate of Hell*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Press, 1979), 61-62.
8. The works of western writers like Ibsen and Dumas were translated into Chinese in 1920s and 1930s. They were very popular among young people.
9. Cheng, 440.
10. Zhao, 62.
11. Zhao, 62-63.
12. Cheng, 449.
13. Cheng, 449.
14. Cheng, 381.
15. Cheng, 383.
16. Patricia Wilson, "...I sought the Jewel of Art," *Chinese Literature*, April 1980: 83-84.
17. Wilson, 84.
18. Zhao, 67.
19. The Legend of Lady Mengjiang was a story from the Qin Dynasty. The lady's husband was recruited to assist with the construction of the Great Wall and never

returned. Lady Mengjiang went to the Great Wall to look for her husband. She could not see her husband but only the vast length of the Great Wall. She wept and the Wall crumbled for 800 li. Ever since then, Lady Mengjiang has been a symbol of the faithful woman waiting for her husband return from war.

20. Chris Berry, "Poisonous Weeds or National Treasures," *Jump cut*, No. 34, 1989, 93.

21. Zhao, 66.

22. Tony Rayns & Scott Meek, *Electric Shadows: 45 Years of Chinese Cinema*, (London: Bristh Film Institute, 1980), A11.

23. Rayns and Meek, A11.

CHAPTER V

THE LEGACY OF LEFTIST URBAN FILMS

The leftist film movement ended when major studios like Mingxing and Lianhua were forced to shut down as the war against Japan broke out in Shanghai. Most filmmakers transferred to inland provinces where they resumed their drama practice. Others, like Yuan Muzhi and his wife, actress Cheng Bo'er, went to Yan'an to join the Communist Party.¹ After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, many of these Shanghai leftist filmmakers took up important positions in the film industry. There were significant changes in their roles, however, according to Paul Clark:

Although the people to a considerable extent remained the same - again in large part because of the specialized nature of the medium - their roles were somewhat different after 1949. The progressive tradition was an underground tradition of opposition to studio owners, government authorities, and the social order in general. The environment in which both filmmakers and cultural leaders worked changed considerably with the rise to power of the Communist Party. The leaders called on films artists to reorient themselves to the new exceptions place on culture.²

With the strong influence of the Communist Party, leftist filmmakers were only able to make films that strictly followed communist ideology. They still followed the principal guidelines set by the leftist film movement of the 1930s, as discussed in Chapter II. That is, films were oriented to rural peasants, the urban proletariat, and middle class urban residents. The themes of class conflict and proletarian struggle were repeated in many films after 1949. Portrayals of characters in most films followed leftist guidelines

to a significant degree. Capitalists and their families are characterized as ruthless and debauched, while workers are portrayed as oppressed and poverty-stricken people who would finally join in social struggles. And the positive woman characters are portrayed as proletarian, revolutionary women. A large number of films from the 1950s to 1970s were set in a time before 1949. Films that dealt with contemporary urban issues were scarce.

Chinese film scholars discussed the leftist films of the 1930s more extensively in previous decades, when socialist ideology was emphasized in every aspect of the country's life. In recent years they have turned their attention increasingly to new generations of filmmakers. The films of the Fifth Generation, for example, have been closely examined by many Chinese and western critics. The Fifth Generation filmmakers were revolutionary in term of themes and cinematic style when compared to older generations. Still, the Fifth Generation directors rarely made films with contemporary urban settings.

The urban life of contemporary China is a very dramatic aspect of the country's life. There have been significant social and economic changes in most cities in the past 10 years. A large number of foreign investors have come to China for business speculation; millions of peasants have come to the cities to seek job opportunities; young urban people are confronted with ideological confusion as the communist orthodoxy is deemphasized, and they have been exposed to different forms of thought since China opened to the outside world in 1979. In this sense, urban life in modern

China to a degree resembles that of Shanghai in the 1930s.

Under such circumstances, it is important to discuss the legacy of leftist urban films. There are many valuable points present-day filmmakers can borrow from leftist films in the production of contemporary urban films. The success of leftist films, especially films in the late period of the movement, is closely related to the filmmakers' careful observation of society. Filmmakers like Yuan Muzhi and Shen Xiling based their films on the life experiences of the people around them. This naturalistic tendency is something present-day filmmakers need to follow.

In leftist films of the 1930s, an identifiable "Chinese style" of film began to take shape. "Chinese style" has always been stressed in literary writing or film production in China, both in official circles or unofficially (by free-lance writers and film practitioners). Chris Berry points out that "even stylistically, they [leftist filmmakers] do not follow Hollywood paradigms and conventions."³ Zhao Dan argues that actors should play their roles in a way that Chinese audiences can easily accept. While most performers of his time studied western-styled drama performance, Zhao Dan tried to learn from Beijing Opera acting.⁴ In *Street Angel*, director Yuan Muzhi invented his own style that doesn't resemble Hollywood films in the aspects of theme, narrative and characterization (see chapter 4 of this thesis). The lyrics of "Song of Four Seasons" in *Street Angel* consists of many images that are borrowed from classic Chinese poems and folklore. These are important aspects that present-day Chinese filmmakers can learn from in producing films of "Chinese style."

Paul Clark points out that “a long-lasting feature of pre-1949 film art was the close ties among filmmaking, the theater, and the literature.”⁵ He says that “the emphasis on the literary aspect of films, on the secularist rather than the director, started early in China and remained strong long after 1949. In part it can be explained by the filmmaker’s urge to find a respectability for the modern medium by association with the most honored of cultural activities.”⁶ This tendency seems to be lost as China’s new generations of filmmakers emerge directly from film institutes, and drama and literary activities are given less attention in present-day Chinese film institutes. Directors are usually technically accomplished, but they are often desperately in need of good screenplays. Significant recent exceptions involve the kind of cross-medium exchange that was once much more common in Chinese film practice - for instance, the contemporary urban films adapted from Wang Shuo’s novels have proved to be very successful.⁷ This is another example showing how literature can benefit film production. That is, one lesson of the leftist film movement is that the “literary” tradition of China should be honored, and present-day filmmakers would benefit by paying more attention to the works of contemporary novelists, short story writers, and dramatists.

The production of leftist films of the 1930s attracted China’s most talented directors and performers. They produced socially conscious films that confronted contemporary urban social problems, and in part through these films they sought solutions to these problems. Leftist films exerted a strong influence on Chinese film practice after 1949. The realistic tendency, the exploration of a Chinese film style, and

the connections with literature and drama reflected in leftist film production remain a valuable legacy for present-day filmmaking.

Notes:

1. Cheng Jihua, *Zhongguo Dianyng Fazhanshi (History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*, (Beijing: China Film Press, 1981), 515.
2. Paul Clark, *Chinese Cinema, Cultural and Politics Since 1949*, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 19.
3. Chris Berry, "Chinese Left Cinema in the 1930s: Poisonous Weeds or National Treasures," *Jump Cut*, no.34, 1989, 91.
4. Zhao Dan, *The Gate of Hell*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Press, 1979), 53.
5. Clark, 20.
6. Clark, 20.
7. Films adapted from Wang Shuo's novel include *Samsara* (1988), *Half Sea, Half Fire* (1988), *Ben Ming Nian* (1989), *In the Heat of the Sun* (1995), etc.

APPENDIX A
CREDITS FOR *CROSSROADS* AND *STREET ANGEL*

The credits of *Crossroads* and *Street Angel* were taken directly from Tony Rayns and Scott Meek *Electric Shadows: 45 Years of Chinese Cinema*, (London, British Film Institute, 1985)

Crossroads (Shizi Jietou)

1937, Mingxing Film company, Shanghai (2,972 metres)

Director: Shen Xiling
 Screenplay: Shen Xiling
 Photography: Zhou Shimu, Wnag Yuru
 Editor: Qian Xiaozhang
 Art Director: Yang Jingxin
 Music/Lyrics: He Luting
 Sound Recording: Dai Shuzhou
 Film Developing: Gu Youmin
 Continuity: Bi Xinzhang
 Grip: Ni Andong
 Production Manager: Hong Yong

Cast:

Zhao ('B')	Zhao Dan
Xiao Yang, the girl	Bai Yang
A'tang ('C')	Lu Ban
Yao, Xiao Yang's friend	Ying Yin
Liu Dage ('G')	Sha Meng
Xiao Xu ('A')	Yi Meng
A's mother	Bi Qiuxia
The Landlord	Quan Guangzhao
Landlord's Wife	Wu Yin
Pawnbroker	Chen Yiting
Butcher	Feng Zhicheng
Beggar	Zhao Ming
Landlord's Song	Yuan Xiaomei
Woman Neighbor	Wang Feijuan
Sweet Seller	Cui Wei
Newspaper Editor	Sun Jing
Proofreader	Qian Qianli
Neighbor's Daughter	Kang Jian
Factory Manager	Tang Chaofu
Secretary	Zhu Guyan

Aggressive ManWang Tingshu
 Old Secretary Zhao Ming

Street Angel (Malu Tianshi)

1937, Mingxing Film Studio (2,587 metres)

Director: Yuan Muzhi
 Screenplay: Yuan Muzhi
 Photography: Wu Yinxian
 Editor: Qian Xiaozhang
 Music/Lyrics: He Luting
 Sound Recording: Lu Yinkeng
 Film Developing: Gu Youmin, Chen Futing
 Continuity: Qian Qianli
 Production Manager: Liu Tuotian

Cast:

Chen, the trumpet player Zhao Dan
 Lao Wei, the Newspaper seller Wei Heling
 Xiao Hong, the little singer Zhou Xuan
 Xiao Yun, the prostitute Zhao Huishen
 Erhu Player Chen Yiting
 Erhu Player's wife Liu Jinyu
 Gu Chengling Feng Zhicheng
 Barber Qian Qianli
 Owner of Barber's Shop Tang Chaofu
 Fruit vendor Shen Jun
 Unemployed Man Qiu Yuanyuan
 Little Widow Yuan Shaomei
 The Lawyer Sun Jing
 Penniless Bourgeois Young Man Xie Jun
 Penniless Bourgeois Girl Liu Liying
 Policeman Han Yun
 The Bailiff Li Dizhi
 Playboy Yao Ping
 Driver Yuan A'fa

APPENDIX B
FILMOGRAPHY

This list includes film titles mentioned in this study. Abbreviations:
s: screenplay; d: director; st: studio.

1913

***Poor Wife and Poor Husband* (*Nan Fu Nan Qi*)**

s: Zheng Zhengqiu

d: Zhang Shichuan

st: Asia

***Clerk Lost His Lottery* (*Dian Yuan Shi Piao*)**

d: Zhang Shichuan

st: Asia

1922

***The King of Funs in China* (*Hua Ji Da Wang You Hua Ji*)**

s: Zheng Zhengqiu

d: Zhang Shichuan

st: Mingxing

1923

***The Orphan Saved His Forefather* (*Gu Er Jiu Zu Ji*)**

s: Zheng Zhengqiu

d: Zhang Shichuan

st: Mingxing

1928

***Fire On The Temple of Red Lotus*, the first episode (*Huo Shao Hong Lian Si*)**

s: Zheng Zhengqiu

d: Zhang Shichuan

st: Mingxing

1932

Ti Xiao Yin Yuan

s: Yan Duhe (adapted from Zhang Henshui's novel)

d: Zhang Shichuan

st: Mingxing

The Blood War of Resistance to Japan (Kang Zhan Xue Shi)

Newsreel

st: Mingxing

War of Resistance of the Army of the 19th Route Against Japan (Shi Qiu Lu Kang Ri Zhan Shi)

Newsreel

st: Lianhua

Mourning Ceremonies For the Soldiers (Song Hu Kang Ri Zhan Shi Zhui Dao Hui)

Newsreel

st: Lianhua

1933***Wild Torrent (Kuang Liu)***

s: Xia Yan

d: Cheng Bugao

st: Mingxing

Spring Silkworm (Chuan Can)

s: Xia Yan (adapted from Mao Dun's novel)

d: Cheng Bugao

st: Mingxing

Cigarette Beauty (Xiang Cao Mei Ren)

s: Hong Shen, Ma Wenyuan

d: Chen Kengran

st: Mingxing

Twenty-four Hours in Shanghai (Shanghai Er Shi Si Xiao Shi)

s: Xia Yang

d: Shen Xiling

st: Mingxing

Sister Flowers (Zi Mei Hua)

s, d: Zheng Zhengqiu

st: Mingxing

The Three Modern Women (San Ge Sin Nu Xing)

s: Tian Han

d: Bu Wan Cang

st: Lianhua

National Salvation (Min Zu Sheng Cun)

s, d: Tian Han

st: Yihua

1934

Song of Fisherman (Yu Guang Qu)

s, d: Cai Chusheng

st: Lianhua

Goddess (Shen Nu)

s, d: Wu Yonggang

st: Lianhua

New Woman (Xin Nuxing)

s: Sun Shiyi

d: Cai Chusheng

st: Lianhua

Plunder of Peach and Plum (Tao Li Jie)

s: Yuan Muzhi

d: Ying Yunwei

st: Diantong

Nostalgia (Xiang Chou)

s, d: Shen Xiling

st: Mingxing

The Daughter of the Fisherman (Chuan Jia Nu)

s, d: Shen Xiling

st: Mingxing

1935

Feng Yun Er Nu

s: Tian Han, Xia Yan

d: Xu Xinzhi

st: Diantong

Blue Gem Horse (Fei Cui Ma)

s, d: Xu Xinfu

st: Mingxing

1936***One Heart For Life and Death (Sheng Si Tong Xin)***

s: Yang Hansheng

d: Ying Yunwei

st: Mingxing

1937***Crossroads (Shi Zi Jie Tou)***

s, d: Shen Xiling

st: Mingxing

Street Angel (Ma Lu Tian Shi)

s, d: Yuan Muzhi

st: Mingxing

Smiling Forever (Yong Yuan De Wei Xiao)

s: Liu Naou

d: Wu Cun

st: Mingxing

1959***Song of Youth (Qing Chun Zhi Ge)***

s: Yang Mo

d: Zheng Junli, Cen Fan

st: Beijing

1965***Stage Sisters (Wu Tai Jie Mei)***

s: Lin gu, Xu Jin, Xie Jin

d: Xie Jin

st: Tianma

1971

The Red Detachment of Women (Hong Se Niang Zi Jun)

s: China Dance Drama Group

d: Pan Wenzhan, Fu Jie

st: Beijing

1988

Samsara (Lun Hui)

s: Wang Shuo

d: Huang Jianxin

st: Xi'an

1991

Raise the Red Lantern (Da Hong Deng Long Gao Gao Gua)

d: Zhang Yimou

st: ERA International (HK) & China Film Co-Production Corporation

1992

The Story of Qiuju (Qiu Ju Da Guan Si)

s: Liu Heng

d: Zhang Yimou

st: the Beijing Film Academy, the Youth Studio, & China Film Co-Production

Beijing Bastards (Beijing Za Zhong)

s: Zhang Yuan, Tang Dalian, & Cui Jian

d: Zhang Yuan

1996

Shanghai Triad (Yao A Yao, Yao Dao Wai Po Qiao)

s: Bi Feiyu

d: Zhang Yimou

st: Shanghai

In the Heat of The Sun (Yang Guang Can Lan De Ri Zi)

s: Jiang Wen, Wang Shuo

d: Jiang Wen

st: Beijing

Works Cited

In English:

Berry, Chris, ed. *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 1991.

Berry, Chris. "Chinese Left Cinema in the 1930s - Poisonous Weeds or National Treasures." *Jump Cut* No. 34, (1989): 87-94.

Harris, Kristine. "The New Woman Incident: Cinema, Scandal, and spectacle in 1935 Shanghai." In *Transnational Chinese Cinema - Identify, Nationhood, Gender*, edited by Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, 277-302. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

Lee, Leo Ou-Fan. "The Tradition of Modern Chinese Cinema." In *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, 6-20.

Leyda, Jay. *Danying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1972.

Lu, Sheldon Hsiao-peng ed. *Transnational Chinese Cinema – Identify, Nationhood, Gender*. Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

Pickowicz, Paul G. "Melodramatic Representation and the 'May Fourth' Tradition of Chinese Cinema." In *From May Fourth to June Fourth*. Cambridge, Mass., London, England: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Rayns, Tony. *More Electric Shadows: 45 Years of Chinese Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 1985.

Sheridan, James E. *China in Disintegration - The Republican Era in Chinese History, 1912-1949*. London: The Free Press, 1975.

Wei, Betty Peh-T'i. *Shanghai - Crucible of Modern China*. Hong Kong, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Widmer, Ellen and Wang, David Der-wei, eds. *From May Fourth to June Fourth*. Cambridge, Mass, London, England: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Wilson, Patricia. "...I Sought the Jewel of Art: Introducing Zhao Dan," *Chinese Literature*, Fall, 1979, 73-92.

Wilson, Patricia. "...I Sought the Jewel of Art: Introducing Zhao Dan", *Chinese Literature*, Fall, 1979, pp. 73-92

Xiao Zhiwei. "Anti-imperialism and Film Censorship During the Nanjing decade: 1927-1937." In *Transnational Chinese Cinema - Identify, Nationhood, Gender*, 35-57.

Zhang, Yingjin. *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

Zhang, Yingjin. "Imagining the Modern Woman in Shanghai." In *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, 185-231. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

In Chinese:

Cheng, Jihua. *Zhongguo Dianyng Fazhanshi (History of the Development of Chinese Cinema)*. Beijing: China Cinema Press, 1981.

Feng, Ming. "About *Street Angel*." *Popular Cinema*, 6, (1983) 23.

Feng, Ming, "*Street Angel* and Realism." *Modern Cinema*, 5, (1989):95-100.

Ling, Zhenyuan, "Comparison Between Chinese Left Films and Italian Neorealism films." *Shanghai Teacher's College Journal*, No. 1(1992): 110-117.

Luo, Yijun, "The National Characteristics in the Movie of 30s." *Art of Film*, 8, (1984): 50-58.

Xia, Yan. *Recalling the Old Memoirs, Lazily*. Beijing: China Cinema Press, 1984.

Zhao, Dan. *The Gate of Hell*. Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Press, 1979.

Zhong, Dianfei. "Making Efforts for the People and the Progress of the Society." In *Cinema Brochure*, 225-232. Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Press, 1987.

Zhou, Bing and Yao, Guohua. "The First Leap in Chinese Cinema - About the Process and the Contribution of Leftist Films." *Dang Dai Dian Ying*, 2, (1994): 32-39.