

Shifting Gender Norms Through Cinema: Physical Spaces and Cultural Ideals of 1920s

Shanghai Cinema

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Modernizing on the City's Terms

By the 1920s, Shanghai had established its economic authority domestically and internationally and painted itself as a modern city. With increasingly influential economic connection to the West, Shanghai gained access to new goods associated with Western cultural modernity. While many of the city's residents refused outright acceptance of Western culture, some urban residents carefully adopted many of the aspects of Western cultural modernity, specifically through Shanghai's emerging cinema industry.¹ Largely originating from Western influence brought to the banks of the Bund, Shanghai's cinema followed a similar path to many other defining traits of the city with curators of Shanghai culture, be they directors, chefs, or actors, focusing on taking the novel, foreign influence of European and American styles and molding them to the tastes and themes of the city.² A subsection of the city's cinema industry, composed mostly of young and hopeful cultural idealists, sought to blend Western influence with their preexisting cinematic styles. Using film to portray the thoughts and ideas of Shanghai's residents, the city began to forge a definition of modernity through nurturing one of the more progressive and intellectually provoking communities on the Asian continent.³ The movement

¹ Zhang, Zhen. *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*. (University of Chicago Press), 2005, x-xi.

² Mark Swislocki, *Culinary Nostalgia: Regional Food Culture and the Urban Experience in Shanghai*. (Stanford University Press, 2013). 96.

³ Modernity, as a nebulous term, manifests in numerous forms and definitions. Economically, Shanghai came to represent Western perceptions of a modernizing China developed under the intense influence of European and American authority. Modernity in this economic sense represented the shift from a mid-nineteenth century fishing village into the economic pearl of Europe's access to China. Bergère, Marie-Claire and Janet Lloyd. *Shanghai: China's Gateway to Modernity*. (Stanford University Press, 2010). 242.

and ideals cinema portrayed especially highlighted topics focused on gender, such as the plight of women in society, new dimensions of public interaction, and a greater focus on the elevation of women beyond the traditional norms of conservative Chinese culture.⁴ While many of these progressive themes were questioned by the city's older residents, the public spaces within Shanghai continued offering an opportunity for an open dialogue.⁵ Amongst the city's parks, teahouses, and gardens, movie theaters and the films they showed stood in a uniquely separate class.

Films proliferated new and diverse messages across society, many advocating for abolition of social restrictions placed upon women, while the space of the cinema provided a new freedom from tradition and increased the feeling of individualism for women within the city. The film industry, and the spaces it provided, proved influential in developing the role of women as independent, powerful members of the new society Shanghai was becoming. This essay will develop the argument for the importance of Shanghai's film industry by focusing on two separate areas of analysis: first, how the physical spaces of theaters offered a break from traditional, gendered relationships and expectations and second, the cultural significance and impact on gendered norms of the films *The Abandoned Wife* by Hou Yao and *Red Heroine* by Wen Yimin, as well as the magazine *Liangyou*. I will discuss how the theater in Shanghai came to represent what film theorist Xuelei Huang calls "a unique public space of social intercourse," known above all else for its "social and sexual dynamics outside the more regimented and moralizing public world."⁶ This analysis of the dynamics and traits of theaters that challenged traditional

⁴ Yingjin Zhang, *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) 334.

⁵ Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*. x.

⁶ Xuelei Huang, "Through the Looking Glass of Spatiality: Spatial Practice, Contact Relation and the Isis Theater in Shanghai, 1917-1937." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2011), 1-33.

gendered norms will focus first on a story from the historic Paris Theater and women's increasingly equal influence over their social relationships.

Shi Zhecun's "At the Paris Theater," a short work of fiction that takes place in Shanghai's historic Paris Theater, depicts a date-night outing shared between a married man and his mistress.⁷ Though scrutinized and dissected countless times by scholars using commentaries focused on urban male lust and the rise of emboldened females in the dating scene, I wish to instead analyze this story's setting and how the theater as a social space affects the characters.⁸ At the theater, the male suitor grows more and more frustrated with the seemingly unreadable enigma that is his mistress. He then reflects on the wedding ring he removed earlier just as his mistress springs back to her extroverted, emotional self. The story goes on with further signs of sexual tension and desire between the two before the mistress rejects his advances, yet offers him another date.⁹ The narrative of the short work focuses on this social dynamic between the theater's spectators, demonstrating the potential for romantic, sexual, and emotional whiplash within the theater's space. The two individuals arrived to engage in socialization, where their focus remains throughout, not the passive consumption of film. In this way, the theater operated as a realm of flirtation and social engagement for its patrons, a phenomenon as significant as the content of Shanghai films.

Though fictional, Zhecun's short story offers an insightful view of gender dynamics within the theater itself. Violations of traditional Chinese behaviors were frequent among the younger generation of Shanghai, with the theater becoming a hub of sexual expression for

⁷ Shi Zhecun, "At the Paris Theater," in *One Rainy Evening* (Beijing: Panda/Chinese Literature Press, 1994). 38.

⁸ Zhan, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

couples.¹⁰ As previously mentioned, with her ever changing emotions and unreadable nature, the mistress controlled the dynamics of the date, not to mention the future trajectory of the relationship. The social nature of the date represented Shanghai's departure from notions of filial piety across familial boundaries that were still deeply rooted outside the city. The mistress' role as leading the social engagement, apart from the influence of her older date and any elderly figure, speaks to a uniquely Shanghai experience. This demonstrates how the space of the cinema allowed for expressions of agency by women within the theater that might not be possible in other public spaces. The aspect of control over one's own romantic and emotional relationships was a new-found freedom beginning to open to women of economic mobility. While still limited to just these more urban, economically equipped women, the new social liberation associated with more open and equitable relationships began to alter women's expected social roles.¹¹ The theater served as a transformative, gendered space and a break from the restrictive society so often in conflict with the theater and the films shown therein.¹² As a public space, it openly displayed not just women's growing agency, but also burgeoning societal conversations concerning established hierarchies and the status quo. While Shanghai's more traditional population continued to critique novel sexual promiscuity, the city's progressive residents began to readily embrace their new definition of cultural modernity and the sexual and social liberties it entailed. Understanding the sociospatial nature of the theater and its gendered tensions, I now turn to an analysis of films shown during this time to analyze how cinema took up progressive themes in hopes of societal reformation.

¹⁰ Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 73.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Zhang, *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, 122.

The Abandoned Wife and Red Heroine

The physical space of the cinema provided a remarkable new avenue for redefining the sexual dynamics within the city, yet the messages disseminated through films also furthered this new social transition. The growth of Shanghai cinema's female patrons, coupled with a rising emphasis within films on themes of social inequality, promoted an increasingly supportive base for films pushing the boundary between art and social critique.¹³ Therefore, the two following case studies on Hou Yao's *The Abandoned Wife* and Wen Yimin's *Red Heroine*, two highly controversial films for their day that focused on promoting unconventional roles for women, will demonstrate how the boundary between art and social critique became blurred. These films also offer the chance to examine the social influence and impact of these creators' work on Shanghai society.

Hou Yao was a writer and director in the 1920s and 1930s, who largely broke from the still young, traditional style of Chinese and Shanghai cinema in his thematic exploration of realism and contemporary struggle.¹⁴ Much of Hou Yao's work centered on the plight of urban women and their economic subjugation to a husband or male employer. Hou Yao sought to provide social commentary on the flaws within his society and, in the words of Chinese film scholar Yingjin Zhang, still "wanted to use his film as a way of demonstrating the possibility of change."¹⁵ This style of film offered an extremely unique perspective into an industry that had become entrenched in the "spirit of comic relief and quotidian entertainment," embodied by traditional comedic filmmaker Xu Zhou dai.¹⁶ Notable scholar of Chinese cinema Zhen Zhang

¹³ Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 95.

¹⁴ Yingjin Zhang, *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*. (Stanford University Press, 2002), 55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹⁶ Zhan, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 157.

labeled Hou Yao's methods of "creating a cinematic language to dramatize a tragic sense of life" as a way of presenting serious topics that would normally be ignored or disregarded within the popular Chinese comedies of the time.¹⁷ Yao's philosophy of film as a vehicle for social commentary is best exemplified in his 1926 film *The Abandoned Wife*, which analyzes the demeaning role of women within urban spaces and the freedoms women could pursue if unhindered by a constricting society.

The Abandoned Wife tells the story of Wu Zhifang, a young wife who becomes unable to cope with the oppressive and restricting treatment of traditional life perpetuated by her "debauched husband and tyrannical mother-in-law."¹⁸ Hou Yao focuses on the young wife's abandonment of domestic life in her pursuit of a life with more meaningful purpose. She eventually decides to campaign for women's rights while attempting to live a modest, independent life. Yet, her transformation leads to her downfall at the hands of the conservative Chinese society that alienates her as a social outcast; likely a commentary by Yao on the need for broad, societal progressivism.¹⁹ The mother-in-law's irritation with the young wife's entrance into the public, political sphere, at odds with her own strict alignment with traditional, gendered norms, directly pits the two against each other in a broader theme of generational division. Zhifang's husband is defined by debauchery in order to speak against the abusive, restrictive marriages of traditional Chinese and conservative Shanghai society. By representing conservative Chinese society through Zhifang's husband and mother-in-law, Hou Yao creates thematic underpinnings of authority and associates them with society's reluctance to acknowledge the female population as equal.

¹⁷ Zhan, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 157.

¹⁸ Zhang, *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*, 55.

¹⁹ *The Abandoned Wife*. Directed by Hou Yao. Performed by Wang Hanlun. China: Great Wall Studios, 1924. Transcript.

The Abandoned Wife, and Hou Yao's work as a whole, represented an exposure of contemporary audiences to the problems of gender inequality facing society. Film scholar Zhen Zhang labeled Hou Yao's creative thought process as making it "possible to transform the notions of suffering and redemption...into a set of modern concerns."²⁰ With this film, Hou Yao sought to shift the perception of gender roles in two essential ways. Firstly, Hou Yao sought to communicate that the movement for greater levels of equality between the sexes was not only a fight currently in progress, but a righteous and necessary fight.²¹ In doing so, Yao hoped to encourage greater social and political participation amongst the women of Shanghai. Secondly, Hou Yao sought to inspire a public interrogation of traditional gender roles.²² Using the cinema as a vehicle to communicate his messages, Hou Yao was able to directly disseminate his social commentaries, critiques, and ambitions for change.²³ This common theme runs throughout the film, with acts such as the disregard of marriage, domestic life, tradition, and protest all being celebrated as contributing to a new societal norm apart from traditional filial piety. While the young wife's life is decidedly more difficult after taking control over her present and her future, Yao's films argue the empowerment and agency women regained over themselves outweighed any societal and personal backlash they received. In this way, Hou Yao used his work to communicate his own personal challenge to Shanghai's gendered norms through the imagined space of his films, in the physical space the theater provided.

While many films like *The Abandoned Wife* used women's lives to critique general social conditions, few films actively promoted the social advancement of women alongside, or at the

²⁰ *The Abandoned Wife*. Directed by Hou Yao. Performed by Wang Hanlun. China: Great Wall Studios, 1924. Transcript.

²¹ Zhang, *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*, 55.

²² *Ibid.*, 56.

²³ Zhang, *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*, 30.

expense of, their male counterparts. Wen Yimin's *Red Heroine* broke from this norm. *Red Heroine* served as a milestone within Chinese cinema as one of the first noted martial arts films, functioning as the genesis for an entire genre that would come to define the film industry of the country.²⁴ Yet *Red Heroine* remains notable within Chinese cinema for a different aspect of the film: its use of a strong and independent female protagonist. The film depicts a village being terrorized by oppressive warlords, inspiring a young girl to learn martial arts to defend her family. Much of the film focuses on the concept of revenge, ending with the deaths of the warlords at the young girl's hands.²⁵ As referenced by scholar Jubin Hu, Wen Yimin was far less politically motivated compared to his contemporaries in Shanghai's film industry, like Hou Yao.²⁶ However, his work did serve to promote the cause of increasing women's standing within the cultural zeitgeist of society by representing them in nontraditional roles.

By associating a female with the traditionally male practice of martial arts and its legacy of strength, Wen Yimin attempted to alter the perceptions and limitations placed on women by demonstrating female strength. While perhaps not directly encouraging martial arts reform, Wen Yimin made the conscious effort to select a female actor to play the role of a traditionally male martial artist. This choice speaks to an attempt to chip away at restrictive gender norms that would traditionally discourage these transgressive actions on screen.²⁷ Yimin's directorial

²⁴ Jubin Hu, *Projecting a Nation: Chinese National Cinema before 1949*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 72.

²⁵ *Red Heroine*. Directed by Wen Yimin. Performed by Wen Yimin, Fan Xuepeng, Wang Juqing, Shu Gohui, and Sao Guanyu. China, 1929. Film.

²⁶ Politically motivated in the case of Wen Yimin refers to his distinction between spheres of culture and politics. Culture focused on attempts to promote a society defined by greater equality and opportunity regardless of gender while politics in Shanghai were centered around issues of international diplomacy. The creation of two cultural spheres, that of foreign policy looking Shanghai and Chinese controlled Shanghai, reflected this as the two cultivated wildly divergent cultures with the main interaction being political. This wide cultural definition allowed Yimin to advocate for societal shifts in perception and attitude without focusing on the minutia of international relations in pursuing equality. Hu. *Projecting a Nation*. 72.

²⁷ *Ibid*.

choices demonstrate how Shanghai's cinematic culture enabled filmmakers and actors to step outside tradition and speak to larger social issues. *Red Heroine* was an important influential step in Shanghai's greater movement toward the realignment of gendered norms in favor of expanding female roles. The film industry, with Wen Yimin as a catalyst, focused less on simply appealing to the popularity of tradition and more so on innovation by placing women in progressive roles that promoted women's pursuit of social empowerment.²⁸ Yimin's work operated as a successful model for other filmmakers to follow, opening up larger societal conversations about female agency and strength and narrower industry conversations about broadening roles for female actors.

***Liangyou* in Support of Shanghai Cinema**

Similar to how Wen Yimin's *Red Heroine* sought to establish a strong, independent female protagonist in order to promote a trend of female actors in traditionally male roles, the print industry of Shanghai also aided in the popularization of strong female roles in cinema.²⁹ The already massively popular cinema industry gained further attention as magazines such as *Liangyou* began covering new films and trends within Shanghai to a national audience. *Liangyou* illustrates an important cultural landmark of Shanghai society in relation to gender at the time. The film industry's commitment to practices and ideals considered by many to be culturally offensive represented an intent to foster "a Shanghai brand of visual modernity, with print culture or film culture at the center."³⁰ This Shanghainese relationship focused on furthering the messages conveyed through film. With film serving as the inspiration behind the print medium, many magazines such as *Liangyou* further contributed to the spreading of radical ideas on gender

²⁸ Hu, *Projecting a Nation*, 73.

²⁹ Pickowicz, Paul, Kuiyi Shen, and Yingjin Zhang. *Liangyou: Kaleidoscopic Modernity and the Shanghai Global Metropolis, 1926-1945*. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), Leiden: Brill. 2013, 113.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

roles and women's rights.³¹ Few magazines outside of Shanghai would ever consider publishing the provocative pieces that *Liangyou* and others did regularly.³² This radical sphere of publishing only furthered the influential nature of the Shanghai film industry in relation to normative gender roles, such as promoting the decline of traditional marriages and foot binding and the emphasis on greater liberties for the women of Shanghai.³³ Many of these proposed radical shifts came in the form of spotlight pieces on actors.

Alongside *Liangyou's* public support of controversial films and admiration for Shanghai's critical questioning of traditional gender relations in cinema arose direct praise for actors' brash lifestyles and rebellious attitudes. Issues, such as *Liangyou* no. 2 (March 1926), focused on displaying the rising actor Wang Hanlun in its most prominent positions to advertise for her upcoming films.³⁴ Wang Hanlun gained a great deal of attention for her actions in her onscreen roles, particularly from many traditional Chinese viewers who saw her work as culturally offensive. Wang had made the leap to "boldly show her unbound feet on the screen" and cut her long, traditional style of hair during filming.³⁵ Commonly associated with the lower tiers of society, Hanlun's unbound feet and shorter hair shocked traditional, elite Chinese society, who understood her actions as disrespectful.³⁶ However, Wang Hanlun consciously sought to be provocative in her actions and lifestyle as a means of fighting against the stranglehold she felt as a woman in Chinese society. By proudly displaying such controversial actors, *Liangyou* actively

³¹ Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra. *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*. (Duke University Press, 2003), 522.

³² Kuiyi Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, *Liangyou: Kaleidoscopic Modernity and the Shanghai Global Metropolis*. Leiden: Brill, 2013, 35.

³³ Bean, Negra, *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, 522.

³⁴ *Liangyou (The Young Companion)*, no. 2 (March 1926).

³⁵ Bean and Negra, *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, 522.

³⁶ Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 12.

supported actors they believed to be “champions of the modern lifestyle.”³⁷ This open support of such prominent and contentious figures further supported the trend emerging within Shanghai’s cinema of questioning traditional performance of gender as a way of encouraging modernity. Theaters and films represented arenas where Shanghai’s youth could challenge social conventions, yet these cultural products would be meaningless without public media support used to spread them. Progressive institutions, like *Liangyou*, willingly supported the messages portrayed in controversial films like *Red Heroine* and *The Abandoned Wife*, giving a voice to a young, reformist generation.

Conclusion

The previously described methods of communicating the new, modern thoughts on gender roles all share a common link: popularization and prominence through cinema and the film industry. The environment of the theater offered a culturally unique experience that allowed for an expression of shifting definitions of social and sexual liberty now defined, to a greater degree, by Shanghai’s young, well-off women. Simultaneously, the cinema and progressive publications served as vehicles for filmmakers who intentionally and unintentionally made strides toward reshaping societal perceptions of the limitations of strict, gendered expectations on personhood and agency.³⁸ Shanghai found itself at the foreground of a transition between traditional beliefs and norms for women into a more liberating and curious society. Women could find strength in seeing relatable struggles on screen and begin to sympathize with struggles they were not familiar with.³⁹ The actors who served as inspirations of female strength were supported in print culture across Shanghai, in spite of backlash from more traditional audiences.

³⁷ Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 12.

³⁸ Zhang, *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*, 46.

³⁹ Bean, *Negra. A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*. 76.

In this way, these mediums of cultural innovation fostered continuing critiques of gendered norms within the city. The cultural works listed above all incorporated heavily progressive ideals and themes within their work, but this is by no means a demonstration of their widespread popularity. The eventual gains made in promoting gender equality and shifting the constrictive gender norms of the era were largely made in spite of the majority of the artistic community, not because of it.⁴⁰ While a great number of directors, writers, and filmmakers were inspired and driven by dreams of a progressive future, just as many, if not more, stood in polar contrast to these ideals and their cinematic tools. Often condemning the attacks on foot binding and other traditional practices as representing a corrupting Western influence, many Chinese stood diametrically opposed to the novel nature of the cinematic movement. Additionally, Chinese cinema remained a realm of comedic entertainment, with serious pieces acting as a major break from convention.⁴¹ For these more traditional audiences, the reflection of the sexual aspects of modernity and overall progressive themes of female empowerment felt out of place and culturally invasive.

Cinema promoted reform and rethinking of classical gender roles while carving out a portion of public influence within Shanghai.⁴² Shanghai's cultural forms offered women a chance to claim a feeling of independence and liberty in methods previously unheard of in Chinese society. The cinema of Shanghai provided inspiration for this experimentation. Some films and their actors questioned tradition and created norms they, not conventional society, found appropriate. Without the physical space of the theater and the themes it spread, this progressive movement toward shifting the gender norms of Chinese society would have

⁴⁰ Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 45.

⁴¹ Hu, *Projecting a Nation*, 33.

⁴² Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 379.

remained a demonized, radical movement without the large base of followers and supporters the art form cultivated.

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