An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: The Actress As Vernacular Embodiment in Early Chinese Film Culture

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Camera Obscura, 48 (Volume 16, Number 3), 2001, pp. 228-263 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

Xuan Jinglin in *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen* (Mingxing, 1931), directed by Zhang Shichuan. Courtesy China Film Archive

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What does it mean to talk about "early cinema" in a Chinese context? How "early"—or how "late"—was early Chinese cinema? Where can we locate it in a broad cultural landscape of modernity, particularly with regard to women's place in it? In the following essay I will discuss questions of periodization and historiography in relation to women's roles in Chinese film and modern cultural history. I begin with a historical textual analysis of the silent film quoted in the title, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen* (dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1931). This self-referential docudrama, which chronicles the rise, fall, and triumphant comeback of a prostitute-turned–film actress in Shanghai, is an exemplary text about the makeup and transformation of early Chinese cinema and its reception. A gender-specific examination of the relationship between body and film technology as evidenced in female screen presence and fan culture allows us to conceive early Chi-

Camera Obscura 48, Volume 16, Number 3
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nese cinema as a mass-mediated yet culturally inflected modern experience. Moreover, by inserting and foregrounding woman's place, especially that of the first generation of female stars, in the emerging public sphere represented by the cinema, I reconsider the relationship between cinema and the vernacular movement as well as the interaction of verbal and visual culture within the broader scenario of the democratization of writing and iconography. I argue that the figure of the actress in particular embodies the vernacular experience of modernity in early twentieth-century China.

"Amorous" Historiography and Early Film Culture

History, for Walter Benjamin, does not unfold in a "homogeneous, empty time." Likewise, historical thinking that attempts to seize in an illuminating flash the image of nonlinear time and heterogeneous experience, involves "not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. . . . Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad."[1] The year of 1931 in early Chinese film history is for me one of those monadic moments when history congeals and implodes, generating as much tension as energy. At that moment, everything seemed possible; all the historical actors found themselves at a masquerade ball that could last forever—but which, of course, did not. Events were taking place at a head-spinning speed as past and present intertwined.

It was a moment when the Chinese film industry, concentrated in Shanghai since the early 1910s, was suddenly seized by an urgency to view self-reflexively its history on the screen, as though propelled by a desire to arrest its own image in a hall of moving mirrors. The craze of the "martial arts magic-spirit" (*wuxia shenguai*) genre was reaching its peak. The advent of sound had triggered a cacophony of public debates as well as a deluge of experiments in various formats, in particular the "dancing and singing" (*gewupian*) genre, to incorporate sound into the silent screen. The film industry was being reconfigured as a result of the

establishment of the Lianhua company (which quickly rivaled the veteran Mingxing company) and the campaign to "revive national cinema" (*fuxing guopian*). It was also a time when the Nationalist government took definitive steps to make its legitimacy felt in the film scene by, among other things, instituting a fully fledged censorship organ. 1931 was also marked, especially in standard Chinese film historiography, as the turning point at which a more progressive and patriotic cinema began to emerge following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria that same year. That shift was quickened by a new crisis, when, on 28 January 1932, the Japanese also bombarded Shanghai, which brought immense destruction to the film industry.

In the midst of these interconnected changes and on the eve of catastrophe, the Mingxing company, a leading studio in the prewar Shanghai film industry, released an eighteen-reel, two-part feature, called *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen* [*Yinmu yanshi*]. The term *amorous history*, or *yanshi* in Chinese, has always denoted deviant history or histories outside or parallel to the official history, often with erotic connotations. Its usage was particularly prevalent in traditional vernacular literature. *Amorous History*, a product of modern times, stands as the cinematic incarnation of this long tradition. For many decades this film has been ignored, if not purposely omitted, by Chinese film historians. I regard this film, however, as a condensed textual instance that gives expression to the configuration of its particular historical moment. It offers insights into the Shanghai film world poised on a threshold. One of the nine silent films produced by Mingxing in 1931, *Amorous History* is unique in its direct reference, as suggested by the title, to the film world on multiple levels. The film is structured as a backstage drama and showcases the Mingxing studio as a technological wonderland and a simulacrum of the everyday world. It thus also serves as a self-portrait of the Mingxing company and a synecdoche of the broad film world in China in the early 1930s. A docudramatic tale about the vicissitudes in the career of a prostitute–turned–film actress and her troubled personal life, the film presents, more significantly, an ambivalent history about Chinese women's relationship to the cinema—the

promise of liberation and social mobility as well as the lure and risks of a new kind of commodification of the body by film technology.

Within this larger frame of reference, the interplay on and off the screen between fiction and reality, between the film world and lived experience, lends important insights to the understanding of *Amorous History* as a self-referential text about film production and spectatorship in China in 1931, a year of historical implosion. It directs our attention to the question of early Chinese cinema in relation to the question of woman and Chinese modernity as a whole. What *kind* of history could we envisage through the lens of the multiple cameras embedded in the film? Why was the film given the curious generic title "amorous history," and why was it linked to the "silver screen"? Hence, what is the relationship between such an intimate or deviant history to the master narratives of film and national culture of the prewar period as authorized by standard historiography in China? What does this self-referential gesture tell us—beyond the prevalent definition of self-reflexivity often associated with the cerebral modernist obsession with language, interiority, hermeneutic depth, and (masculine) existential angst, or about the embodied mass experience of cinematic modernity?[2]

Before I proceed further, a clarification of the term *early cinema* is in order, especially because it has a quite specific reference in film scholarship in the West. More than a period term, *early cinema* functions as a critical category, one that has gained increased attention and weight since the 1978 Annual Conference of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) held at Brighton, England. It refers primarily to the cinema—that is, films as well as media intertexts, industry, and market—between 1895 and 1917. Early cinema has also been alternatively called the "primitive cinema" or the cinema "before Hollywood"—that is, before the emergence of the so-called classical narrative cinema (and the concomitant institutionalization of a particular patriarchal structure of looking) came to be perceived and received as a dominant mode of cinematic storytelling.[3] The conference as well as the annual *Giornate del cinema muto* at Porde-

none, Italy, which has made it possible for researchers and the public at large to reexperience early cinema, provided the vital fuel for an archaeological project of rethinking its aesthetic and cultural significance, especially how it contributed to the shaping of a radical new perception of time and space, life and death, subject and object with the onset of modernity.[4]

Scholars of early cinema have arrived at the conclusion that early cinema possessed a set of distinctive aesthetics for (re)presenting the world and lived experience, and that classical narrative cinema, along with the seamless fictional world it created, was not the medium's necessary destiny. This new orientation in historical film scholarship highlights the importance of conjoining theory and practice, critical analysis and archival work, and has opened up many hitherto neglected areas of investigation beyond the films themselves. As early cinema was intimately bound to the practice of exhibition, studies on early audience formation and viewing relations have relocated the experience of early cinema in a wide range of cultural practices such as the vaudeville theater, the amusement park, shopping arcades, and so on. It became possible to envisage the film experience in the broader landscape of modern life, in the street and in the theater, in the city and in the country, and, I shall hasten to add, in the West as well as in many other parts of the world. In short, the identification and elaboration of early cinema has not only opened new arenas for studying film, but has also offered rewarding conceptual and methodological tools for placing film history in an intermedia and interdisciplinary field.

More recently, a strand of feminist film scholarship has not only contributed to but also critically enriched this new film history by highlighting the aspect of gender, with regard to, among other things, early women film pioneers, and the sexual coding of stardom and spectatorship.[5] This work challenges the prevalent reading of the classical cinema as a seamlessly sutured patriarchal representational system by inserting the conceptual as well as historical female spectator into the picture. At the same time, modes of address such as exhibitionism, heterogeneity, and corresponding patterns of (re)presentation associated with so-called primi-

tive cinema are found to persist in classical cinema. The gender question proves to be of critical importance for understanding the vitality, if not longevity, of not only a particular kind of aesthetic but fundamentally an epistemology and politics.

But how shall we account for early cinema in the Chinese context? And in what ways did women contribute to the formation of the new film culture in early twentieth-century China? Despite the fecundity of scholarship on early cinema, little has been done about the subject in a cross-cultural field, let alone a consideration of its gender aspects in a non-Western context. In the Chinese context, particularly as used by Chinese film scholars in periodization, the term *early cinema* (*zaoqi dianying*) serves loosely as a common reference to the cinema before 1949, when the Communists drove the Nationalists to the island of Taiwan and founded the People's Republic of China on the mainland. In standard Chinese film historiography, therefore, its connotation has been mainly negative or even pejorative, because early cinema as a whole is not only construed as aesthetically inferior in the evolutionary chain of cultural development (which is also often the case in the Western contexts), but also linked to the "pre-Liberation" and hence feudal and semicolonial political and social system. *Modern*, or *modeng*, a term prevalently associated with urban modernity, especially that of Shanghai during the Republican period (1911–49), conjured up meanings of cultural decadence, sexual promiscuity, social anarchy, and Western imperialism.

More recently, however, with the revival of Chinese cinema and the renewed interest in its historical roots, early Chinese cinema has begun to receive more favorable reassessment, and scholars tend now to make finer periodizations within that long "early" period. Not only have they subtly challenged prevalent ideological assumptions that inform existing historiography of early Chinese cinema, their work as a whole has also tried to delineate the aesthetic and cultural significance of genres such as comedy and martial arts film, which had been largely deemed "vulgar" or "low brow."[6] Underlying this diverse, albeit limited, body of scholarly work is the vexed question concerning the polit-

ical and cultural status of early Chinese cinema, especially in the period before the emergence of the left-wing cinema in the early 1930s.[7] Yet some of these endeavors still betray a one-dimensional historical consciousness and impoverished methodology. *Zhongguo wusheng dianying shi* [History of Chinese silent film], for example, which was commissioned by the Chinese Film Archive and published on the occasion of the centennial of cinema's arrival in China, is to date the first comprehensive account of early Chinese cinema produced by mainland scholars.[8] The book remains, however, mired in the same evolutionary conception of history, despite its sympathetic revisions of many previously denounced or forgotten filmmakers, producers, actors, and their films.

The unwitting parallel of critical discourses on early cinema in the West and China, despite their divergent circumstances, motivations, and applications, offers an opportune moment to relocate early Chinese cinema in a broader cinematic modernity. The divergent origins of the term in Euro-American and Chinese contexts, and the discrepancies in periodization respectively, alert us to the heterogeneity of the international film scene in the silent period. Rather than trying to find an equivalent—or contemporaneous—period and practice in Chinese film history that squarely fits the category of early cinema in the West, I choose to use the term heuristically for creating a critical space that negotiates its different valences, temporality, and historicity.

The first Chinese film was not made until 1905, and a Chinese film industry as such came into being only in the mid-1920s. The enjoyment and consumption of cinema, however, had already become an integral part of urban modernity with the first public commercial showing in a teahouse in Shanghai on 11 August 1896. The lack of archival holdings of films (actualities, travelogues, educational films, and early short story films) made before 1922 contributes to the practical difficulty in studying that part of early cinema. Significantly, many features of the extended early cinema in China, in aspects of filmmaking as well as distribution, exhibition, and reception, resonate with similar motifs in the history of early cinema worldwide. The time lag between early Euro-American cinema and early Chinese cinema speaks cer-

tainly to the semicolonial nature of Chinese modernity, especially with regard to "belated" technological transfer and implementation. This temporal disparity, ironically, also supplies testimonies to the persistence of early cinema not so much as a rigidly defined aesthetic or period category, but as an emblem of modernity, or rather multiple modernities, on the "non-synchronous synchronous" global horizon of film culture.[9] To disentangle ourselves from the trappings of such a time lag in periodization, a shift in focus from early cinema to early *film culture*, which includes a wide range of film experiences such as stardom, fan cults, theater architecture, and fashion in addition to what happens on screen, will allow a more productive interdisciplinary approach to the study of early film history in specific cultural locations. Such a shift will also, more crucially, enable us to expand the horizon of comparative studies of cinematic modernities.

Let me now return to *Amorous History* as a case study to probe the complexity involved in the writing of early Chinese film history, particularly from the perspective of gender. As I will indicate in detail below, the film opens onto a geography of film culture, both through its textual inscription and material consumption. As a self-conscious gesture at writing film history on the silver screen, the film and its reception reveal the capacity of the cinematic medium to offer a unique historiographic register in the age of mechanical reproduction of moving images.

According to the synopsis written by publicists of the time, the first part of the film (nonextant) begins with a panoramic view, or establishing montage, as it were, of the rise of Shanghai as a modern metropolis when it was "opened" as an international trading port following China's defeat in the Opium Wars in the mid–nineteenth century.[10] In an urban landscape animated by a prosperous commercial and industrial life, dotted with high-rises and asphalt streets, and crowded with people migrating into the city from all over China and the world, a local film industry is born. One large film company in particular not only boasts a studio with a host of large buildings and a contingent of "bright stars" (*mingxing*—an apparent self-reference to the Mingxing company), but features as well productions that are

widely distributed and "popular all over the world" [*fengxing quanqiu*]. One of the bright stars, in the diegesis as well as in real life, rises from the city's pleasure quarters. Wang Fengzhen, played by Xuan Jinglin (1907–92) (see photo on article's opening page), is slapped on the face by a client who resents her late arrival. Seeing her tears flowing uncontrollably, the playboy (who is only given a generic name "*Baixiangren*"—playboy or hooligan) mocks her: "Since you are so good at crying, why don't you devote yourself to the silver screen to become the oriental Lillian Gish?" He does not, however, expect that his sarcastic joke will prompt Wang to enter the film world.[11] Her dedication and ability to act out the full range of a woman's emotional expression—from the most comic to the most tragic, from that of a young girl to that of an old woman—quickly wins her the title of movie star (*dianying mingxing*). Fang Shaomei, a wealthy dandy, eagerly pursues her by coming to the studio every day and lavishly spending money on her. Wang begins to show signs of negligence in her work. Finally she disappoints the director who has contributed to her stardom by breaching her contract with the studio and becoming Fang's concubine, or according to the fashionable term of the day, entering a relationship of *cohabitation* (*tongju*).

The extant sequel starts with the demise of Wang's domestic dream and then gravitates toward her comeback to the film world. Despite her desire and effort to become a model housewife, her playboy patron-lover grows increasingly indifferent to her as he begins dallying with a dancing girl (played by Xia Peizhen [1908–?]). One day, after another verbal confrontation, Wang dozes off and has a daydream in which she sees herself arriving at a dance hall and finding Fang with the dancing girl. After following them to a hotel, she runs into her old director, who is there working on a script. He reveals to her that the reason for her falling out of favor is that she is no longer a film star, and he encourages her to return to the studio. The next day, her dream is fully reenacted, powerfully showcasing the power of cinematic fantasy in conjuring reality. She sets out for the hotel and confronts Fang in front of the dancing girl for the last time, only to be insulted again. She finally makes up her mind: "I will go my

way. I won't die hungry for lack of a man!" Arriving at the studio, she tells the overjoyed director to quickly write a script for her so that she can resume her career on the silver screen.

Amorous History begins to take on the look of a mock documentary when the returned star is given a tour of the expanded and technologically updated studio. Forty truckloads of extras arrive for several films being shot simultaneously at different studios of the same company: *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* [*Huoshao hongliansi*], a martial arts serial film; *The Red Shadow of Tears* [*Honglei ying*], a melodrama; *Fate in Tears and Laughter* [*Tixiao yinyuan*], a romance based on Zhang Henshui's popular novel; and *Money Demon* [*Qianmo*].[12] Wang wanders with the director through the sets of both *Money Demon* and *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple* and is impressed by the sophistication of the new equipment as well as the dedication of the production crews. The organization of the extras is executed in an assembly line fashion, with a supervisor conducting a collective choreography of makeup within half an hour. Among the extras, Wang recognizes the hooligan who slapped her face back in her former life as a prostitute. Their "reunion" on the set of the film, specially written for Wang's comeback, turns into an act of vengeance with a cinematic license when the plot requires Wang to slap the hooligan character in public. Wang's resolution to return to the silver screen also magically rekindles Fang's love for her. He begins to pursue her again by driving her to and from the studio. The disenchanted dancing girl, realizing the romantic power of being a film actress, decides to try her luck in the film world herself. Along with hundreds of others, she arrives at the studio for an interview, which, without her knowing it, turns out to be a rigorous audition of her acting skill. She is provoked to cry and laugh, to be happy and angry (*xinu aile*). The film ends with her leaving the studio, hoping that she will return and become a film star.

On both thematic and stylistic levels, *Amorous History* not only records a significant segment of Chinese film history but also lends expression to the multilayered experience of those women who in various ways contributed to the making of early Chinese film culture. By infusing the history of Chinese cinema up to the

advent of sound into the personal and professional history of an emblematic actress figure (or vice versa) the film chronicles early Chinese film history as characterized by heterogeneous technological practices and spectatorial expectations as well as multiple gender roles available to or imaginable by women. The "amorous" mode thus provides a unique method for understanding and writing women's history and film history as inseparable from each other within the framework of a particular film culture.

Referentiality, Feminine Biography, Film Technology

The particular attraction of *Amorous History* comes from the intertwining of a personal romance and a studio promotional showcase, feminine biography and the history of film technology. Set in the liminal space (as the daydream sequence indicates) between fiction and documentary, the film indulges in cinema's potential for both realism and fantasy—or rather, the magic blending of the two—thereby creating a new perceptual experience of reality. Some Chinese film historians have pointed to the orientation towards referentiality (*zhishixin*) rather than representation, romance (*chuanqi*, or fable) rather than psychological narrative, as the basic features of early Chinese cinema.[13] The elusive referentiality and hyperbolic realism of an "amorous history" (which can also be translated as "romance") inside and outside the film illustrates this observation. The contemporary fans of Mingxing productions, in particular those starring Xuan Jinglin, would readily find Xuan's life story embedded in the film. Born to a poor family (her father was a newspaper vendor) and having had only sporadic schooling, Xuan had become a prostitute when Zhang Shichuan (1889–1953), the director and one of the founders of the Mingxing company, discovered her talent for acting and had her redeemed from the brothel where she worked.[14] Made one year after Xuan's return to the studio, and following the dissolution of her cohabitation relationship with a businessman, the film is in fact a biographical portrait of a cinematic Cinderella, in this case Xuan Jinglin herself.

Xuan's rising stardom paralleled the rising fame and

wealth of the Mingxing company.[15] The first (nonextant) part of the film chronicles her bewilderment when she first entered the film world. The Mingxing company, the first fully fledged Chinese film enterprise established by Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Zhengqiu (1888–1935), and others in 1922, was just beginning to outgrow its cottage-industry mode of production and to be transformed into the Mingxing Film Limited Co. when Xuan joined the company in May 1925. Mingxing's first glass studio was built while the film in which Xuan played a minor role was being shot. During 1925 and 1928, Xuan portrayed an array of characters, including the country maiden, the poor widow, the dancing girl, and the female gangster. By the time she joined the company for the second time in 1930, Mingxing had just begun another large-scale expansion and modernization following the commercial miracle created by the martial arts film series, *The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple*.

The new studio, which the actress in *Amorous History* tours with bewildered eyes, is presented as a magic workshop of virtual reality. When the actress marvels at the grandiose sets, high-tech lighting, numerous other gadgets, and special effects, the love story that dominates the first part of the film recedes. Instead it is taken over by an exhibitionist impulse for display characteristic of early cinema and the showmanship associated with it.[16] The romance between the actress and her unfaithful patron is now replaced by the romance between the female self and cinematic technology. If woman, as Andreas Huyssen remarks, has been prevalently linked to or allegorized as modern technology, as exemplified in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927),[17] the relationship between the actress and technology in *Amorous History* is organized along a different line that cannot be subsumed under the category of mechanical incorporation or alienation alone. Xuan is not overpowered by the gigantic scale of the new studio and equipment; the latter functions rather as a hyperbolic backdrop for the personal drama in which she redeems her independence. Unlike the dystopic vision of femininity and modern machinery in *Metropolis*, technology here emits a humorous energy—due to the comic structure of the plot—that facilitates a social transfor-

mation embodied in the figure of the actress. Xuan, playing her former self as a prostitute decked out with a huge flower on her chest, is instructed by the director to slap (back) the hooligan in front of the camera. Screen performance and the reenactment of the past facilitates the redemption of her personal history. In front of the camera, Xuan not only literally acts out her ascendance from the lower social depth to the pantheon of movie stars, she is also able to close a painful chapter from the past. "Just as people whom nothing moves or touches any longer are taught to cry again by films,"[18] she regains the capacity to feel and emote. The *act* of revenge made possible by film technology is certainly a utopian representation of women's agency. At the same time, because of the indexical rapport, or fusion, between Xuan's biographical and cinematic life, the slap is not just a make-believe dramatic gesture; it rather serves as the point where the onscreen action unites with its social and experiential referent, and a personal *histoire* with a public spectacle.

Xuan's comeback also coincided with another sea change in film technology that redefined the structure of sensory perception in early Chinese film history. Shortly after the first American talkie was shown in a Shanghai theater in 1929, several Chinese film companies began experimenting with sound, despite the lack of adequate equipment. The Mingxing company once again proved to be a leader in innovation by collaborating with the Pathé recording company of Shanghai to produce the first (partial) sound film, *The Singsong Girl Red Peony* [*Genü hong mudan*], (dir. Shichuan Zhang, 1931), using wax disks. Because sound film demanded the use of *guoyu*, or the standard "national language" based on the Beijing vernacular (as dictated by the Nationalist government, supposedly for universal intelligibility in the Chinese speaking world), many actors who were not of Northern origin suddenly found themselves suffering from a speech handicap. Xuan Jingling, born and raised in Shanghai, could only speak the Shanghai vernacular with a Suzhou (her maternal native town) inflection. Determined to catch up with the new technology and surpass her own image as a silent film star, Xuan took crash lessons in *guoyu* and singing. By appearing in the first Movietone

film while continuing to make silent films, Xuan demonstrated that her comeback was not a mere repetition of her screen image as an icon for the first Golden Age of Chinese silent film but more of a leap into a new era, embodying coexisting technologies, with their ambivalent relations as well as distinctive possibilities. It is significant that during her tour of the studio, the several films being produced *simultaneously* are of different genres and appeal, with one of them being a partial sound and color production, *The Fate in Tears and Laughter* (dir. Zheng Zhengqiu, 1933). She thus characterizes or personifies early cinema as a critical category—that technological change does not easily translate into a shift in aesthetic modes and spectatorial address but can expose the very contradictions of technology and its multiple appropriations.

Besides the main plot surrounding the actress's double-edged amorous history, the film, with its numerous references to both production and reception contexts, points to the breadth and depth of a film culture far beyond the silver screen and exhibition space. In fact, *Amorous History* virtually inventories a cluster of interconnected practices that sustain and feed back on the film industry: money, stardom, fan culture, as well as the broader urban landscape. In this landscape, film experience is interwoven with other contiguous forms of the urban experience—such as ballroom dancing and window shopping—which underscores the constant transaction and contagion between them. The emphasis on the commercial nature of the film industry is clearly seen in a crucial scene inside the studio. At the moment when the actress is led to see, as a spectator, the set for *Money Demon* and is taken aback by the gigantic mask of the money demon descending from above and crushing a circle of dancing young women and men, the film is at its most self-reflexive about the commodity nature of the cinema, as well as women's ambivalent place within the film world.

Throughout the film, the figure of the actress embodies not so much the glamour of stardom as the multiple and concrete social roles available to women at the time, both in the domestic and public sphere. This multiplicity manifests itself in Xuan's repertoire of characters of different ages and classes as well as in

her own life experience. To be sure, women's presence in the film world remained largely confined to the performing sector. Their visibility as public figures and their heightened social status were nevertheless considerable, especially at the threshold of the 1930s when the film industry had secured its legitimate place in everyday life, if not quite yet on the altar of art.

The cinema created not only a new vocation for women but also a significant social position and public image. Because many of them contributed substantially to early film ventures in capacities that went beyond acting, it is not too far-fetched to consider them pioneers of Chinese cinema and builders of film culture as well. Traditionally Chinese women had been largely excluded from the public arena, let alone regarded as public models for emulation. (That was only reserved for the few very chaste or filial who sacrificed themselves for patriarchy.) Before the advent of the cinema, only women from poor or marginal social groups worked as actors, mainly in all-women traveling opera troupes catering to the rural population or town residents of lower classes. Women and men were not supposed to appear on the same stage, and, as audience members, women were either not allowed in respectable theaters or had to be seated separately. While cinema as a mass attraction drastically changed the gender makeup of audiences, and women quickly became avid spectators, the earliest Chinese films featured only male actors coming mainly from theatrical backgrounds. In 1913, Yan Shanshan became the first Chinese woman to appear on the silver screen in a short story film, *Zhuang Zi Tests His Wife* [*Zhuang Zi shiqi*], directed by her husband Li Minwei. Ironically, Yan played the minor role of the maid while Li played Zhuan Zi's wife.[19] At the time, it was inconceivable for women to appear in film, let alone play leading roles. Before becoming the first film actress in Chinese film history, Yan was known as a member of the female bombing squadron during the Republican Revolution in 1911. Afterwards no women played female roles until 1921, when Wang Caiyun, a theater actress–turned–singsong girl, was asked to play the leading female role (a prostitute) in *Yan Ruisheng* (dir. Ren Pengnian), a feature-length docudrama based on a sensational

murder case in Shanghai. The filmmakers wanted to achieve as much authenticity as possible and chose her not only because no other ordinary woman would play such a role but also because of her close relationship with the prostitute before the murder.[20]

The cinema boom and especially the proliferation of long narrative films, along with a growing popular "taste for reality" and melodrama,[21] in the early 1920s created a demand for actresses not just to fill the scenes but also to play leading roles. The profession of screen acting thus provided an unprecedented opportunity for many women of diverse backgrounds, including the new-style female students who defied family and societal prejudice to embrace the screen life, as well as courtesans or singsong girls who saw in cinema a chance for changing their social standing. With the help of the print media, including early trade journals and fan magazines, a proto star system was born. Actresses like Wang Hanlun (1903–1978), Yin Mingzhu (1904–?), Yang Naimei (1904–1960), Zhang Zhiyun (1905–?), and Hu Die (1908–1989) displayed their courage in embracing a modern mass medium that was still shunned by the elite society.[22] Their stardom partly derived from their image as champions of the modern lifestyle in many aspects—in fashion, hairstyle, car driving, and an unconventional sexual life (such as having boyfriends or choosing cohabitation over marriage).[23] They were in fact the first generation of Chinese "modern girls."

Among them, Yin Mingzhu and Yang Naimei were probably the most prominent. Yin, born to a gentry family, studied at a western-style women's college in Shanghai. At school Yin excelled in dancing, singing, horseback riding, biking, and car driving. Because she always dressed in the manner of foreign movie stars, she came to be called Miss F. F. (Foreign Fashion).[24] Together with Dan Duyu, an artist–turned–self-made director, they created the Shanghai Shadowplay Company, one of the early cottage-industry style ventures. In addition to her involvement in the operation of the company, Yin was the leading star of their popular productions. Yang Naimei, on the other hand, was famous for her romantic lifestyle and her penchant for "strange clothes." The only daughter of a successful Cantonese businessman, Yang

Yang Naimei, from *Yinxing* [The movie guide], no. 12 (1927), 9

went to a girls' school and indulged in performances. After a small role in a Mingxing box office hit, *The Soul of Yu Li* [*Yu Li hun*] (dir. Sun-fung Lee, 1923), she quickly became a major star and character actor, specializing in playing "wayward" or "amorous" women like herself. Her hobbies included high-speed driving through the main thoroughfare in central Shanghai. Yang's fame

(or infamy) outraged her father who considered acting as nothing less than prostitution and consequently disowned her. In 1926, Yang sensationalized the film world by appearing in tableaux vivant fashion during the screening of *The Resurrection of Conscience* [*Liangxinde fuhuo*] (dir. Bu Wancang, 1926), lip-synching the song she "sang" in the film. Unsatisfied with being dictated to by male directors, she founded her own company, the Naimei Film Company, and produced a film about a legendary modern woman in 1928; none other than she herself played the protagonist.[25]

In light of the history of women's contribution to early Chinese film culture, the referentiality of *Amorous History* appears all the more significant. The film did more than record the prime of Xuan Jinglin and the Mingxing company, both at a moment of crucial transformation. In weaving together the personal and institutional histories in a docudramatic romance, the film offers a compelling glimpse into prewar Chinese cinema from both an insider's and a woman's point of view. Xuan's career as represented on the screen is thus indexical of the collective career of women pioneers of the Chinese film industry.

The history of film technology as presented in the film is involved, yet not without a critical distance. The self-reflexive impulse is never steeped in psychological absorption but rather inscribed on the social skin of the cinematic experience. Instead of abstracting that experience for moral didacticism or formal indulgence, it motivates in the viewer a heightened awareness of its significance as part of the larger sensorial economy of modernity. Indeed, this referentiality and self-reflexivity should be viewed more as a combination of a residual aesthetic of display or monstration, with a direct address to the "(in)credulous" audience that characterizes early cinema[26] and at the same time the impulse to narrativize or update this early history more than three decades after the advent of the cinema.

More importantly, the impact of the film also vibrated on the reflexive horizon of reception. The film came into contact with an audience unrestrained by geographical location and educational level, thereby becoming a vehicle for the expansion of knowledge and the sharing of experience beyond the limits of

Shanghai. After seeing the film, one viewer wrote a long letter from the remote Jilin province in Manchuria to the editors of *Movie Weekly* [*Yingxi shenghuo*, literally "Shadowplay Life"] in Shanghai. In the letter, he expressed his enthusiasm for the film and gratitude to the Mingxing company for generously sharing the secrets behind the scenes and imparting to the audience basic knowledge about film production. He lamented the fact that, because of the remote location of his native town from metropolitan Shanghai, it usually took months before a new film reached Jilin, where the only theater was the auditorium of the local YMCA, which held screenings mainly for the purpose of education. However, as an avid fan he watched everything shown there. *Amorous History*, unlike anything else he had seen, opened his eyes to what was behind the world of illusion on the screen. He was particularly impressed by the tour sequence in the film when the actress visits the sets of several films, encountering famous actors, directors, and cameramen. What astonished him most was how film technology was capable of manufacturing a different kind of reality, or a second nature:

> What a big electric fan! It makes us realize the origin of torrential rain or snow in a movie. What a big mountain and what a fast train! Now we know how a mountain is made and a train is manufactured.
>
> We know now that a skeleton is painted; a pavilion is but a miniature; a lavish living room is a backdrop; and a bustling street is artificial! Flying and leaping in the air—what impressive martial arts! But it's made possible by a hanging rope! Tears flowing—what a profusion of emotion! Do you know, though, that he is just using fake tears?!
>
> Furthermore, [we see] the way the director works, how the camera runs, and operations in the makeup room and on the sets—all the things we have never seen or heard of![27]

The sense of bewilderment as well as the exhilarating enlightenment about the "true nature" of the cinema, "the magic metamorphosis rather than a seamless reproduction of reality," as Tom Gunning underscores, "reveal not a childlike belief, but an undisguised awareness of (and delight in) film's illusionistic capa-

bilities."[28] Moreover, the revelation, or surfacing, of the cinematic magic paradoxically only intensified the provincial viewer's passion for the cinema. Beyond the gadgets and special effects, he was gripped by the vivid presence of the people who produced the magic: "the models draped in gauzy dress, the country women who cry and laugh hyperbolically, the directors who shout in panic through their loudspeakers, and the stars with a cocky aura."[29] Seeing these people vicariously through Xuan Jinglin's eyes, the viewer experiences the film as a three-dimensional virtual space in which the flatness of images on the silver screen materializes into a tangible reality. The crowded and simultaneous presence of extras, the hidden masters of illusion (in other words the directors and cameramen), and the sheer size of sets and equipment, endow the film with an overwhelming visibility and physicality, as well as a democratic appeal. Nothing is withheld from the viewer; every person and every object comes to the foreground, even though they are governed by a certain hierarchical organization. This experience puts the audience of a remote provincial town in direct touch with the pulse of metropolitan modernity, which the film world both fashions and represents.

Woman As Embodiment of Vernacular Modernity

If *Amorous History* offered a rare occasion for the provincial spectator to travel to Shanghai's film scene without riding a real train and crossing mountain ranges from Jilin province, it has provided me with an entry point from which to begin to make sense of a film world that existed decades ago. When I watched the film for the first time on a small video screen at the Beijing Film Archive in August 1995, around the centennial of the cinema, the astonishment and enlightenment I experienced then was perhaps not much less than the viewer seated in the YMCA auditorium in Northeast China more than sixty years ago, even though I had the advantage of a historical hindsight mediated through a new kind of screen practice. Just as *Amorous History* offered an introductory lesson on the ABC's of the cinema to the provincial viewer, it

proved to be an eye-opening phantom ride that transported me to the Shanghai film world. That world suddenly came to life. At that moment, I was overcome by the power of embodiment the film transmitted. I was moved not so much by the rare visual encounter with an extant silent film and the story it presented as by the sensation aroused by the virtual tour of the film world of 1931, by being in the company of Xuan Jinglin as well as her contemporary moviegoers. I realized that here I had not simply a precious primary source but also a methodological guide for conceptualizing the relationship among women, cinema, and modernity. In the amorous history of early film culture in China, as well as elsewhere, women were never simply flat images or representations but were active agents and makers of this history.

By further locating early Chinese film culture and women's presence in the historical landscape of early-twentieth-century China, it is possible to challenge existing views of Chinese cultural modernity, the origin of which has been habitually associated with the May Fourth movement and the related vernacular movement in the late 1910s and well into the 1920s. Shifting away from the supremacy accorded language and literature in the discourse on Chinese modernity, I argue that early Chinese film culture, particularly women's amorous and ambivalent relations to the silver screen, *embodies* modernity as a constellation of interconnected vernacular experiences that defy any rigid boundaries between high and low culture, the visual and verbal, and the aesthetic and the political.[30]

My theoretical investment in the term *vernacular* is not simply motivated by a desire to get away from the much contested and delimiting categories of the "popular" or "mass culture" deployed in current discourses on marginality vis-à-vis hegemony, or subversion vis-à-vis domination. Rather, it is propelled by an urge to reestablish the historical connection, or dialogue, between film culture and modernity, and to rescue the vernacular from the exclusive claim of linguists and literary historians. At the same time, as a historical experience arising from the particular juncture of the vernacular movement and the attendant cultural nationalism, early Chinese cinema does share the ambivalence

toward a global vernacular represented by Western cinemas, in particular that of classical Hollywood. The emergence and survival of the Chinese film industry and film market is thus a tension-ridden process of negotiating between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, between film as a utopian "universal language" on the one hand,[31] and local vernacular(s) on the other. In that sense, the vernacular experience from which the early Chinese film culture emerged, and which it in turn refashioned, is inherently plastic and polyvalent. It was constantly being experimented with, lived out, and redefined. The formation and reception of modern imagery were informed by a host of old and new technologies and related cultural practices. Simultaneously, the emergence of a film culture in the cosmopolitan setting of Shanghai drastically transformed gender relations and perceptions of the body as configured in a modernizing urban space with the impact of mass media and commodity culture.

Standard Chinese film historiography has consistently regarded the film practice of early Chinese cinema, in particular that of the 1920s, as part of the nonprogressive popular culture outside of the May Fourth movement proper.[32] In an influential but rather biased essay, the veteran screenwriter and film critic Ke Lin asks, rhetorically: "Why didn't the strong shock waves of the May Fourth movement reach the film circle?"[33] According to Ke Lin, it was only after the Japanese bombing of Shanghai on 28 January 1932, when the left-wing writers began to enter the film world, that Chinese cinema belatedly connected with the New Culture movement. The May Fourth movement stemmed from a particular political movement, namely, the surge of Chinese nationalism triggered by the students' demonstration in Beijing on 4 May 1919. The students, mostly from Beijing University, joined by Beijing citizens, protested against the imminent signing of the post–World War I Versailles treaty, which allowed the Japanese to take over Shandong province from Germany. The incident was in fact but a pivotal point within a decade-long (1915–25) cultural movement that was radically antitraditional or even iconoclastic and that has been alternatively labeled the Chinese Enlightenment.[34]

One of the most consequential changes effected by the movement took place in the domain of language, with the promotion and institution of the vernacular language (or Mandarin based on the Beijing dialect) as the standard modern Chinese. The process started during the late Qing reform movement and culminated in the May Fourth period. This vernacular turn had a profound impact on the cultural transformations in China in the twentieth century. It was a massive attempt to reconcile elite and popular culture, orality and literacy, and above all, linguistically to unify China as a modern nation on the ruins of a dynastic past. Countless studies in English on the origin and impact of the vernacular movement have centered around the "literary revolution" (*wenxue gemin*) in the May Fourth movement and the literary corpus it generated. Little effort has, however, been made to locate the question of vernacular writing—modern print culture beyond the confines of literary history—in a broader inquiry on the "technological transformation and implementation of the word,"[35] and its interaction with the radically far-reaching form of mass-mediated visual literacy, the cinema.

Hu Shi (1891–1962) is one of the Western educated intellectuals who spearheaded the Chinese Enlightenment. Hu Shi's status as the "father" of the vernacular movement was established instantly when he published "Some Modest Proposals for the Reform of Literature" in *New Youth* in 1917.[36] The "modest proposals" took the form of a literary and linguistic prescription for a "living literature" (*huo wenxue*) written in the vernacular (*baihua*), so that the latter could take over the canonical status traditionally accorded literature and historiography written in the classical language (*wenyan*). While studying philosophy with John Dewey at Columbia University, Hu Shi also began experimenting with writing poetry in the vernacular Chinese (more than prose and drama, poetry as an art of the educated elite had been composed primarily in the classical language), as a radical act of proving the empirical theory of experience. This experiment to modernize Chinese literary language and sensibility resulted in a book of poetry entitled *Collection of Experiments* that became a model text for the vernacular movement.[37]

In the preface for the fourth edition of the collection, Hu articulated writing in the vernacular as visceral.[38] More strikingly, here he compares the vernacular experiment to the physical pain of unbinding feet (*fangjiao*) that many Chinese women were experiencing at the time:

> Now when I look back on the poems I wrote in the past five years, it feels as though *a woman who has unbound her feet* looks back on the changing size of her shoe pattern. Although they have enlarged year after year, each shoe pattern is tinged with the *bloody smell* of the foot binding era. . . .
>
> But women with bound feet can never regain their natural feet. I have once again sorted through my "shoe patterns" over the last five or six years, selected some while omitting those that are totally shapeless and even potentially harmful [to readers]. There remain some "small patterns"; by retaining them, however, I hope people can learn something about the *pain* of foot binding. If that would serve some *historical purpose*, then I would not worry as much (2–3; emphasis added).

The use of foot binding (and unbinding) as a metaphor for cultural renaissance illustrates the point Rey Chow has made about the Chinese male intellectual's masochist identification with (oppressed) women. In assuming the position of the premodern female subject, the male intellectual was able to come to terms with the traumatic encounter with the West and the process of modernization.[39] Rey Chow's psychoanalytical and feminist approach has provoked heated debates on issues concerning gender and national culture in the study of modern Chinese literature. What concerns me here, however, is the sliding, or interchangeability, between writing and body in the production of the vernacular as a cultural practice beyond the limits of language and literature. In other words, the bodily metaphor carries a quite literal or referential weight. The grafting of a linguistic experiment onto the social skin of modernity as a lived, gendered experience—pain as well as liberation—suggests that the cultural ambition of the vernacular movement extends into a larger cultural domain, including the transforming perception of the body and its epistemological status. Rather than being the exclu-

sive property of language or literature, the vernacular is grasped as an affective experience enmeshed in the larger referent of everyday life and social reality (the unbound feet) as well as a discursive formation that demands the creation of a flexible sign system (the shoe pattern).

The production of the vernacular entails, in fact, the production of a historical trope (or purpose) and its attendant forms of expressibility. Language is an integral, but by no means the only way this historical trope gets articulated. Hu Shi's effort to anchor the process of vernacularization in the flesh and blood of the female experience of becoming modern remained a literary masquerade. But the historical impulse behind this movement toward recognizing the vernacular as an embodied experience has a heuristic implication for my conception of early Chinese cinema as the quintessential medium of the vernacular. Hu Shi's vernacular poetics emerged largely outside of, yet simultaneous with, the early Chinese film culture. The cultural etiology of the bound feet deployed by Hu Shi to convey the pain as well as liberation characterizing the vernacularizing process allows me also to take the word *movement* in the expression *vernacular movement* seriously, and quite literally. The vernacular movement was not a static or pedantic enterprise. It involved the production of a pervasive, if often contradictory, historical force and the emergence and perception of a new social body. This theoretical move resonates with Vivian Sobchack's invocation of Merleau-Ponty's view of language as an "embodied" and "enworlded [*sic*]" experience for restoring the "sensuous" power of the motion picture to signify. As a new vernacular "language" for perception and expression, the cinematic experience is always already situated (hence the term "*address* of the eye") in the "flesh of the world" and grounded in the embodied existence and material world.[40]

What Hu Shi did not realize, however, was that while he was writing about the pain of unbinding the feet of vernacular literature and trying to resuscitate experience in the endangered poetic form, the first Chinese female film star Wang Hanlun entered the cultural scene with her unbound feet in 1922. Wang became an instant celebrity after she successfully portrayed a

widow convinced of the virtue of education in *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* [*Gu'er jiuzu ji*] (dir. Zheng Zhengqui, 1923), produced by the Mingxing company, which Xuan Jinglin (the actress in *Amorous History*) joined a couple of years later. If the silver screen made her unbound feet, referred to at the time as *wenmingjiao*, or "civilized feet," visible to the public, it was the life story of her unbinding herself from the fetters of an old society that made her an urban legend.[41] Born to a wealthy gentry family, Wang Hanlun was forced to marry a stranger in her late teens. After a hard-won divorce, she supported herself by teaching in an elementary school and later working as a typist of English for a foreign company. Her decision to enter the film world was met by her family with both opposition and contempt. Wang Hanlun abandoned her original family name Peng and took *Wang* as her new name because the Chinese character for *Wang* (which also means king) was part of the unsimplified Chinese character for *tiger*—a fearless creature.[42] Hanlun, on the other hand, was derived from her English name: Helen. The director Zhang Shichuan recalled years later that Wang Hanlun was one of the few rare "modern girls" (*modeng nülang*) of the time; her fashionable dress and makeup deeply impressed him and his colleagues.[43] Her linguistic gift—being able to speak Mandarin and English in addition to the Shanghai dialect—added to her modern flair. Not only did Wang Hanlun boldly show her unbound feet on the screen during the shooting of a film in 1926, she also had her long hair cut in front of the camera. Though required by the plot, this cut (from her past) added another embodied token to her image as a modern girl.

Wang's film career culminated in the opening of a film company under her own name, which in 1929 produced a feature called *Revenge of the Actress* [*Nüling fuchou ji*] (dir. Bu Wancang) in which she starred.[44] It was practically a one-woman enterprise. She hired a director but had to take care of all other aspects of production, including editing, herself. Because of the negligence of her partners, she eventually bought the shooting script from the director and finished the postproduction by herself. With the aid of a manual projector, she finished editing the film at home. Afterwards she traveled with the film all over China, performing

Wang Hanlun in *The Abandoned Wife* [*Qifu*], directed by Li Zeyuan and Hou Yao (China, 1924)

live during intermissions. The profit generated by the film enabled her to retire from the screen and establish the Hanlun Beauty Salon, which became a trendy spot in Shanghai.

Both Wang Hanlun and Xuan Jinglin's ascendance as icons of modern women, despite their different social origins, exemplifies the redemptive power of the cinematic medium in the realization of a modern version of the Cinderella fairy tale. The cinema presented both women (and many others) with a chance for a second life both on and off the screen. At the same time, their disparate backgrounds and ways of living out their

potential demonstrate the heterogeneous origin of early Chinese cinema as well as the hybrid nature of Shanghai's vernacular culture. While Wang came from a wealthy family and received her education at a missionary school, Xuan belonged to the lower depths of society and was hardly literate when she entered the film world. One escaped from an arranged marriage and cut her ties with a traditional gentry family; the other left the pleasure quarters and later the confines of modern-style concubinage. The film world became their new home as well as the university of life. While the sense of liberation and empowerment felt by Wang and Xuan was certainly never complete and was often ambivalent, the silver screen nevertheless allowed them to experience their changing self-perception through performance or role-playing. It is in the process of blending reality with fiction, their personal histories with the lives of the characters they portrayed on the screen, that the collective experience of Chinese women, poised on the threshold of different worlds and destinies, and deployed by Hu Shi as an allegory for the vernacular movement, began to receive embodied articulation. If the movement toward embodiment in Hu Shi's vernacular poetics remained symbolic and short-lived, the reenactment and transformation of the lived experience of the first generation of film actresses on the silver screen carry the weight of a particular historical indexicality and concreteness.

Notes

I wish to thank Miriam Hansen, Tom Gunning, Judith Zeitlin, Anna McCarthy, and John Crespi for their constructive comments on the article at its different stages.

1. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968), 262; 264.
2. For a study on reflexivity in film and literature, see Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985).
3. Some representative works in this trend are Roger Holman, ed.,

Cinema 1900–1906: An Analytical Study (Brussels: Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film, 1982); John Fell, ed., *Film before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Jay Leyda and Charles Musser, eds., *Before Hollywood* (New York: American Federation of the Arts, 1987); Noël Burch, *Life to Those Shadows*, ed. and trans. Ben Brewster (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). The most representative work that maps out the patriarchal structure of looking through the psychoanalytic method is Laura Mulvey's seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6–18.

4. For a concise sketch of the rise of "early cinema" as a critical concept, see Thomas Elsaesser, "General Introduction—Early Cinema: From Linear History to Mass Media Archaeology," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 1–8. The volume contains some pioneering studies on early Western cinema from multiple perspectives. However, non-Western early cinemas were not included.

5. See, for example, Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Ann Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Patrice Petro, *Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Shelly Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz, eds., *The Red Velvet Seat: Women's Writings on the Cinema, the First Fifty Years* (New York: Verso, forthcoming). The present volume will no doubt make a significant contribution to this expanding field.

6. For a brief assessment of this emergent scholarship in China, see my article, "Teahouse, Shadowplay, Bricolage: *Laborer's Love* and the Question of Early Chinese Cinema," in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

7. Recently, some European and Japanese scholars (including Marie-Claire Quiquemelle, Regis Bergeron, Marco Müller, Tadao Sato, and Fumitoshi Karima) have also produced interesting work, mostly in the form of articles that are included in

catalogues for retrospectives of Chinese film held in the early 1980s. See for example, Centre de Documentation sur le Cinéma Chinois, ed., *Ombres électriques: Panorama du cinéma chinois 1925–1982* (Paris: Centre de Documentation sur le Cinéma Chinois, 1982); Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, *Le cinéma chinois* (Paris, 1985); *Chugoku eiga no kaiko (1922–1952)* [A retrospective of Chinese cinema, 1922–1952] (Tokyo: The National Film Center at the Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan [The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo], 1984); *Chugoku eiga no kaiko (1932–1964)* [A retrospective of Chinese cinema, 1932–1964] (Tokyo: The National Film Center at the Tokyo Kokuritsu Kindai Bijutsukan [The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo], 1988); *Sun Yu kandoku to Shanghai eiga no nakamatachi—Chugoku eiga no kaiko* [Sun Yu and his Shanghai colleagues: Retrospective of Chinese fims] (1992). I am grateful to Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano for acquiring the Japanese catalogues.

8. Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin, *Zhongguo wusheng dianyingshi* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1997). The English version of the book was published in 1998 by China Film Press, Beijing.
9. For an early attempt to theorize nonsynchronicity, see Ernst Bloch, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics," trans. Mark Ritter, *New German Critique* 11 (1977): 22–38.
10. Printed in the programs of the Afanggong Theater for *Amorous History*, parts 1 and 2, August 1931.
11. The reference to Lillian Gish is an allusion to Xuan Jinglin's real life story. Her original name was Tian Jinlin. While in the brothel she used the nickname Xiao Jinmudan (little golden peony). The veteran director Zheng Zhengqiu helped her to adopt a stage name, Xuan Jinglin, obliquely (in Shanghai dialect) alluding to Lillian Gish (*Ganlixu*, in Chinese transliteration). See Tan Chunfa, *Kai yidai xianhe—Zhongguo dianying zhifu Zheng Zhengqiu* [The pioneer—Zheng Zhengqiu, the father of Chinese cinema] (Beijing: Guoji wenhua chuban gongsi, 1992), 308.
12. The first three are actual films produced by the Mingxing company that year.
13. Zhong Dafeng and Shu Xiaomin, *Zhongguo dianyingshi* [History of Chinese film] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1995), 14.
14. Xuan Jingling, "Wode yingmu shenghuo" [My life on the silver screen], *Zhongguo dianying* [Chinese Cinema] 3 (1956): 72–74. See also Zhang Shichuan, "Zi wo daoyan yilai" [Since I started

directing], *Mingxing banyuekan* [Mingxing bimonthly] 1.5 (1935). Zhang recalls first seeing Xuan as a little girl with pigtails riding donkeys in the New World Amusement Center where he worked as a manager. Years later, while he was casting for the film *Last Conscience* [*Zuihou de liangxin*] (1925), he managed to find Xuan, who had become a prostitute out of poverty, and asked her to play a minor role. After the successful release of the film, the company paid two thousand Chinese dollars to redeem her from the brothel.

15. The social status of the company in particular and the film world in general was significantly enhanced when Hong Shen (1894–1955), a Harvard-trained professor of English and drama at Fudan University, joined Mingxing as a screenwriter. If the cinema liberated Xuan from prostitution, Hong Shen's decision to enter the nascent film industry (which at the time was still regarded as a low entertainment form rather than art) and to place himself in the company of an ex-prostitute like Xuan aroused shocked reactions in the intellectual circle, including his family and friends. His action was labeled by a Fudan colleague as "prostitution of art." Hong Shen was nevertheless resolute about his commitment. See Hong Shen, "Wo de dagu shiqi yijing guo le ma?" [Has the time of my drumming passed already?], *Hong Shen quanji* [Collected works of Hong Shen], vol. 4 (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe, 1957), 517. Xuan starred in *The Mistress's Fan* [*Shao nainai de shanzi*] (1926), scripted and directed by Hong Shen.
16. For a groundbreaking study on the exhibitionist mode of presentation of early cinema, which challenges the prevalent voyeurist paradigm used in studies of classical Hollywood cinema, see Tom Gunning, "Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8.3–4 (1986): 63–70. Miriam Hansen has described such a presentational practice in terms of "excess of appeal," "diversity and display," and "public performance." See "A Cinema in Search of a Spectator: Film-Viewer Relations before Hollywood" in *Babel and Babylon*, 23–59.
17. Andreas Huyssen, "The Vamp and the Machine," in *The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 65–81.
18. Walter Benjamin, "One Way Street," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, vol. 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 476.

19. It remains a common practice for men to impersonate women in the Peking opera. At the turn of the twentieth century, this practice was carried over to the modern spoken drama and subsequently cinema for some time.
20. The film became a huge box office success, which helped to stimulate the popular taste for the new medium. For a synopsis of the film, see *Zhongguo wusheng dianying juben* [Chinese silent film scripts], ed. Zheng Peiwei and Liu Guiqing (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1996), 4–5.
21. The term *taste for reality* is adapted from Vanessa R. Schwartz, "Cinema Spectatorship before the Apparatus: The Public Taste for Reality in Fin-de-Siècle Paris," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 87–113.
22. For an instructive account of the relationship between early movie actresses and public discourse in China, see Michael Chang, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s–1930s," in *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943*, ed. Yingjin Zhang (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 128–59.
23. Gongsun Lu, *Zhongguo dianying shihua* [Historical accounts of Chinese cinema] (Hong Kong: Guangjiaojing chubanshe, 1976), 39–41; 53–54.
24. There were two other famous modern girls known also by their "foreign" names—Miss A. A. (Ace Ace) and Miss S. S. (Shanghai Style). Miss. A. A.'s real name is Fu Wenhao, and she also appeared in films. She is allegedly the first Chinese woman to earn a driver's license in the International Settlement of Shanghai. See Cheng Bugao, *Yingtan yijiu* [Reminiscences of the film world] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1983), 57.
25. Gong Jianong, *Gong Jianong congying huiyilu* [Robert Kung's memoires of his silver screen life], vol. 1. (Taipei: Wenxing shudian, 1966–67), 123.
26. Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator," *Art and Text* 34 (1989): 31–45.
27. Zhong Yuan, "Guan 'Yingmu yanshi' hou" [After watching *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*], *Yingxi shenghuo* [Movie Weekly] 1.34 (1931):15–17.
28. Gunning, "Aesthetic of Astonishment," 43.
29. Zhong Yuan, "Guan 'Yingmu yanshi' hou," 16–17.
30. For a perceptive study on female stardom and vernacular

modernism in Chinese silent film of the 1930s, see Miriam Hansen, "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism," *Film Quarterly* 54.1 (2000): 10–22.

31. The discourse on film as a potential universal language or visual Esperanto was intimately linked to the emergence of the cinema as a social and cultural institution in America in the 1910s. See Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 76–89. Hansen argues that "the celebration of film as a new universal language ultimately coincided in substance and ideology with the shift from primitive to classical modes of narration and address that occurred, roughly, between 1909–1916" (79). In other words, the creation of a cinematic universal language went hand in hand with the cultivation of a uniform code of narration and the concomitant abstraction (or textual inscription) of a spectatorship. A similar process occurred in Chinese film, but lasted well into the mid-1920s, when feature-length narrative cinema finally began to dominate the film scene (though never completely so).
32. The most established text that holds this orthodox view is Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Xing Zuwen, *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* [History of the development of Chinese cinema], 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1981).
33. Ke Lin, "Shi wei 'Wusi' yu dianying hua yi lunkuo" [An attempt at drawing a contour for the May Fourth movement and the cinema], in *Ke Lin dianying wencun* [Selected extant writings of Ke Lin], ed. Chen Wei, (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1992), 286–302. Ke Lin entered the Shanghai film world as a left-wing writer in the early 1930s.
34. See Vera Schwarcz, *The Chinese Enlightenment: Intellectuals and the Legacy of the May Fourth Movement of 1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
35. Walter Ong, *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).
36. Hu Shi, "Wenxue gailiang chuyi" [Some modest proposals for the reform of literature], *Xin qingnian* 2.5 (1917), rpt. in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*, ed. and trans. Kirk Denton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 123–39. *New Youth* published the first piece of fiction written in the vernacular by Lu Xun in January 1918. Hu Shi first experimented with vernacular writing and publishing when he studied in new-style schools in Shanghai as a teenager from

1904–10 before he left for America. See Hu Shi, "Sishi zishu" [An autobiography written at the age of forty], in *Hu Shi zizhuan* [Hu Shi's autobiographical writings], ed. Cao Boyuan (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 1986), 54–62. "Sishi zishu" was originally published in booklet form by the Yadong Library in Shanghai in 1935.

37. Hu Shi, *Changshiji* [Collection of experiments] (1920; Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1922).
38. According to this preface, the first three editions sold about ten thousand copies within two years, a phenomenal number for a poetry collection (1).
39. See Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), especially chap. 4, "Loving Women: Masochism, Fantasy, and the Idealization of the Mother." Bound feet did, however, play a concrete role in Hu Shi's personal experience. Before he went to America, he was engaged to a woman with bound feet whom his mother chose for him in his native Anhui province. When he was studying at Columbia, he fell in love with an American woman. Unable to absolve his feeling of moral obligation, he married the Chinese woman upon returning to China.
40. Vivian Sobchack, "Phenomenology and the Film Experience," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 36–58.
41. Gongsun Lu, *Zhongguo dianying shihua*, 50–52.
42. Wang Hanlun, "Wode congying jingguo" [My experience with the cinema], in *Zhongguo wusheng dianying* [Chinese silent film], ed. Zhongguo Dianying zi liaoguan (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1997), 1471–75.
43. Zhang Shichuan, "Zi wo daoyan yilai," *Mingxing banyuekan* [Mingxing bimonthly] 1.4 (1935): 16.
44. Wang Hanlun, "Wode congying jingguo," 1476–77. The original English title for the film is *Blind Love*. For a synopsis of the film, see *Zhongguo wusheng dianying juben*, 1849–50.

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Wang Hanlun (center, with her unbound feet) in *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (China, 1923), directed by Zheng Zhengqui. Courtesy of the China Film Archive