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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Regional Cultural Enterprises and Cultural Markets in Early Republican China: The Motion Picture as Case Study

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Abstract

The transition of the motion picture from foreign amusement to local enterprise was primarily the result of transnational commercial activity linking investors, entrepreneurs, and entertainment professionals. Amid the ongoing urbanization of China's early Republican period, the enterprises emerging from this activity became increasingly profitable and, as a result, film production and exhibition became regularized phenomena, rooted in identifiable genres and standardized approaches to engaging audiences within the immersive space of the theater. By the early 1920s, those closest to the nascent industry were eager to legitimize its power by portraying the medium as a tool for political and social reform. However, commercial strategies and aesthetics remained relatively undisturbed despite this progressive rhetoric. In geographic terms, motion picture-related enterprises and culture remained strongly regional: affected and constrained by the non-Chinese national industries operating in politically divided China, by competing forms of local popular culture, and by existing geographies of exchange and infrastructure. The early Republican "experimental" period in Chinese cinema was, from an enterprise-centered perspective, one of numerous coexisting subnational cultural centers and zones.

Keywords: modern Chinese history, Republican era (1911–1949), business history, cultural geography, Sino-foreign enterprise, media change, cinema, motion pictures (production and exhibition), film theaters, popular culture

To Chinese audiences before 1907, the motion picture was a foreign-created amusement that depicted strange lands and scenes and was consumed as a foreign curiosity. In the waning years of the Qing empire, this state of affairs began to change. Though concentrated at first in zones of foreign control, the technology radiated outward into the world of theatrical and street-level amusements frequented by urbanites and those from surrounding areas. Exhibiting films became one of many modern trades built on commercial transportation links between distant urban centers and the gradual electrification of urban life (Strand 2000). China's late imperial and early

Republican urban transformation created new spatial patterns—urban spaces—that linked cities both to one another and to metropolises beyond China’s borders (Elvin and Skinner 1974; Esherick 1999; Cochran, Strand, and Yeh 2007; So and Zelin 2013). Exhibition and production, however, remained first and foremost regional forms of commercial activity, and exhibition beyond major provincial cities was sporadic at best.¹ Motion picture–related enterprises thus provide important evidence concerning the geography of cultural change accompanying urbanization, as well as insight into the global dynamics of cultural entrepreneurship within the specific local setting of early Republican China.

During the early Republican period, the production of motion pictures was characterized mainly by partnerships formed between foreign entrepreneurs seeking to capture a share of China’s urban entertainment markets and Chinese performers and business managers whose professional experience was drawn primarily from the world of the stage.² These partnerships resulted in three important changes to China’s urban cultural landscape. First, despite the general dominance of European and, increasingly, Hollywood film in Asian markets, Chinese-operated filmmaking enterprises emerged in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and (more apocryphally) Beijing. Second, filmgoing became a more ubiquitous cultural practice, as evidenced by the appearance of film-only theaters and theater companies. Finally, film and its imputed social “power” became subjects of public scrutiny, debate, and greater state regulation.

These three changes marked a new stage in the history of early cinema in China. In contrast to the first decade of China’s film history, the post-1907 period was characterized by the *regularization* of film markets through the establishment and expansion of distribution networks; the orientation of both production and consumption toward multireel features differentiated into narrative genres; the construction of fixed exhibition facilities (mainly, though not limited to, the film theater); the homogenization of the theatrical experience through increasingly uniform management practices; and the creation of localized regulatory environments that taxed and policed new film-related businesses as part of the larger, and still primarily stage-based, entertainment economy (Xiao 1994). Film markets also became *regional*, and by the early 1920s the presence of Hollywood studio offices across multiple zones of direct and indirect political control suggests that a “China market” roughly contiguous with the geo-body of the republic was also beginning to emerge. Chinese filmmaking enterprises, most notably the Commercial Press Motion Picture Department, also strategized to create wider, transregional markets for

domestically produced films (*guochan pian*), highlighting the sense that competition was cast in national terms (Lu 1997, 1–4).

Chinese film enterprises were the product of transnational connections between investors, entrepreneurs, entertainment professionals, distributors, theater owners, and overseas communities of different national backgrounds (Lu 1997; Huang 2008b; Yau 2010). However, foreign business interests remained dominant in China’s film markets prior to the formation of a national industry—as, indeed, they did thereafter.³ As a result, in practical terms, the landscape of early Republican mass culture remained heterogeneous, if not divided, and spheres of imperial influence resulted in the “nationalization” of the motion picture as a commodity: American, British, French, Japanese, and Russian films were among the most notable within this variegated cultural landscape. Other factors affecting the distribution of motion picture–related enterprises, and particularly exhibition, included the degrees of integration between economic cores and peripheries, transportation costs, and social acceptance or resistance. For all these reasons, it is exceedingly difficult to generalize about early cinema history in China based on evidence drawn from a single location, such as Shanghai. Instead, the growth of treaty port–based mass cultural enterprises in China tended to follow patterns typical of the economy as a whole, which possessed both interregional and regional characteristics (Hao 1998, 112–114).

This article intends to provide an overview of China’s motion picture enterprises prior to the emergence of a more recognizably national film industry during the 1920s. The “experimental period” (*changshi shiqi*) from 1907 to the 1920s (Li 2003, 4–10) was *transnational* in terms of the ownership and operation of enterprises. As such, it may be seen as an antecedent to later diasporic forms of transnational enterprise—the Hong Kong–based Shaw Brothers Studio being among the most notable examples—documented by film historians Sheldon H. Lu, Emily Yueh-yu Yeh, and Poshek Fu (Lu and Yeh 2005; Fu 2008). The experimental period was characterized by commercial strategies, efforts to build steady markets across disparate locations, and partnerships between historical actors of differing nationalities. Aesthetically, films produced for or in China during this period were intended to attract large audiences, often bearing strong connections to popular forms of stage performance and theater (Zhang 2004, 13–14). Research using gazetteers, interviews, foreign newspapers, and other overlooked sources of data also shows that, even as film markets grew and the reach of producers and theater chains expanded, film culture in China remained regionally distinctive, and

a wide range of actors and motivations created a diverse exhibition environment that was not solely commercialized or theater-based. For business historians, is perhaps noteworthy that, by the end of the experimental period, filmmaking and film exhibition in China were characterized by a mixture of internationally serialized and locally attenuated practices. Within China's fluctuating borders, the new economic and commercial subsector of motion picture-related enterprise had several centers, each fostered by a relatively well-defined contact zone (e.g., Manchuria, Shanghai and the Yangtze River, Hong Kong, and Canton), and gradually radiating outward in tandem with changing transport linkages and regional patterns of marketization. A key finding of this article, then, is that economic geography and foreign film industries together explain the regional nature of Republican China's multiple cinematic cultures, even as the founding entrepreneurs of China's Shanghai-based domestic industry explored the possibility of creating a genuinely national alternative in their stead.

Localized Production and the Drama-Cinema Nexus, 1905–1914

By the early twentieth century, the global commercial circulation of motion picture technology had resulted in the creation of a modest network of regionalized distribution and exhibition circuits, but little in the way of film production. While foreign filmmakers visited China with regularity as exhibitors or “showmen,” the moving images that they produced during their journeys were primarily shown in other countries; notable exceptions included early motion picture presenters H. Welby Cook and the team of Johnson and Charvet, whose Shanghai scenes were apparently included among the films shown during their respective tours of the China coast prior to 1900. This situation began to change starting around 1905, when entertainment entrepreneurs based in China began to contract with Chinese actors to produce moving images of stage-based performance and narrative “story films.”

Two particular enterprises mark the shift in late Qing motion picture entertainment culture from one of distribution and exhibition only to one of more regularized local production. Beijing studio photographer Ren Qingtai (Ren Jingfeng), owner of the Fengtai Photography Studio, is believed to have funded the production of a run of “opera films” between 1905 and 1908. These were actualities, or unvarnished documents, of well-known Peking opera performers acting out scenes from stage adaptations of classic works of popular entertainment, such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*San guo yanyi*) (Cheng [1963] 1998, 13–29; Li and Hu 1996,

13–16; Lu 2002, 3–4; Fang 2003, 6–8; Lu 2005, 7–9; Shen 2005, 15–17; Xu 2005, 14). Ren’s connections to the Manchu court, whose nobles he had photographed, made him an economically powerful entrepreneur with varied business interests within the capital (Shen 2005, 17). His films were allegedly shown in an entertainment complex that he personally owned and operated—the Dagan Tower, which was later converted into a teahouse-style “motion picture garden” (*yingxi yuan*). None of Ren’s films have survived, and even the scant visual evidence for their existence has been challenged on the basis that it cannot be traced back to the moment of the films’ production (Huang 2008a, 104–111). The motion picture remained primarily a “foreign spectacle,” even if short films depicting war in northeast Asia, or scenes of treaty port society, appeared occasionally in the context of exhibitions for primarily non-Chinese audiences (Farquhar and Berry 2005).

A. E. Lauro (Enrico Lauro), a filmmaker trained at Italy’s Cines Company, is also believed to have been active in production at the same time as Ren Qingtai; unlike Ren, he is not believed to have been successful. From 1904 to 1905, Lauro produced actualities—primarily street and teahouse scenes (Law and Bren 2004, 13). Then, according to his own account, Lauro began shooting for a film titled *The Curse of Opium*, hiring a troupe of Chinese stage performers as actors (*The Chinese Mirror* 2008). The film was never completed or released, and Lauro returned to producing one-reel actualities, such as *Shanghai’s First Tramway* (1908), *Imperial Funeral Procession in Peking* (1908), *Lovely Views in Shanghai Concessions* (1910), and *Cutting Queues by Force* (1911) (Barsam 1992, 135). Lauro is also described as an exhibitor whose first screenings were conducted in a tent containing benches and a screen (Zhang 2004, 14, 18; *The Chinese Mirror* 2010).⁴ Unlike many previous exhibitors, however, Lauro—whose business enterprises may have extended from Shanghai to Beijing—is presumed to have shown his own films alongside others (Shan 2005, 9; Fang 2003, 30–31; Lu 2005, 7–9).

The Transition to Sino-Foreign Production

By 1911 more than fifty actuality films had been produced in China by foreign filmmaker-exhibitors; this number is potentially larger if the eight opera films produced by Ren Qingtai between 1905 and 1908 are added to the total (Shan 2005, 8; Law and Bren 2004, 310). Motion picture production included an increasingly pronounced emphasis on the writing and adaptation of stage performances for film from 1909 onward; however, the production of

actualities, war films, and, increasingly, news footage continued relatively unabated (Lu 2002, 5; Hu 2003, 43). Though the existence of individual titles is often difficult to verify, these latter films included: reenactments of China's Wuchang Uprising produced by Shokichi Umeya, a Japanese associate of Sun Yat-sen; other scenes of the 1911 civil conflict, supposedly filmed or produced by Chinese magician and stage performer Zhu Liankui; and the war between Yuan Shikai's central government and the southern provinces (the Second Revolution of 1913) (Leyda 1972, 11; Shan 2005, 9–10; Fang 2003, 8–12; Fahlstedt 2014). In addition, foreign film companies routinely dispatched filmmakers to China with the intent of producing new footage for viewing by audiences abroad—footage that has been described by Chinese film historians as focusing on anti-China themes and exotic aspects of China (Shan 2005, 9; Fang 2003, 31–32; Gao 2003, 5–8; Li and Hu 1996, 20–21).

By contrast, the shift to localized production of opera and story films was mainly characterized by the emergence of enterprises that relied on cooperation between Chinese performers and foreign capital, experience, and technology. These joint cultural ventures represented important channels of technology and knowledge transfer; several of China's most prolific and influential early filmmakers began their cinematic careers working alongside non-Chinese motion picture entrepreneurs (Li and Hu 1996, 20–21; Fu and Desser 2002, 45–46). While the opera and story film efforts of Ren Fengtai and A. E. Lauro remain relegated to the status of historical hearsay, a better-documented example of localized film production concerns Europe-born filmmaker Benjamin Brodsky, whose production activities began in Hong Kong in 1914 (Bren 2009, 4–7). Brodsky was initially a distributor whose company, the Variety Film Exchange Company, claimed offices in Honolulu, Yokohama, Tokyo, Vladivostok, Harbin, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. Later, along with hired technician R. F. Van Velzer, he became a producer of racetrack and travel films, as well as story films for exhibition in Chinese (“native”) theaters; according to Van Velzer, these latter titles included *The Defamation of Choung Chow* (*Zhuangzi shi qi*, 1914, aka *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife*), *The Haunted Pot*, *The Sanpan Man's Dream*, and *The Trip of the Roast Duck* (*The Moving Picture World* 1914, 577). With the exception of *The Defamation of Choung Chow*, the details and existence of these titles is disputed. However, Brodsky's multireel travel film, *A Trip through China*, was exhibited across the United States in 1916 and 1917, and likely represented Variety's most successful venture:

A Trip through China (c. 1910–1915) begins in Hong Kong and roves north through China to include long takes in the Forbidden City (Beijing) and a legal slow-strangulation execution indicating Brodsky’s “pull” in official circles. This extraordinary film, which is about two hours long, earned solid, even “rave,” reviews in the *New York Times*, *Motography*, *Variety*, and other journals upon its...release in America, where it was sometimes accompanied by a Chinese orchestra. Variations on the title, in sundry reviews and advertisements, included *Brodsky’s Trip through China* and *A Trip Thru China*. (Law and Bren 2004, 30)

Brodsky’s business strategy thus included production of two types of films: realistic depictions of China for non-Chinese audiences, and story films using Chinese stage performers for Chinese audiences. (One of the principal actors for *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife*, Li Minwei [Lai Man-wai]—see figure 1—would go on to become cofounder of China’s Lianhua [United Photoplay] film company, as well as Sun Yat-sen’s personal documentarian.) Brodsky’s success and that of his cinematic protégés was not accidental. The China Cinema Company, another Hong Kong-based film production company established by Brodsky prior to completion of *A Trip through China*, was funded by U.S. college-educated “returned” students with ties to China’s political and financial elite (Curry 2011, 71–84).



Figure 1. Li Minwei appearing as Zhuangzi’s wife in a film or stage production of *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife*. Undated photograph. *Source*: Li (2005, 16).

The Asiatic Film Company and Photoplay Company

The Variety Film Exchange Company model was paralleled by that of another Sino-foreign film producer, the Shanghai Yaxiya (“Asiatic”) Film Company (Shanghai Yaxiya yingpian gongsi). Like Brodsky and Van Velzer’s enterprise, the Asiatic Film Company was established by two foreign entrepreneurs, Arthur J. Israel, a former American insurance man, and Thomas H. Suffert (Fu 2015). Israel and Suffert established their company in 1913, immediately releasing a film of scenes supposedly shot by a hired “expert” during the recent Battle of Shanghai (Shanghai zhanzheng) (Huang 2008b, 85). The company also announced the recent production of six additional films in which “Chinese theater would be performed as household new dramas” (*banyan Zhongguo xiju ru jiating xin ju*) by members of the Xinmin (“New People”) Dramatic Society (Xinmin she). The films were later exhibited in Shanghai’s French Concession and— highlighting the close connection between dramatic culture and cinematic culture—performed on stage (Huang 2008b, 85–86).



Figure 2. Members of the Asiatic Photoplay Company, allegedly photographed in a studio on Hong Kong Road, Shanghai. Undated photograph. *Source*: Cheng ([1963] 1998).

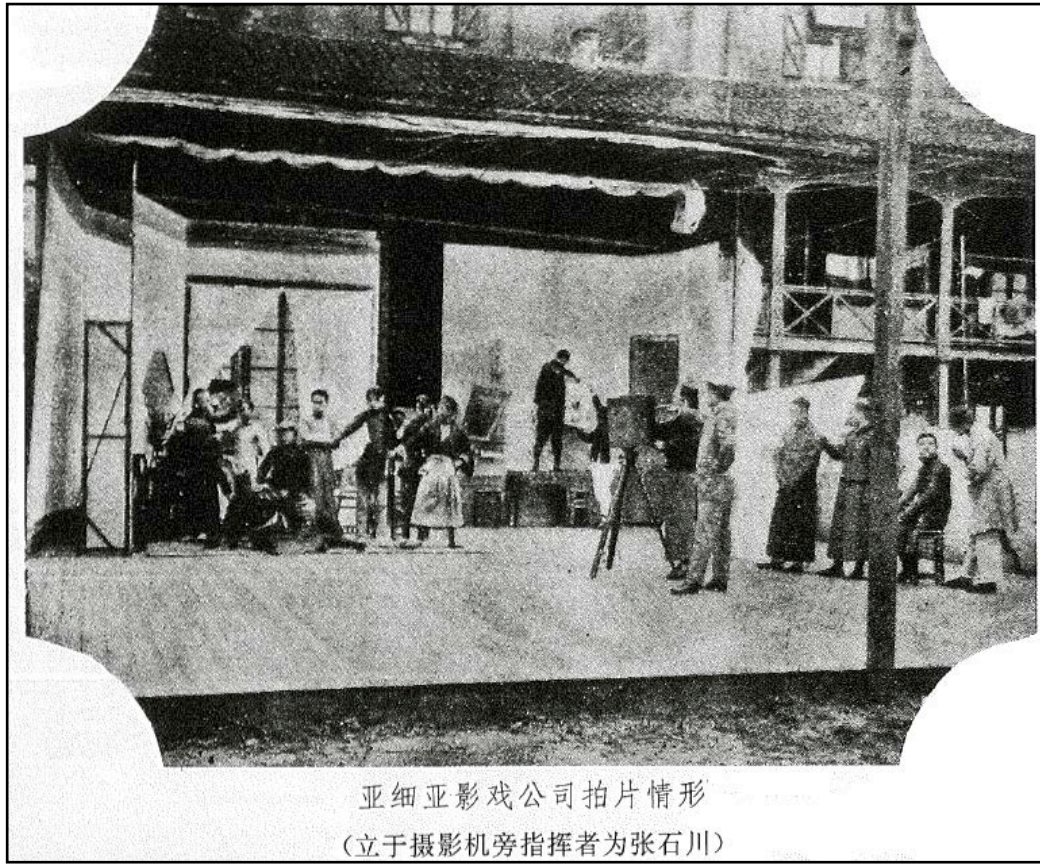


Figure 3. Image of Asiatic employees at work, possibly showing Arthur J. Israel and Zhang Shichuan directing and operating the camera. Undated photograph. *Source*: Cheng ([1963] 1998).

The Asiatic Film Company and its subsidiary, the Asiatic Photoplay Company (Yaxiya yingxi gongsi), forged close relationships with Shanghai-based dramatic societies, who acted as theater staff and stage performers and produced their own stage productions of Asiatic Photoplay Company films for theatergoing audiences (figures 2 and 3). The company's closest partner was the Minming ("People's Voice") Dramatic Society (Minming she), which in 1914 was perhaps Shanghai's most popular performer of "new" spoken drama (*xin ju*) (Liu 2013). Several key Minming members had previously belonged to the Xinmin Dramatic Society, and Minming appears to have effectively taken over Asiatic Photoplay Company operations. Two major figures of early Chinese cinema, Zheng Zhengqiu and Zhang Shichuan, were initially Asiatic-Minming employees; Zheng was already a well-known figure in new drama circles, and may have written several of the screenplays for Asiatic films produced in 1913 (Wang [1957] 1962, 1–6).⁵ At least one Asiatic production, *Victims of Opium* (*Heiji yuan hun*) (figure 4), was based

on a well-known play of the same name.⁶ Another, *The Difficult Couple* (*Nan fu nan qi*), was supposedly written by Zheng for the company, and became its first successful foray into the story-film world.



Figure 4. Print advertisement and promotional photograph for *Victims of Opium* (*Heiji yuan hun*, aka *Lost Souls in an Opium Den*). Huanxian, 1916. Source: Yang (2006, 10).

Unlike Brodsky and Van Velzer's Variety Film Exchange Company, the Asiatic Photoplay Company was, at least initially, a successful endeavor in terms of its output and staying power. Minming Dramatic Society actors were well versed in a variety of roles both comedic and dramatic. Their short features included comedies about marriage, dramatization of scandalous news events, as well as other amusements taken directly from the stage. These features reflected the bawdy and fast-paced nature of urban stage art: images of ghosts with long

tongues, lecherous monks, cuckolds, encounters with city gods, unlucky shop boys, and rickshaws amok in vegetable markets (Wang [1957] 1962, 1–6). Some of these scenarios were adopted directly from popular Peking operas, while others seem modeled on slapstick films produced abroad. The films were primarily shown following stage performances, or in nontheatrical spaces also frequented by cultural reformers, such as the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) (Zhang 2004, 20). They complemented Shanghai’s stage culture but did not significantly challenge the dominance of the stage, or of “mixed” live commercial entertainment—known in other global settings as vaudeville—as dominant urban cultural industries.

Emerging Functions, Studios, and Genres, 1916–1922

Early film producers were organized as companies, not as studios. Production was limited and varied in location, including both “live” sites and theaters in which narrative films were performed by actors on a stage. Like the drama from which it borrowed, and newspapers in which news of its attractions appeared, early filmmaking in China remained regional in terms of its reach. Within several years, foreign producers like Brodsky and Van Velzer (Hong Kong) and Israel and Suffert (Shanghai) gave way to Chinese entrepreneurs who capitalized on their experience producing and performing new spoken drama (or “civilized plays” [*wenming xi*]) to expand business among Chinese theater audiences. Chinese dramatists were familiar with both “traditional” (*jingju*) and “modern” (*shizhuang de xinju*) idioms, and as such their approach to film production reflected previous changes in the late Qing theater world, during which Yuan, Ming, and Qing genres had been adapted to incorporate depictions of contemporary society; themes from the new plays and articles of literary journals; and updated costuming (Cody and Sprinchorn 2007, 251–252). Influences from Japanese new drama (J: *shinpai*) and adaptations of Western works, such as *The Lady of the Camellias* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, added new elements to the emerging spoken drama world. For dramatic professionals–turned-filmmakers, however, comedy and other forms of visual attraction also remained important elements of the business; film producers thus became involved in the development of new genres and functions for the medium.

By 1916, foreign and Sino-foreign film companies, including Russian and Japanese enterprises in Manchuria, had thus been established in several locations throughout China. The

primary genres of production at this point were short opera and story films, which consisted essentially of filmed recordings of stage performances (Li and Hu 1996, 28–78). Popular theater became cinema, and popular films were reenacted for the stage. A shift to longer, multireel narratives had taken place after 1910, in response to changes in the U.S. industry; other elements of production also mirrored U.S. developments, such as the emphasis on comedy (Xiao 1994, 55–57). Until 1919, there seems to have been little interest or ability on the part of investors to support a large-scale domestic industry. Variety and Asiatic both closed their doors, with the latter giving rise to the short-lived Huanxian Film Company (Huanxian yingpian gongsi) (Lu 2005, 9–14). However, between 1919 and 1922, four noteworthy new companies emerged: the Commercial Press Motion Picture Department (Shangwu yinshuguan huodong yingxi bu), China Film Production Company (Zhongguo yingpian zhizao gufenyouxian gongsi), Mingxing (“Star”) Film Company (Mingxing yingpian gongsi), and Shanghai Photoplay Company (Shanghai yingxi gongsi) (Shen 2005, 20; Jiangsu sheng dianyingjia xiehui 2005, 2009). Like their predecessors, these enterprises engaged in production of narrative films based on new dramas and civilized plays as well as stage comedies (*qu ju*), but they also looked to popular literature and magazines for stories with a humorous or sensational bent (Lu 2002, 5). Filmmakers were also keenly aware of trends within foreign industries—the lead actress of Shanghai Photoplay’s *The Sea Oath* (*Hai shi*, 1922), for example, styled herself after Pearl White, star of serial cliffhanger *The Perils of Pauline* (Eclectic Film Co., 1914) (Wang [1957] 1962, 23–28).

Regional film producers, most notably those clustered around Shanghai, benefited in part from changes in available technology, with Kodak becoming a major supplier of motion picture production equipment to China after 1916 (Zhao and Jia 2005, 11). The Commercial Press Motion Picture Department (figure 5) was among the first to take advantage of newly available equipment, and several films produced by smaller companies relied on the use of Commercial Press facilities (Xu 2005, 14–15, 18). With the growth of China’s domestic film industry also came new assessments of the industry’s potential application to issues of national, and transnational, concern. Here again the Commercial Press was an early innovator, adopting the early Republic’s reformist language of culture and enlightenment to justify its commercial activities in nationalist terms, and engaging in production of nonfeature actuality films under the rubric of popular education.

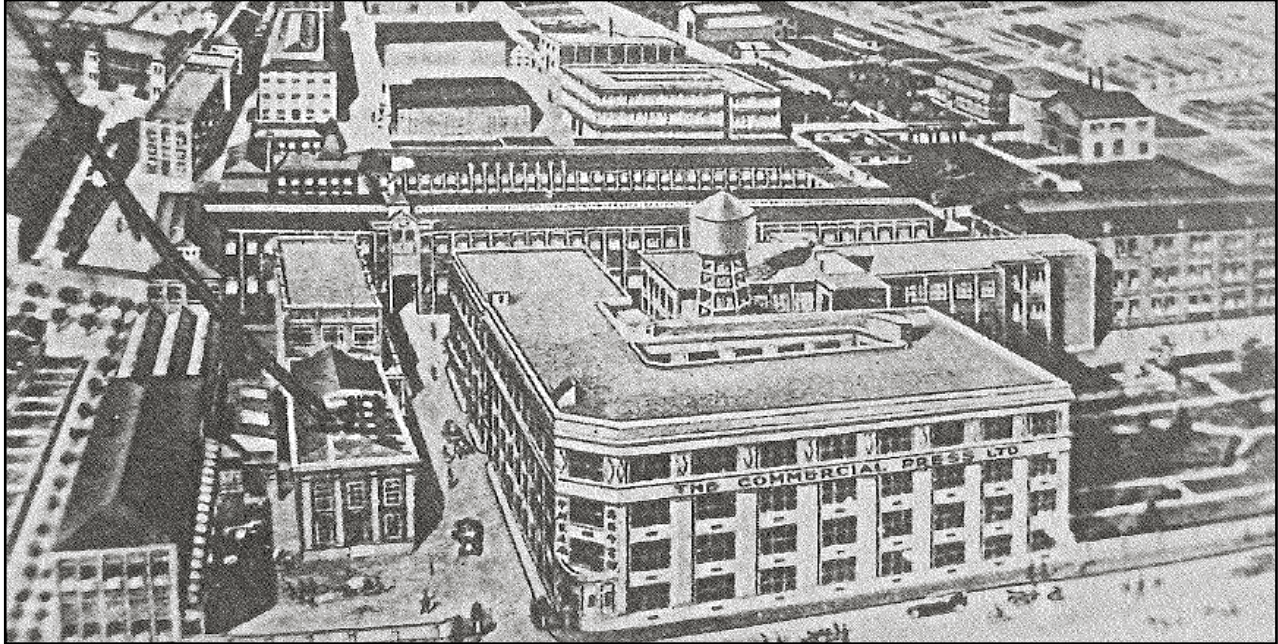


Figure 5. The Commercial Press Motion Picture Department (indicated by arrow). *Source:* Yang (2006, 11).

Regularization of Commercial Genre and Style

As local motion picture enterprises emerged within culturally heterogeneous contact zones, production became multiply sited and multifunctional. Contrary to more established Hong Kong– and Shanghai-centered narratives, Russian Harbin may have been the site of territorial China’s first film company—the Far East Film Company, established in 1908 and active into the 1920s (Lahusen 2000, 146; Liu 2009, 24–25).⁷ (Another Harbin-based Russian filmmaker, Panteleimon Vasil’evich Kobtsev, was an established producer of actuality films from 1909 onward, including scenes showing the assassination of Japanese statesman Itō Hirobumi at a Harbin train station; the Manchurian plague of 1910–1911; and an aerial acrobatic performance by a Russian pilot named Sizov.) In Jiangsu Province, the Nantong Film Company (Nantong yingpian gongsi) may have produced at least one feature by 1919 or 1921, an adaptation of the Peking opera *Four Heroes Village* (*Si jie cun*) (Liu 2009, 26, 34).⁸

Like the regional exhibition enterprises that preceded them, these small-scale efforts reinforced trends toward a greater diversity of cinematic modes in early Chinese motion picture production—a general transition toward more numerous, and stable, genres and functions. Romance, criminal activity, and war were the main themes of narrative features shown in 1917;

non-narrative, actuality films became news (*xinwen, qiwen*) (Liu 2009, 45–50). By the early 1920s producers and audiences alike thought of features in terms of at least two distinct genres: crime films (*zhentan pian*) and romantic films (*aiqing pian*) (Lu 2002, 43–99). Nonfeature genre categories included newsreels, short comedies, and “social films” depicting modernization and reform (Li and Hu 1996, 108–128). While Hollywood films became increasingly ubiquitous in China during the 1920s, there is evidence that Chinese-made films produced during the previous decade were shown and reshowed, suggesting that earlier, stage-derived cinema remained popular with audiences as well (Liu 2009, 53–81). Yet for Chinese producers, the general trend was away from a cinematic tradition strongly associated with stagecraft. This trend was further reinforced by the establishment, beginning in 1922, of schools of “photoplay studies,” which offered training in filmmaking and cinematic acting (Liu 2009, 89).

The impetus toward a more stable, less stage-centric sense of what cinema entailed seems to have coincided with a broader global transition to longer, Hollywood-influenced feature film production as the basis of cinematic culture after 1910 (Xiao 1994, 51–56). However, the backgrounds of early Chinese filmmakers often included significant exposure to the worlds of theater, stage performance, and literature, and so the mimesis was neither wholly desired nor complete (Xiao 1994, 33–40). Asiatic’s comedies were to a certain extent modeled on films first made in the United States, and they may even have been used to advertise U.S. goods, but their titles and subject matter made reference to dramatic and literary cultures that were already “hybrid” by virtue of the melding of Chinese and non-Chinese genres, references, and symbols (Xiao 1994, 57; Liu 2013). Intermediality and hybridity were also reflected in the films produced by China’s early 1920s wave of motion picture enterprises, which continued to depict the Chinese stage and sensational local events as well as non-Chinese genres, plots, and settings (Zhang 2004, 21–22).

To the extent that Chinese companies like the Commercial Press, China, Mingxing, and Shanghai Photoplay specialized in creating competitive alternatives to imported cinematic culture, they did so by incorporating elements that continued to draw from other popular cultural media, such as Peking opera, literary magazines, and the press. In 1922, filmmakers debated whether, in fact, the future of the industry lay in bringing stage productions to the screen (Lu 2002, 6). Concerns over whether domestic films (*guochan pian*) and Chinese cinema (*Zhongguo dianying*) had a viable future also gained momentum during this period, as major Hollywood

studios, all of which had established China sales offices by 1921, threatened to overwhelm smaller competitors (Lu 2002, 27; Xiao 2005). Chinese productions of this era were made rapidly and cheaply, often in four or five days, and their ability to compete with more elaborate foreign productions seemed uncertain (Lu 2002, 55). Despite exploring several niches, Chinese filmmakers found, somewhat ironically, that their greatest successes were those that continued to incorporate elements of stage drama and slapstick comedy (Wang [1957] 1962, 19–22). Yet while film production moved toward an increasingly formulaic mainstream, its practitioners also experimented with nonfeature films, which resembled the actualities of past decades in form but were produced with a new focus on education and social reform.

Early Studios and Film Function: The Commercial Press

The case of the Commercial Press Motion Picture Department illustrates the persistence of non-narrative cinematic modes within China's expanding film sector. Founded in 1897, Shanghai's Commercial Press was a major publisher of books and magazines in the fields of current affairs, education, and literature (Shangwu yinshuguan 1987; Lee 1999, 46–47). In 1917 its representatives acquired a camera and other motion picture production equipment, and thereafter the press established a Motion Picture Department for the production of educational films (Li and Hu 1996, 28–29; Fang 2003, 20–21; Shan 2005, 11–12). These productions were relatively wide ranging in terms of subject matter and included both feature films of the familiar “civilized play” variety as well as newsreel-type depictions of current events, educational modernization, historic sites, and opera performances (Wang [1957] 1962, 7–18; Zhao and Jia 2005, 13).⁹ It is possible that some of these films were produced to accompany public lectures; while not noticeably popular in China, the film-aided lecture was a staple of early twentieth-century middle- and upper-class public entertainment in other national contexts. Between 1920 and 1923, the Commercial Press obtained additional equipment from U.S. film companies, which made possible the construction of increasingly elaborate and efficient shooting stages. These facilities ultimately included a glass-roofed studio—likely the first structure of this type built in China. In 1926 the Motion Picture Department closed, and its personnel and equipment were transferred to the Guoguang Film Company (Guoguang yingpian gongsi).

In addition to its technologically sophisticated production facilities, the Commercial Press was innovative in its marketing strategies, which portrayed the motion picture as

educational and, potentially, beneficial to China's international image. In an April 1919 request to the northern Beiyang government's Board of Agriculture and Commerce ("Petition for Approval of Tax Exemption for Self-Produced Motion Pictures"), the Commercial Press justified the value of its productions by arguing that foreign-produced cinematic depictions of China were:

flippant and mendacious, extremely harmful to customs and popular sentiment, and frequently satirical concerning inferior conditions in our society, thus providing material for derision. . . . So as to promote the boycott of imported products that are harmful to decency, we hope to aid popular education, in part by exporting and selling our films overseas, glorifying our national culture, and mitigating foreigners' spiteful feelings, while simultaneously mobilizing the affections of overseas Chinese toward their homeland. (quoted in Shan 2005, 11–12)

In this document, filmmaking was described as a means of managing perceptions of China among overseas and foreign populations and countering the influence of motion picture producers in other parts of the world. The petition also expressed ambitions to create a national distribution network "reaching every province in China," suggesting that Shanghai's native film industry was potentially poised to break out of its regional mold (Fang 2003, 23).

Like Variety and Asiatic, the Commercial Press Motion Picture Department derived its success at least partly from inflows of foreign technology and expertise. Anger at racist depictions of China and Chinese in foreign films was evident, and yet the Motion Picture Department also appears to have contracted with the Universal Pictures Company for work on a serial production titled *The Dragon's Net* (*Jin lianhua*, 1920, aka *The Golden Lotus*) (Wang [1957] 1962, 7–18; Zhao and Jia 2005, 14).¹⁰ Universal may also have provided training for Commercial Press filmmakers Ren Pengnian and Liao Enshou (*The Chinese Mirror* 2007). The Commercial Press studio was used in the production of several story films written and directed by other, smaller companies—two of the most notable were *Yan Ruisheng* (1921), based on a sensational and extensively reported murder, and *The Women Skeletons* (*Hongfen kulou*, Xinya, 1921, aka *The Vampires*, *The Ten Sisters* [*Shi zimei*]), a detective movie with action and thriller elements (see figure 6). These elaborate, multi-investor films were also among China's first features, premiering at the Embassy, a Shanghai theater that showed primarily first-run foreign films (Zhang 2004, 21). From 1922 onward, the Commercial Press shifted toward an almost exclusive focus on producing narrative and opera films, including at least one filmed recording of popular Peking opera performer Mei Lanfang (see table 1).



Figure 6. Promotional photograph for *Yan Ruisheng*. China Photoplay Research Society, 1921.
Source: Yang (2006, 16).

Table 1. Commercial Press Titles by Genre and Year, 1917–1927

	1917	1918	1919	1920	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927
Narrative films, stage performances			2	7	4	6	2		2	4	1
Actualities, educational films, travel films	2	7	3	5	9		2				

Source: Cheng ([1963] 1998)

With the exception of rare stills, films produced in the Commercial Press studio have been entirely lost. Surviving accounts provide some indication of what these early filmmakers viewed as the key ingredients of their commercial strategy. The Motion Picture Department sought to make use of other well-known Peking opera and stage performers, in addition to Mei Lanfang (Wang [1957] 1962, 7–18). The studio invited and reviewed submissions from external theatrical societies, film companies, and groups of investors. Films based on “spectacular sights from past and present” (*gu-jin qiguan*)—*Yan Ruisheng* being one of the most notable

examples—were targeted for production, as were plots that referenced popular “tales of the strange,” such as those compiled in Pu Songling’s eighteenth-century *Records of the Strange* (*Liaozhai zhiyi*). Another common element in early 1920s film production was the use of Western dress; other, contemporary scenarios developed in house included tales of romance, murder, and national traitors. Experiments with war films and adaptations of foreign novels proved less successful and, already in financial decline, the Motion Picture Department turned toward family tragedies and films concerning social ills, such as alcoholism (e.g., *Zui xiang yihen*, Shanghai Commercial Press, 1925). While it is difficult to detect a particularly progressive or May Fourth influence in such films, their common features were that they drew from elements of local popular culture and literature, were produced by Chinese companies, and featured Chinese actors in leading roles.

New Directions in Motion Picture Function

Feature film production based on strange tales, cultural hybridity, and the deployment of familiar and popular literary tropes paralleled the world of early twentieth-century Chinese urban fiction, which reflected the concerns of readers then negotiating the transition from late imperial, or “classical,” culture to a more rapidly modernizing urbanity (Link 1981; Zhang 2004, 27–28). New drama, tales of the strange, Peking opera, and Western genre tropes all commingled within the screen culture created by Chinese motion picture enterprises. At the same time, Commercial Press references to “popular education” and concern over racist foreign depictions of China and Chinese indicated that filmmaking might potentially be shaped by other, less commercially oriented concerns.

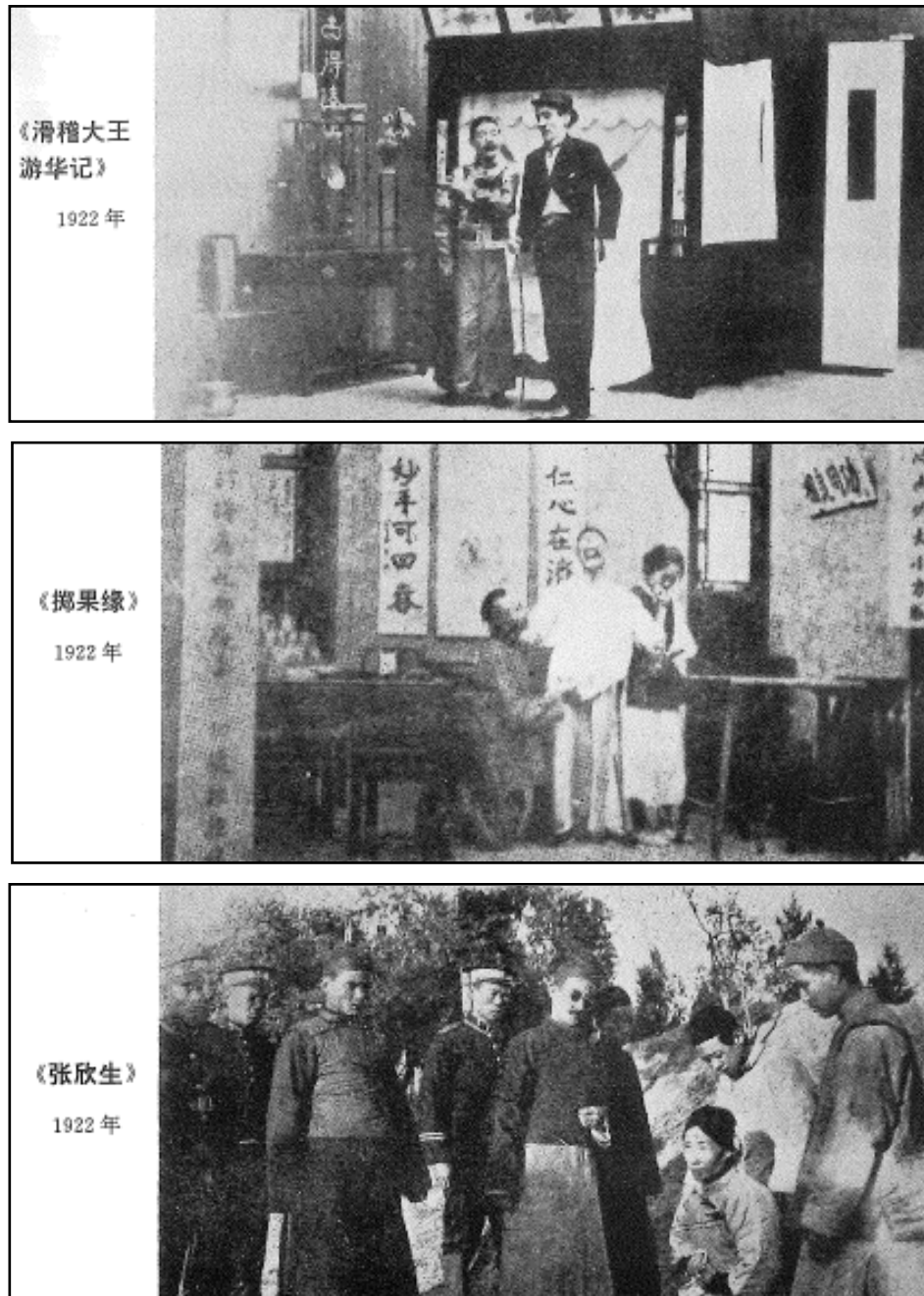
While the nationalistic outcry of the 1919 May Fourth Movement did not immediately affect mainstream cinematic culture in China, its influence was felt on the visible margins, including transnational Chinese communities abroad. When U.S. films *The Red Lantern* (1919) and *Broken Blossoms* (1919) stirred protest among Chinese American communities, Los Angeles film industry veteran James B. Leong founded his own company in the United States to present “the real China on the screen, thereby correcting the general impression that Chinese life, as it may be seen through the camera’s eye, is chiefly concerned with tong wars, opium smoking, and strange methods of gambling” (*New York Times* 1920a; Chen and Xiao 2004, 37).¹¹ (The company, James B. Leong Productions, Inc., seems to have met with little success.) A group of

overseas Chinese students living in New York City abruptly shifted their focus to filmmaking, establishing the Great Wall Filmmaking Company (Changcheng zhizao huapian gongsi) in 1921 before relocating the entire enterprise to Shanghai in 1924 (Gao 2003, 12; Chen and Xiao 2004). Among Great Wall's earliest productions were two films, *Martial Arts of China* (*Zhongguo de wushu*, 1922) and *Clothing of China* (*Zhongguo de fuzhuang*, 1922), apparently intended to promote more positive appraisals of Chinese culture among viewers.

China-based filmmakers also responded to a sense of culturalist and nationalist mission during the years following 1919. The basic message was not unlike that of late Qing reformist intellectual Liang Qichao, who had singled out the importance of new fiction in creating and strengthening the Chinese nation, and it was virtually identical to the Commercial Press emphasis on education and patriotic feeling. Dramatist and recent returned overseas student Hong Shen, later a major figure in modern Chinese theater, also wrote screenplays and advocated the use of film as a “vehicle” for spreading civilization, education, and ideals of citizenship (Zhang 2004, 28; Liu 2003, 11–33). Li Minwei, who along with brothers Li Haishan and Li Beihai had participated in Variety's early feature film foray, *Zhuangzi Tests His Wife*, later cofounded the pro-Nationalist Party China Sun Motion Picture Company (Minxin zhizao yinghuapian gongsi) in Shanghai in 1926, and they viewed the motion picture as a tool of educating the masses (*jiaoyu qunzhong*) and changing habits and customs (*yi feng yi su*) (Choi and Law 2001, 8). Li Minwei's lengthy experience with Sunist politics marked a portentous new development in the history of China's regional film enterprises—the voluntary entanglement with revolutionary political organizations.

While individual filmmakers may have espoused lofty ideals for the motion picture medium, film-producing enterprises were dependent on consumer tastes rather than political patronage. As a result, their products reflected what directors, scenarists, and other producers imagined would appeal most to filmgoing urbanites (Lu 2002, 115–173; Link 1981). The early films of Mingxing, whose founders included former Asiatic-Minming filmmakers Zheng Zhengqiu and Zhang Shichuan, give some indication of the degree to which production remained closely tied to popular culture, and included: *The King of Comedy Visits China* (*Huaji dawang you Hua ji*, 1922), which emulated the films of Charlie Chaplin; *Laborer's Love* (*Laogong zhi aiqing*, aka *Zhi guo yuan*, 1922), a slapstick romance; and *Zhang Xinsheng* (1922), an embellished re-creation of a contemporary murder case (figures 7a, 7b, 7c). Comedies and crime

stories were not the sorts of didactic works called for by early twentieth-century cultural reformers, but they attracted audiences—Mingxing would go on to become one of China's best-known studios in the 1920s and 1930s.



Figures 7a, 7b, 7c. Promotional photographs from *The King of Comedy Visits China* (top), *Laborer's Love* (middle), and *Zhang Xinsheng* (bottom). All 1922. Source: Cheng ([1963] 1998).

Early Republican Cinema Culture: Scope, Venues, and Exhibition

Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, foreign studios accounted for the production of 80 percent of all films shown in China (Lu 2002, 115). The financial fragility of domestic motion picture-producing enterprises was reflected in fears that domestic filmmaking would collapse altogether. These concerns never fully disappeared during the Republican era, even following the emergence of a national industry by the mid-1920s. (Prior to this point, the primary market for Chinese-made films was diasporic communities in Southeast Asia [Lu 2002, 25–42; Fang 2003, 25].) By contrast, interior markets remained weak, with civil conflict and war seriously impeding the inland expansion of distribution networks for financially constrained Chinese firms.

Despite this picture of domestic producer constraints, film consumption grew. Chinese urbanites proved increasingly receptive to the new medium, and films were steadily imported from Europe and the United States. The years after 1920 also marked something of a watershed as the moment during which European filmmakers were forced to cede their position within regional markets throughout China to U.S.-based studios and distributors. As one newspaper reporter observed, “Nowhere are American slapstick comedies received so hilariously as in Chinese cities” (*Chicago Defender* 1922). After 1910, the popularity of motion pictures meant that film distributors began to seriously challenge drama troupes, musicians, vaudeville performers, and other stage entertainers for revenue (Li 2004, 64). Competition with other cultural amusements persisted through the early 1920s. Local theaters advertised in newspapers and on the street, and by 1914 multireel narrative features conforming to distinct genres became the primary modes through which audiences experienced the motion picture. Within Shanghai, the numbers of film-only theaters rose—from four in 1920 to more than twenty in 1925. By 1923, Beijing’s film-only theaters numbered somewhere between ten and twenty (Shen 2005, 14). First-class (*shang deng*) theaters, typically foreign-owned, showed first-run foreign features, while Chinese and second-run films appeared more regularly in “second-class” theaters (Li 2004, 70). Exhibitions of imported films were, on average, twice as frequent as those of domestic features by the early 1920s.

Distribution and Commercialization: A Fragmented Geography

During the late Qing, the expansion of foreign empire and related increase in commerce and investment created a foundation for the subsequent expansion of foreign-owned film

distribution businesses. Film theater construction gained momentum after 1907, as the medium became a popular and increasingly accessible mode of urban entertainment (Shan 2005, 8; Liu 2009, 8). As filmgoing became a more regular and, for theater owners, profitable activity, major studios began to compete more vigorously for market share on the basis of exclusive contracts with individual theaters; this process, and its timing, varied deeply by region. Like the motion picture itself, distribution networks and their creation were facilitated by available transportation, such as railroads and rivers, while relatively slow to appear in less accessible zones represented by economic and geographically interior peripheries. Four main zones of motion picture distribution were particularly notable: Manchuria, Shanghai and the Yangtze River, the southeast and south China coast, and Yunnan.

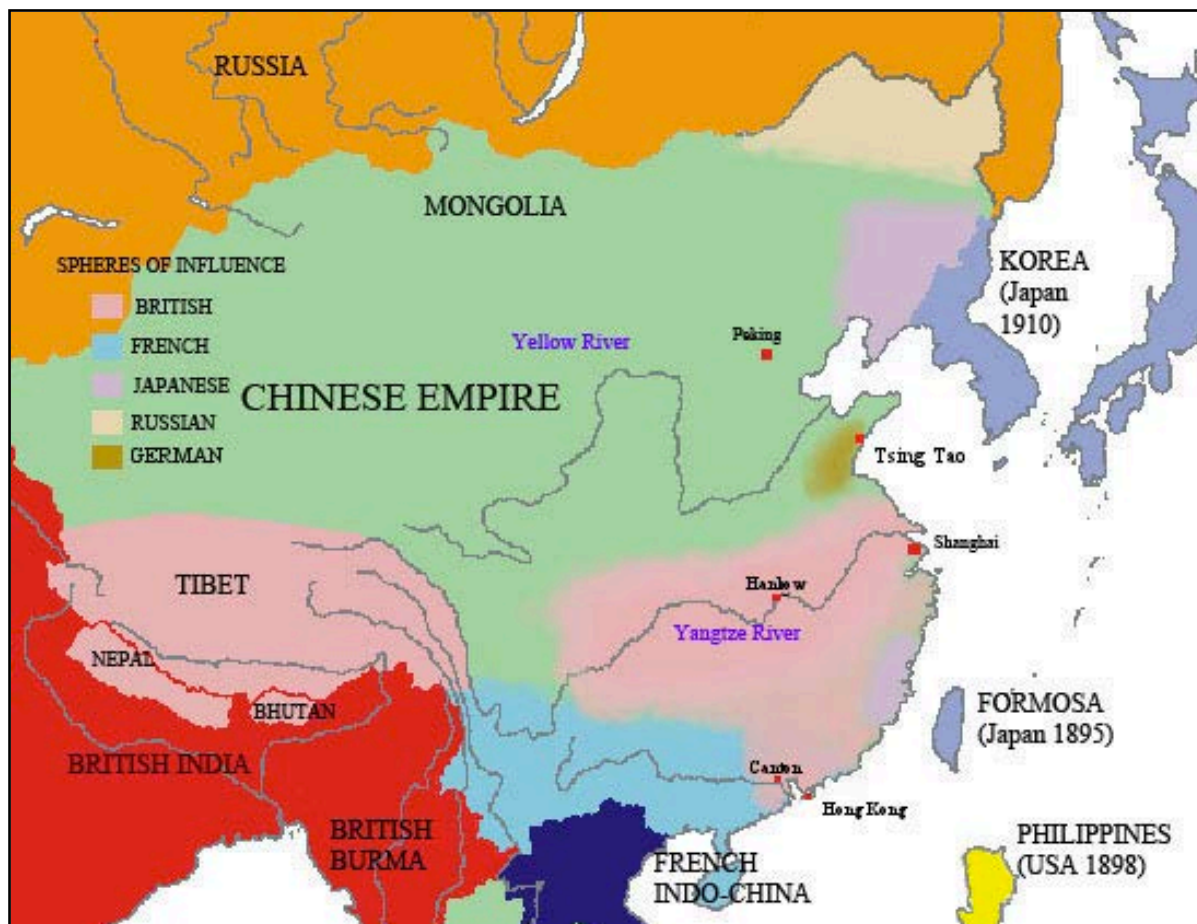


Figure 8. Spheres of influence in Qing and early Republican China during the early twentieth century. *Source:* Wikimedia Commons.

Within the former Qing territories of Manchuria, uncertain political control created a region that, from the standpoint of cinema, was rich in international commerce, with Russian enterprises dominant in the North and Japanese enterprises dominant in the South (figures 8 and 9). Film theaters may have appeared in Harbin as early as 1899, while distribution networks and theaters were more notable in the eastern Manchurian region of contemporary Liaoning and Jilin Provinces after 1910 (Jiang 1999, 111–113; Liaoning sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1999, 319; Jilin sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1996, 229; Changchun shi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1992, 1; Wang 2004). Along the Liaodong Peninsula, the South Manchuria Railway Company and individual Japanese investors built theaters. Chinese investment was also notable in the peninsular region from 1920 onward, and included partnerships between Chinese and Japanese investors. Farther north, where Russian political and economic influence remained entrenched even following the Russo-Japanese War, multiple Russian-built theaters opened after 1913 (Jilin sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1996, 229, 239).¹²



Figure 9. Map of the late Qing empire, c. 1870, showing provinces and territories. *Source:* Wikimedia Foundation.

Compared with Manchuria, north China was considerably less open to distributors. In 1912, the Tianjin consular district included only one establishment showing motion pictures, the Arcade, located in the French Concession. Pathé dominated this limited landscape, and according to one report, the entire Chinese market for film and machines along the China coast rested “entirely in the hands of Pathé-Phono-Cenima-China [*sic*],” whose Chinese branch offices could already be found in Hong Kong, Tianjin, and Shanghai (*New York Times* 1912). Pathé films were rented and passed from theater to theater until worn out; the company’s offices also served as distributor for secondhand U.S. films. Beijing’s consular district was reported to have only one film theater, also called the Arcade, which had closed in 1911. Farther south, in Shandong, motion pictures were mainly associated with churches (first noted in 1910) and the mining industry (1915–1916) (Shandong sheng wenhua ting shizhi bangongshi 1988, 2). In adjacent Qingdao, motion picture showing accompanied a renewal of commercial entertainment activity related to the reopening of German military installations in 1914 (*The Washington Post* 1914).

Cinema was, quite simply, viewed as being less popular and commercially viable in north China prior to around 1920, when news concerning commercial conditions suddenly became more favorable. New construction created six new film theaters (“motion picture houses”) in Tianjin—a foreign house with a capacity of six hundred, and Chinese houses with capacities ranging from five hundred to two thousand filmgoers (*New York Times* 1920b). By 1923, somewhere between ten and twenty film theaters existed in Beijing (Shen 2005, 14). New theater construction was also recorded in Qingdao in 1921, and in Shandong (Yantai) in 1925 (Shandong sheng wenhua ting shizhi bangongshi 1988, 2). Farther inland, north and northwest China followed a similar, but relatively late, sequence, with documented exhibition “firsts” in the late 1910s (Shanxi) and 1920s (Qinghai), followed by the appearance of theaters in the late 1920s and 1930s (Hebei sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 2001, 615; He’nan sheng difang shizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1994, 397; Shanxi sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1996, 503; Qinghai sheng diafang zhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 2000, 230). Long-distance trade, banking, and the arrival of electricity seem to have been the necessary preconditions for the motion picture’s arrival, with the most immediate causes being the ability to move exhibitors and commerce inward from the north China coast (Shaanxi sheng wenhua ting 1999, 2–3, 93). Thus, for cities in Shaanxi and Xinjiang, the emergence of cinema as a form of regular commercial entertainment

did not occur until around 1930 (Shaanxi sheng wenhua ting 1999, 101; Xinjiang Weiwu'er zizhiqu difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 2006, 251, 301, 323).

Coastal treaty ports from Shanghai southward showed expansion of motion picture distribution much closer to the Manchurian pattern. Beyond Manchuria, a north China–south China distinction was visible to observers in 1912, as measured in terms of theaters and exhibitors (*New York Times* 1912). Foreign theater construction was most intense between 1910 and 1921, and by 1924–1925 Shanghai was home to at least twenty film theaters, in addition to numerous smaller exhibition halls and other sites where films were regularly shown (Li and Hu 1996, 16–20). Elsewhere in Jiangsu, theater construction had already begun in multiple locations by 1911 (Jiangsu sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 2003, 226). In Zhejiang and Fujian Provinces, foreign companies, missions, and other organizations—most notably British American Tobacco, the Red Cross, and the YMCA—were also notable distributors of, and settings for, motion picture showings. (Urban exhibitions also increased in locations farther inland, like Nanchang [Jiangxi], though with less frequency and visible investment in theater enterprises [Jiangxi sheng wenhua yishu zhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1999, 200].) Guangdong and Hong Kong both resembled Shanghai in the pace and timing of commercial growth related to the motion picture, though profitability remained an issue in Hong Kong until at least 1918 due to the high price of films compared with the relatively small segment of the population able or willing to pay for theater admission (*New York Times* 1918).

In addition to Manchuria and the treaty port coast, foreign commercial and imperial zones pushed the motion picture up the Yangtze River and into west and southwest China. French theaters built in Hubei during the 1910s were followed by Chinese-owned theaters during the 1920s (Hubei sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1997, 137). By contrast, in Hu'nan and Sichuan theater construction started later, with the opening of additional distribution offices farther inland and beyond areas of immediate foreign control (Hu'nan sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1991, 187–190; Sichuan sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 2000, 408, 413). Elsewhere, adjacent to French Indochina, Kunming (Yunnanfu until the 1920s) may have seen the construction of China's first cinema in 1906, and thereafter the shift toward theatrical exhibition took place in 1907 to 1910, with railroads and other trade transportation routes spreading the medium as far as county-level cities such as Gejiu, Mengzi, Dali, Qujing, and Heize by 1925 (Yunnan sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 2002, 830, 845). Pathé ruled the

region until 1915, when additional companies and agents began to crowd into what was then one of China's most-developed regional motion picture markets (Yunnan sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 2002, 859, 862–863). Commercial exhibitions reached Yunnan's hinterland of Guizhou by 1913; for mountainous Guangxi, between Yunnan and Guangdong, the first recorded film exhibition came in 1923. Film theaters were constructed in both Guizhou and Guangxi by 1930.

In general, the geographic pattern and sequence of motion picture distribution and commercialization seems to have been tied to economic geography and development during the early twentieth century. Transport hubs related to commerce, empire, and extraction were the first sites to develop viable motion picture-related enterprises: Harbin, Changchun, Shanghai, Hubei (Wuhan), Hong Kong, Guangdong, and Kunming were the most vital centers, with Beijing, Tianjin, and other northern cities “catching up” by roughly 1920. The transition to film theaters took place in 1907 to 1910 in hub cities, with subsequent “waves” thereafter within subordinate urban areas—exhibition in the 1910s, and theater construction in the 1920s. Within the eighteen provinces of China proper, both large and medium-sized cities with direct connections to the modern economy—whether as a result of trade or empire—seem to have witnessed some trend toward commercial film distribution (Fang 2003, 5). Largely due to the concentration of treaty ports along the coast and Yangtze River, the cinema was viewed by contemporary observers as being more popular in the South than in the North, but Manchuria and inland provinces adjacent to French Indochina complicate the picture of how “southern” or “coastal” the main cluster of distribution truly was (*pace* Liu 2009, 24) (figure 10).

Theaters and Exhibition

The rise of the film theater or cinema (*dianyingyuan*) as the primary space of motion picture exhibition was a decades-long phenomenon. Early spaces of exhibition included teahouses, restaurants, hotels, parks, and other popular entertainment sites such as theaters or arcades (e.g., Shanghai's Great World [Da shijie] indoor amusement complex) (Shen 2005, 9; Zhang 2004, 17–18). Additional facilities were constructed by exhibitors themselves—an eclectic and largely European group whose more successful members, such as Spaniard Antonio Ramos, became owners of what were arguably China's first film-only theaters, the first of which were constructed by at least 1906 or 1907 (Shen 2005, 10–11, 13; Xiao 2005). In Shanghai, until

at least 1909, the exhibition spaces frequented by Chinese inhabitants were typically street-level businesses located along Foochow Road and multistory buildings that also included teahouses and theatrical stages (*The Washington Post* 1909). The milieu of the cinema was the electrified urban pleasure district. In 1908, a state-of-the-art urban theater had a capacity of 250 seats. By 1922, the seating capacity of the average film theater had increased to nearly 600 seats, with sizes ranging from one hundred to two thousand seats—a sign of significant architectural variety (*Chicago Defender* 1922). By this point, more than one hundred film theaters were reported to have been built in China's larger cities, with twenty theaters in Shanghai, fifteen in Guangzhou, ten in Harbin, and eight in Hong Kong. Exhibition also spread to other urban and urban-adjacent locations, such as gates, markets, and temples; the film theater, though increasingly widespread, was never the sole venue in which films were shown.

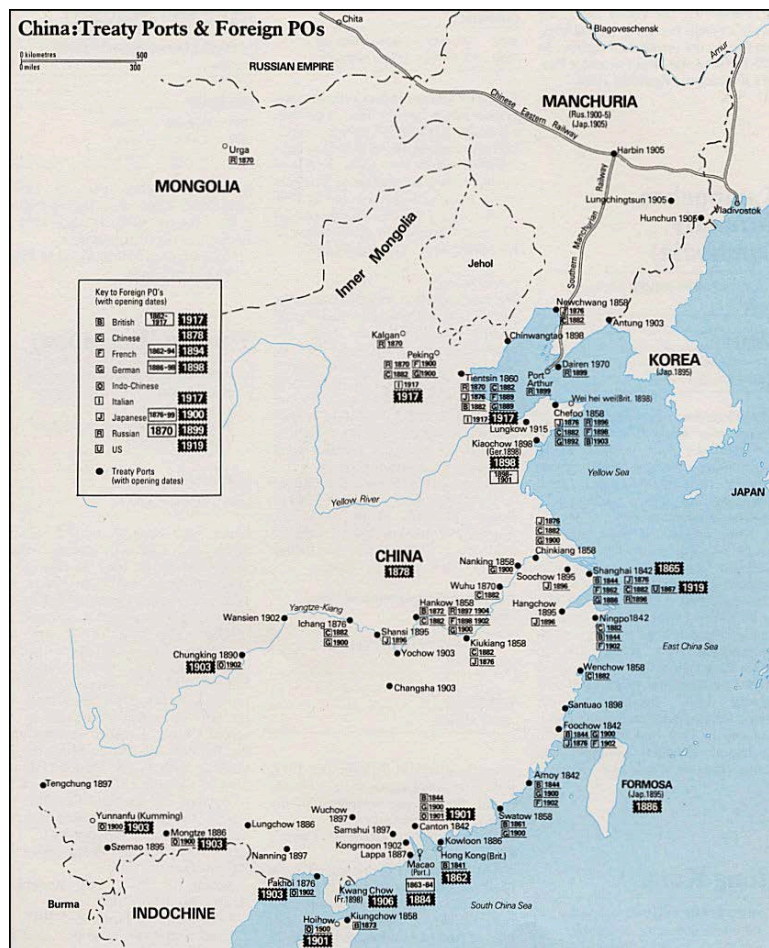


Figure 10. Foreign treaty ports and post offices in China. *Source:* Sandafayre Holdings Ltd. (2012).



Figure 11. Front of Antonio Ramos's Hongkew (Hongkou) Cinema, c. 1913. *Source:* Yang (2006, 5).

Like motion picture production, the development of the film theater was primarily an extension of foreign enterprise and industry. Early exhibitions had taken place primarily within foreign concession areas (Shen 2005, 9–14). While imported exhibition equipment was soon available for rent to Chinese entrepreneurs, the film theater business was, at least initially, associated with foreign investors and successful expatriate exhibitors such as Antonio Ramos, owner of China's first film theater chain and founder of the Ramos Amusement Corporation (McKernan n.d.) (figure 11). Theater owners came from a range of national backgrounds, but competition for audiences, both Chinese and foreign, seem to have created some commonalities that united theaters and theater chains, while providing an increasingly homogenized and predictable experience for the theatergoer. By the early 1920s, theaters throughout China were increasingly based on models derived from Shanghai and global architectural trends (Shen 2005, 13–14). Theater owners signed contracts, which were often exclusive, with distributors, or rented

their facilities to film producers on a film-by-film basis—the latter practice was not uncommon in arrangement between theaters and Chinese film producers, who often lacked their own distribution offices and networks (Xiao 1994, 71–74; Shen 2005, 29) (figure 12).

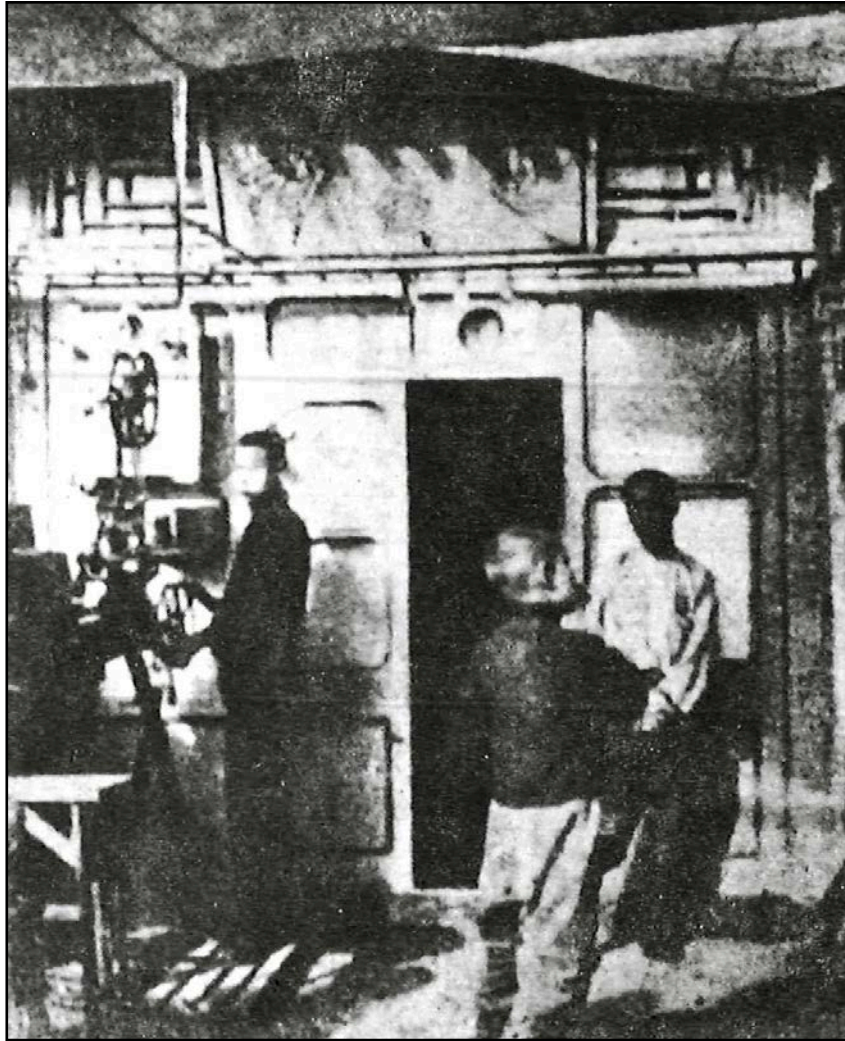


Figure 12. Nontheatrical exhibition space. Undated photograph. *Source*: Yang (2006, 4).

The initial theatrical wave of 1907 to 1910 was limited primarily to foreign zones, but thereafter it moved outward into adjacent urban areas and subordinate cities and economic regions. During the 1920s the theatrical exhibition business attracted greater numbers of Chinese investors, who set up their own independent enterprises, marking yet another shift away from the teahouse as the principal nonconcession space in which films were shown (Shen 2005, 12). Early 1920s Chinese filmgoers were still mainly consumers of fashionable “foreign goods,” but more

films and showing options existed. The intensified competition for Chinese filmgoers indicates increased accessibility of a medium that, until at least 1918, may have been primarily European in terms of audience (*New York Times* 1918). Studio agents and distributors sought to monopolize markets by pushing theaters toward exclusive contractual arrangements (Xiao 1994, 71–74). Other signs of increasing theatrical competition included increases in advertising, and a rise in free gifts, screenings, and stage performance offered along with ticket purchases (Li 2004, 69–71).

And yet the motion picture was not simply a new mass entertainment form. According to one source, film showings were used largely as a pretext for advertisements featuring other commercial products (*Chicago Defender* 1922). Railroad companies and other businesses employed the motion picture for promotional purposes and as in-house entertainment for employees. Public lecturers promoting philanthropic and social reform causes may have used films in addition to other visual aids (Fang 2003, 25). Imperial cultural organizations—most notably the Japan Pioneer Cinematograph Association—also made use of the motion picture for propaganda and acculturation purposes. (In 1914, it was also reported that abdicated emperor Puyi was to be educated using “motion-picture films” [*New York Times* 1918].) Though not always profitable, motion picture–related enterprises and other endeavors employing film made the medium increasingly familiar and visible at multiple levels of society. A significant leap in business, however, seems to have taken place after 1919—a year in which production and exhibition alike were still referred to as “unprofitable” activities farther south in Hong Kong (*New York Times* 1918). From this point onward, the film theater seems to have become a relatively low-risk enterprise, as the motion picture’s popularity reached a point of continuously expanding growth.

Conclusion

Industrialized mass culture in early Republican China took shape in the context of a political economy characterized by fragmentation and the absorption of former Qing territories into foreign empires through both formal and informal means. The combination of partial and divided sovereignty—features of central weakness—created new conditions for change, internationalization, and symbiosis (Brandt, Ma, and Rawski 2013, 47–49). It also meant that the transformation of culture through motion picture–related enterprises was a regional phenomenon,

albeit one arising from border-crossing relationships and patterns of global trade, technology transfer, and multilateral interactions. The fact of this divided geography raises an important question for the study of China's national cinema: in what sense were these enterprises "national" at all? The evidence presented in this article suggests that, throughout the experimental period described, both production and exhibition remained locally situated, and strongly transnational, activities. However, there was also a notable shift toward Chinese ownership and management, self-consciously hybrid aesthetics, expansion of motion picture-related commercial activity into cities throughout China, and profitability. As a result, this regularized and increasingly popular new medium began to challenge the stage for popularity among urban consumers.

From the perspective of business history, this narrative squares with the broader generalization that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were part of a longer shift from a globalization created by "transfer companies," and the forcible expansion of industrial capitalism, to a globalization more widely regulated by the hardening territorial borders of nation-states. Insofar as infrastructure, along with communications, played a crucial role in the territorial creation *of* nation, prior to the creation of national transportation and media networks, there is little basis for describing China's early cinema period and the decades following in terms of a single aesthetic ("shadowplay") or experience ("teahouse culture"). Instead, what the fragmentary and anecdotally limited evidence remaining to historians does suggest is that patterns of production and consumption were as varied as in other global settings. Shanghai remained a subnational space—one of many (Pickowicz 2012, 5–6, 20). To be sure, nationality and nationhood were increasingly important concerns for filmmakers and audiences by the 1920s, but this was to a great extent *because* shifting business strategies, varied exhibition settings, and the impact of geopolitical events and imperial rivalries on market integration worked in opposition to the creation of a mass, nationalized sensorium envisioned by political visionaries like Liang Qichao and Hu Shi. Given that film production and exhibition were both low-margin businesses to begin with, entrepreneurs seized on what worked, and they did so by employing both locally and globally available resources, including a full range of late imperial and early Republican stage-based amusements that went far beyond what researchers have described as "operatic" forms.

In short, there was no single national economy or cultural industry to which "Chinese cinema" corresponded. From the perspectives of transportation and geopolitics, China during the

early twentieth century was a territorial state with limited to nonexistent effective sovereignty in the regions where motion picture consumption grew the fastest; production was even more obviously linked to the presence of foreign technology, expertise, and investment in Manchuria, Yunnan, and along the coast. As in other areas of the economy, manufacturing—that is to say, film production—lagged behind trade, in the sense that production for China’s markets overwhelmingly took place overseas. Within China, and particularly within China proper, local economies, institutions, and modes of transportation accounted for whether this new cultural form, when it arrived, became a regular feature of urban, densely settled, and trade-oriented social space. National market integration was far from established by 1907, and the consequences for cultural change were, quite literally, visible.¹³ By bringing media and cultural history into dialogue with spatial paradigms drawn from political economy, and the historical experiences of businesses in China, we can begin to appreciate the need for a new vocabulary through which to describe cultural change as something more than a lockstep national march.

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Notes

- 1 This differs from motion picture-producing nations such as France, where the idea and organizational form of film businesses, or manufacturers, pointed to the existence of “a homogenous group of companies working in essentially the same economic direction,” whose output relied on mass production and whose board members often hailed from more traditional industries. See Gaudreault, Dulac, and Hidalgo (2012).
- 2 A more self-consciously national Chinese industry would emerge only later, during the 1920s.

- 3 The presence of so much foreign film was not necessarily experienced as cultural subordination, insofar as the stage and vernacular press remained viable outlets for the creation, and re-creation, of Chinese culture (Zhang 2005, 42–88).
- 4 Ramos, in turn, is alleged to have inherited his business from Spanish “countryman” Galen Bocca, believed to have exhibited films in China starting in 1899 (Zhang 2004, 14).
- 5 As related by Qian Huafo, a Minming employee.
- 6 *Victims of Opium* (or *Wronged Souls in an Opium Den*) appears to have been a post-Asiatic Photoplay Society film released in 1916 or 1917. Despite efforts to link the film’s production to Italian filmmaker and theater owner A. E. Lauro, including Lauro’s own claims on the subject, there is no further evidence confirming his involvement even at this later date.
- 7 Details are sparse, and the unconfirmed name of the company appears only as *Yuan dong* in Chinese sources.
- 8 In other accounts the producer of this film appears as the China Film Company, Ltd. (*Zhongguo yingpian gufenyouxian gongsi*), an enterprise apparently most active in 1923.
- 9 As related by Yang Xiaozhong, a Commercial Press director.
- 10 The film, directed by prolific Canadian-born director Henry MacRae, has been considered lost.
- 11 Leong had been personally involved in production of *The Red Lantern* (1919), whose screening was ultimately banned by New York City authorities in response to public outcry. Other similarly controversial Hollywood features included D. W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* (1919) and the Hayakawa Feature Play Company’s *The First Born* (1921). See also Chen and Xiao (2004, 37).
- 12 Japanese theaters seem to have appeared only after 1920, at which time U.S. studio offices began to open in northern Harbin.
- 13 It is surely no accident that the best documented efforts to produce films for Chinese audiences took place in Hong Kong/Guangzhou and Shanghai, where centuries of market integration had given rise to wealthy delta regions and notably higher levels of consumption.

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