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Wang, Chenfeng

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Chenfeng Wang

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Transmedia, intertext, and genre crossing: Saturday fiction and Lou Ye's commercial and historical turn

Chenfeng Wang (D)

Department of Literature, University of California, San Diego, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This article examines Saturday Fiction (2019), Lou Ye's historical spy thriller, as a significant example of the director's turn toward historical themes, departing from his earlier focus on contemporary urban life. Retaining the play-within-the-story structure from Hong Ying's original novel and integrating commercial genre conventions with layered narratives, the film blurs boundaries between fiction and reality, history and the present, and theatre, literature, and cinema. With intertextual references to Saturday School, Saturday Fiction navigates the tension between artistic autonomy and mainstream market demands while reflecting historical contemporaneity. Lou's distinctive cinematic techniques, including handheld cinematography and fragmented editing, immerse audiences in a vivid reconstruction of wartime Shanghai while underscoring the constructedness of cinematic history. Drawing on New Sensationist aesthetics and continuing Lou's signature style of intertwining romance and death, the film foregrounds themes of love, desire, and existential struggle amid times of crisis. Despite its historical focus, Saturday Fiction – like Lou's urban films – engages deeply with the contemporary postsocialist society, critiquing capitalist globalization and cultural commodification. Ultimately, the film underscores the potential of this historical turn to sustain critical perspectives and foster artistic innovation within a globalized, market-driven cinematic landscape.

KEYWORDS

Lou Ye; saturday fiction; historical drama: globalization; spy-thriller; new sensationists

Introduction

As one of the most prominent members of China's Sixth Generation of filmmakers, Lou Ye (娄烨, 1965–) embodies many of the group's defining characteristics in his early works: a youthful and rebellious spirit, a focus on contemporary urban life, and avant-garde cinematic aesthetics. Among his peers, Lou was an early adopter of commercial genres and forms. Beyond following the widely observed trend among formerly self-marginalized Sixth Generation directors of (re)integrating into the mainstream, as this article argues, Lou's recent works also reveal a significant shift toward historical themes, marking a departure from his earlier focus on contemporary issues. Lou has directed two films set against historical backdrops. The first, Purple Butterfly (紫蝴蝶; Zi Hudie, 2003), is a spy thriller set

in 1930s Shanghai, during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931–1945). The second, Saturday Fiction (兰心大剧院; Lanxin Dajuyuan, 2019), also explores this tumultuous historical period, reflecting Lou's more mature treatment of historical themes and an evolution in his conception of history.

Regarding the transition of Sixth Generation directors from underground and/or independent filmmaking to the mainstream film market, scholars have long expressed concerns about the potential compromises these directors are making with their critical stances and artistic aspirations. As film scholar Dai Jinhua once asked, 'Is the margin undertaking a successful march to occupy the center? Or has the omnipresent cultural industry and its market engineered a takeover?' (Dai 2002, 97). In this context, Lou's turn toward historical themes – particularly as a director whose work has primarily focused on contemporary issues – raises further questions: As a manifestation of the willingness to follow mainstream thematic and visual formulas, and perhaps also as a tactic of negotiating while compromising with the regime and the market, does the trend of turning to history counter the contemporaneity – along with the sharp critical edge – that Lou and the Sixth Generation once brought to Chinese cinema? Or does it point toward a viable path of transition from the periphery to the center, in which formerly independent spirits are adapting to the new global commercial culture while simultaneously accommodating political demands, audience expectations, and individual artistic visions?

To further explore these questions, this article closely examines Lou's 2019 film *Saturday Fiction*. Featuring a cast of internationally renowned stars, it adopts the spy-thriller commercial genre to entertain its audience, while also integrating *leitmotif* patriotic themes with elements of romance and action. More importantly, it not only showcases the director's inclination to enter the mainstream culture and market, but also reflects his active engagement with history. As I will demonstrate, the film displays Lou's habitual aesthetic preferences and signature style: location shooting, atmospheric *mise-en-scène*, subjective angles, dynamic handheld cinematography, discontinuity editing, convoluted narratives of romance and death, and especially his tendency to play with multiple boundaries. The main plotline of the film is loosely adapted from the novel *Death in Shanghai* (上海之死; *Shanghai Zhi Si*, 2005), by British-Chinese writer Hong Ying (虹影, 1962–). By adapting the original novel's play-within-the-story structure for the screen, the film seamlessly connects and flows between two different narrative layers, thus blurring the boundary between fiction and reality.

Moreover, in dealing with historical issues, Lou endows his film representation of the past with both a sense of contemporaneity and an appearance of historical documentary through his idiosyncratic employment of seemingly opposite cinematic techniques. By making manifest his contemporary perspective and presenting the past as a current reconstruction, he not only traverses boundaries of time and space in the film, but also deconstructs the dividing line between cinematic construction and historical narration. Furthermore, with intertextual references to both Saturday School and the New Sensationists, the film centers the subjective portraiture of subtle, complex emotional relationships; exposes the love and desire hidden deep in human nature; and highlights people's existential and psychological conditions during a time of crisis.

Finally, I also argue that despite the turn toward historical themes in *Saturday Fiction*, in the representation of the bygone era – like in his previous urban films set in the present – Lou still concerns himself with the contemporary postsocialist society in which he lives.

He attaches more significance to individual desires and feelings (the psychological and perceptual reality) than to an unreachable, transcendental historical truth. By hinting at the present through a symbolic reconstruction of the past, Lou is able to hide his social critiques under the veil of a historical drama, and thereby both cater to the mainstream and maintain his critical stance toward the trends of capitalist globalization and cultural commodification.

Fiction, reality, and meta-narrative

Saturday Fiction is set in wartime Shanghai in 1941, a time when China had become an intelligence battlefield for the Allied and Axis Powers. At the center of the plot is famous actress Yu Jean (Gong Li), who has come back to Shanghai ostensibly to appear in the play Saturday Fiction, directed by and co-starring her old flame Tan Na (Mark Chao). Speculation abounds in Shanghai society about Yu's true motive for returning to the city; suggested theories for her visit range from a desire to rekindle her love with Tan to wanting to rescue her ex-husband Ni Zeren (Zhang Songwen), who is being held in a Japanese prison. Various parties are inexplicably keeping close track of Yu's movements around Shanghai, including the Cathay Hotel manager Saul Speyer (Tom Wlaschiha), the Nationalist (KMT) government agent Bai Yunshang (Huang Xiangli), and the collaborationist puppet regime in Nanking. As the story unfolds, Yu is revealed to be a spy for the Allied Powers, working with her French foster father Frederic Hubert (Pascal Greggory), but her loyalties are far from clearcut. Finally, Yu decides to withhold the information she solicits from Japanese captain Saburo Furuya (Joe Odagiri) about Japan's plan to attack Pearl Harbor, which leads to the outbreak of the Pacific War.

While the film makes some adjustments to the main characters' backgrounds and personalities, its central plotline largely adheres to Hong Ying's original novel, Death in Shanghai. The most notable change in Lou's adaptation is his choice to replace the book's play-within-the-story – written in the novel by the character Mo Zhiyin – with a left-wing love story set during the anti-imperialist May 30 Movement² in Shanghai. The protagonists of this embedded narrative are drawn from characters in Yokomitsu Riichi's (横光利一, 1898–1947) novel Shanghai (上海, 1931). But in Lou's version, apart from borrowing their names and the general setting, the play-within-the-film departs significantly from Yokomitsu's original work.

In both retaining and highlighting the play-within-the-story structure from Hong Ying's original novel, the film adaptation features two different, but interrelated, narrative layers. The first is the fictional plot of the play titled *Saturday Fiction*; it unfolds around the romance between Sanki, a Japanese expatriate, and Qiulan, a Chinese left-wing leader of the May 30 Movement, which targeted Japanese-owned businesses. Correlatively, the second layer is the 'real' time-space outside the play, but inside the film diegesis; here, Yu plays Qiulan, while Tan simultaneously serves as the director, the scriptwriter, and the play's male lead. Taking advantage of Yu and Tan's multiple identities (both real and performed), Lou seamlessly links the fictional and real time-spaces inside and outside the play at the very beginning of the film.

During Saturday Fiction's title sequence, which shows what appears to be a rehearsal of the play's first act, the camera tracks Tan walking around the stage of the Lyceum Theatre, as both the director of the play and the actor playing Sanki. Along with the camera movement, the stage disappears from the film frame, leaving only the interior setting of a shipyard bar, where Sanki and Qiulan (or Tan and Yu) are talking. From the ambiguous mise-en-scène, the audience of the film is no longer able to discern whether this is a real bar or just a fictional, but verisimilar, one being reproduced on the stage. When the talk between the two characters is interrupted by a stranger who takes Qiulan/Yu away and attempts to kill her in the bar's downstairs area (again, this space could be either fictional or real), the time-space becomes even more confusing. After Sanki/Tan saves Qiulan/Yu from the stranger, they run out of the building hand in hand, traversing another dark hallway and rushing toward the bright outdoors. At this moment, it becomes more plausible that the characters are no longer in a fictional play, but rather escaping from danger in reality. Nevertheless, it is still unclear at which point the fictional switches to the real, when the setting imperceptibly changes from the Lyceum to the real shipyard bar, or who the two people running out of the building are: Are they Sanki and Qiulan, or Tan and Yu? Are we seeing the moment when they first met in the shipyard bar years ago, or watching them rehearse the play in the Lyceum Theatre?

Unlike the novel on which it is based, Saturday Fiction's plot adheres strictly to a clear and linear timeline: from Monday, December 1, to Saturday, December 7, 1941 (with captions indicating each date), which was the week leading up to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. However, the title sequence described above takes place outside of this seven-day temporal structure. Positioned at the very beginning, it serves as a sort of prelude that sets the overall tone for the film, and suggests a specific methodology that audiences can use to comprehend it. As Lou himself clarified in an interview at the CineCina Film Festival in 2020:

It is actually telling the audience from the beginning that the situation of space and time is confusing. There are no boundaries between what you thought [of] as the real and the fictional spaces. Maybe this is the first signal, and the later parts follow. (CineCina 2020)

This fiction-reality confusion is even more dramatic and pronounced in the film's climactic sequence: a scene that is director Lou's original creation, and not taken from the novel. It is virtually impossible to differentiate between the two narrative layers, as Lou alludes to above. Having finished her espionage mission, Yu insists on returning to the Lyceum for the play in order to take Tan away, even as she is being chased by Japanese agents. Yu walks onto the stage, now (feeling the pressure and urgency of the situation) less as Qiulan in the play Saturday Fiction than as the actress/spy in the film of the same title, who is anxious to rescue her lover. At this moment, Yu and Tan repeat the actions and lines from the play that they rehearsed previously, but these interactions are now taking place between people of mismatched identities:

Sanki says to Qiulan, worried: 'You seem to be a completely different person'.

(The sound effect of a fictional gunshot should be heard now, but it is replaced, at exactly the same time, with a real gunshot from the real space of the Lyceum.)

Yu replies to Tan with tears in her eyes: 'It's very dangerous here'.

Sanki shouts: 'Let's go together'.

Yu: 'You go first'.

Sanki: 'You and me together'.

These lines and the sound of the gunshot are heard in both Yu and Tan's time-space and that of Sanki and Qiulan. Whereas Tan speaks his lines as an actor on stage, Yu regards him as her lover off stage. As the events resulting from the emergent real situation that has been unfolding all along perfectly coincide with what the script predetermined, the reality is superimposed onto the plot of the play when the fictional character (Sanki) talks directly with a 'real' person (Yu) from the film.

Here, Lou also breaks the fourth wall separating the audience in the Lyceum from the fictional play being performed on the stage. In the 'real' world of 1941, the Japanese men seeking to arrest Yu enter the Lyceum and then shoot at the stage. The performers are frightened, and try to run out of the theatre in a panic. At first, the audience assumes that this chaos is simply unfolding as part of the play, in the fictional shipyard bar on the stage; caused by the fictional gunshots fired by the Japanese colonizers in 1925, separate from their 'real' world. However, by the time they finally realize that what is happening is no longer fictional, but very much part of their present-tense ongoing reality, some of them have already been injured by bullets flying from the fictional space into their real one.

Along related lines, Lou implicitly suggests the existence of yet another time-space layer: a third one in which the film Saturday Fiction is being produced and viewed. Since the rehearsal sequence of the play's first act (which marks the starting point of both the play and the film stories) is positioned at the very beginning, the audience can subtly feel – before the tense espionage story starts to unfold - the process of a film/play being directed, rehearsed, and shot as they are watching. On the stage, and simultaneously at the filming location, Tan calls out, 'Action', like a film director instructing actors to get ready. He then tells the cameraman to start shooting. Through this process, not only is the boundary between the two forms of media - theatre and film - blurred, but so is the one between the content of the film and the process of filmmaking. At the same time, the barrier is also removed between the time-space inside the film (where the film character Tan is directing the play Saturday Fiction) and the time-space outside (where director Lou is directing this film of the same title).

Art historian Jerome Silbergeld described Lou's Suzhou River (苏州河; Suzhou He, 2000) as 'a film that indicts its own filmic process' (Silbergeld 2004, 39). Similarly, scrutinizing Saturday Fiction, we can see that Lou's obsession with self-referentiality and meta-narrative has persisted, and that it continually contributes to his distinctive auteurist style. In the gunfight sequence examined above, as the bullets fly out of the first time-space layer inside the play and hit the 'real-world' audience of the second inside the film, the contemporary audience of the third layer - sitting in front of the film screen - is also bewildered, shocked, and horrified. As the handheld camera quickly pans and frequently shakes, it intensifies the panic-stricken atmosphere, making the gunfight presented inside the film feel so imminent and authentic that the audience even in the outermost layer of reality might feel ready to start dodging bullets themselves. If the fourth wall separating the audience from the incident in the play can be so easily broken, could that also happen to the similar wall separating the audience from the turbulence in the film?

Despite these blurred boundaries, however, the existence of the film screen, the unnatural black-and-white palette, and especially Lou's fragmented parallel editing all serve to remind the audience of the boundary between the cinematic and the real – the time-space where they are situated - and thus pull them back before they are fully immersed in the director's cinematic construction. Considering Lou's self-conscious filming style, which at once offers viewers a vivid sensory perception and invites their distrust, the relationship between fiction and reality that the film conveys becomes even more paradoxical. While the audience in the film tends to believe that the story being performed at the Lyceum is fictional, the bullets flying off the stage make them realize that they are in real danger. In contrast, while viewers outside the film feel themselves becoming immersed in the dramatic gunfight scene, Lou – from whom the statement 'my camera doesn't lie' originated³ – nonetheless implies that even the most verisimilar images are constructed by the director. Thus, they may be deceiving viewers, just like a spy may deceive her most sincere pursuer. Through this self-conscious reference to the third-layer audience and time-space, we can see that Lou – after completing his transmedial blending of theatre and film, and after crossing the boundary between narrative and meta-narrative (film and filmmaking) – ultimately refuses to remove the barrier separating the cinematic and the real. The significance of this practice will become even clearer if we situate it against Lou's conception of history and his thoughts on the past-present relationship reflected in *Saturday Fiction*.

History, the present, and contemporaneity

Just like he did with his previous films set in the present day, Lou filmed *Saturday Fiction* on location, despite its historical subject matter. Its important events mostly take place at two venues: the Lyceum Theatre and the Cathay Hotel. While the basic structures of these two buildings have survived over the eight decades that have passed since 1941, they by no means look the same as they did then. Inevitably, Lou's location footage from 2018 (the year he shot the film) may offer contemporary audiences less of a sense of historical authenticity – something they usually expect from a historical film – than could an artificial set verisimilarly reproduced in a film studio. Yet for Lou, the more important goal in making this historical film is not to restore a past that is already gone forever, but rather to introduce a dialogue between the past and the present. As he emphasized in a conversation with film scholar Michael Berry:

I hope the film is shot in real locations. The Lyceum Theater has not undergone many changes, but many places have already been different, yet [sic] its structure remains intact. The Cathay Hotel, now known as the Peace Hotel, has also retained its original structure. For me, onlocation shooting is very important in this film. It is actually the essence of this film. In other words, the camera entered a real space of the 1940s in 2018, which means that the space itself is [connected to] dual [temporalities]. This double structure is completely consistent with and homologous to the structure of the film, so it is very important. (Berry 2022)

Here, Lou attached importance to the temporal co-existence of the past and the present, emphasizing that it is essential for understanding *Saturday Fiction*. This echoes Lou's more dynamic conception of history, which he conveyed in describing how he dealt with historical issues when adapting the original novel for the screen:

You can only look at that period of time and that moment with today's perspective... You can't change that perspective. So what you filmed is actually the present, not the past... That is to say, history is a concept that changes constantly depending on the author (auteur)'s perspective, and it can be interpreted and explained. However, it's extremely difficult to accurately verify what actually happened in that moment. (Berry 2022)

These remarks make clear that, by intentionally revealing a contemporary perspective in a historical film, Lou had hoped to present to his audience a present-day reconstruction of the past, rather than an unreachable, transcendental historical truth. Therefore, while Lou makes the temporal boundaries between different periods indefinable in Saturday Fiction, he foregrounds the boundary separating the cinematic from the real, thus reminding the audience of the fundamental fictionality of any historical construction.

On the one hand, Lou endows his cinematic representation of history with a perceivable present tense, allowing the audience to witness the 'history' as though it is happening around them in the present. As he employs a shaky, handheld camera to simulate the subjective vision of an on-site onlooker, film viewers can feel the embodied anxiety, bewilderment, panic, and chaos of someone situated inside the same time-space as the fictional characters. Using the handheld camera, as film scholar Qi Wang points out, 'communicate[s] a present and immediate temporality, and 'might be quite unusual for a film set in the historical past... unless the past is intended to be felt as taking place now. Moreover, 'the extremely mobile vision of a handheld camera does not simply communicate the impression of being a witness to events that take place in the past; rather, it functions as a witness to a plot unfolding in the present' (Wang 2014, 117). By using this technique, Lou conveys to the audience that the past, as (re)constructed in the present, actually contains in itself a sense of contemporaneity; and that, when being represented, perhaps an 'event taking place in the past' is just as contemporary as 'a plot unfolding in the present'.

On the other hand, Lou also endows his present-tense, on-the-scene filming with the appearance of a historical documentary. At the start of Saturday Fiction, right before the title sequence, white Chinese characters appear on the black screen, providing context for the story:

一九三七年十一月上海沦陷仅英法租界未被日军侵入被称为'孤岛'

In November 1937, Shanghai was occupied by Japan. The British [International Settlement]⁵ and French concessions were spared. Surrounded by Japan-occupied territories, Shanghai was called a 'lonely island'.6

Similarly, near the end of the film, after the story of the six days leading up to December 7, 1941 is complete, white captions appear again – albeit on top of the film image instead of against a black screen - revealing that the attack on Pearl Harbor was the result of this six-day espionage mission/romance.

These brief historical narrations are written in an official tone. It should also be noted that, unlike normal conventions for writing and reading in contemporary China, these captions lack punctuation marks and are meant to be read vertically from right to left, which is consistent with the printing style pervasive in the 1930s and 1940s. More prominently, Saturday Fiction is shot entirely in black and white; this gives it the coarse texture of historical footage, or at least of films made in the black-and-white period. These features collectively create an alienating effect: challenging the immersive, subjective vision generated by the handheld camera, and disturbing the feeling of being 'on the scene' with a sense of history.

Lou also intensifies the contradiction between the present-tense style of representation and the historical texture through another innovative practice: the combination of long takes and jump cuts, two seemingly opposite filming and editing strategies. The former

retains the rawness and the actual duration of the event being filmed, thus providing a less mediated access to reality. By contrast, the latter calls attention to the filmmaker's active intervention, thus pointing to the constructedness of the film grammar. From a temporal perspective, long takes capture the historical past with a verisimilar quality, while jump cuts add to the sense of tension and immediacy in the present. In combining the two techniques, Lou once again emphasizes the permeability of the boundary between historical truth and cinematic construction, and again juxtaposes the sense of historical past with that of immediate present.

When Lou juxtaposes different temporalities against one another in Saturday Fiction, it is not difficult for viewers to notice a similarity, or even a mutual dependency, between the past and the present. Recall the climactic gunfight scene examined in the previous section. Just as the fiction and reality from different narrative layers overlap, so, too, do 'history' and 'present'. As Tan and Yu in 1941 coincidentally speak the same lines as Sanki and Qiulan in 1925, the two worlds merge into one, in which imperialist forces are oppressing the seemingly peaceful 'lonely island' of Shanghai, just as their counterparts under the reign of the Beiyang government did. This resemblance can be explained by the similar and related uncertainty haunting both time periods, as well as by the contemporaneity of historical narratives. Indeed, the version of the year 1925 that Tan constructed in 1941 inevitably bears some traits and traces of the time in which it was produced.

Like the 1925-set play Saturday Fiction, which incorporates much of Tan's own life experience from the years immediately preceding 1941, the 1941-set film of the same title also reflects many of Lou's thoughts on contemporary Chinese urban society. As Lou writes in his director statement, 'This film is about the destinies of different people during a time of complex world crisis' (Lou 2019). This description applies to the contemporary world as much as it does to the world in 1925, or the late 1930s and early 1940s. According to film scholar Zhen Zhang,

In modern Chinese history, the 1930s and 1990s stand out as strikingly parallel in terms of accelerated modernization and urban transformation, aggressive industrial or postindustrial capitalism, and an explosion of mass culture with the accompanying issues of social fragmentation and dislocation. (Zhang 2007, 7)

Lou started his career in the 1990s, as the tides of globalization and commercialization began sweeping China in the wake of its postsocialist market reforms. His films profoundly engage with the psychological disillusion, moral confusion, and emotional dislocation that contemporary Chinese people were experiencing amid the socioeconomic upheaval. These themes have become even more salient in the new century with China's further integration into global capitalism and the advancement of marketization, and they remain the central concerns of Lou's films.

As a globalized product itself, Saturday Fiction reflects this powerful contemporary force through its prominent transnational features: the cast of actors from around the world; the fluid transitions among multiple languages (Mandarin, English, French, German, Japanese); and the presentation of cosmopolitan imagery, even though the whole film diegesis is set in one single city. However, Lou most perfectly encapsulates the actual conditions of people's existence in a globalized urban environment during a time of crisis through one scene right before the film's finale. Here, after reading Yu's letter informing him that Japan's real target is Hawaii - rather than Singapore, as she had told him before - Hubert walks out onto the street of Shanghai's foreign concessions. We hear on the soundtrack a Japanese soldier asking (in Japanese), 'Don't you miss home?' Another answers, 'I feel lonely from time to time'. As the camera pans gradually, it shows Hubert and the two Japanese soldiers walking toward and brushing past each other. One soldier asks Hubert, first in Japanese and then repeated in English, 'Do you have a light?' After Hubert glumly lights two cigarettes, the man pats him on the shoulder, saying 'thank you' in Japanese before he leaves.

In the same long take, which gradually assumes a deep focus, the two soldiers walk away while Hubert looks at them silently in the background. One soldier asks the other, 'Why are these foreigners still around?' As the shot cuts back to Hubert, still standing there in silence, we hear on the soundtrack this sentence spoken in Japanese: 'Anyway, they will end up in the concentration camps'. Hubert then throws a book he had been holding onto the scrap heap surrounding a trash bin. While he walks on down the street, Japanese troops pass him, accompanied by the sound of army boots treading on the ground. Through the captions appearing immediately afterwards, the audience then realizes that it is December 7: the day the Pacific War broke out, and that the Japanese invaded Shanghai's International Settlement and French Concession. In this scene, the contempt that the two groups felt for each other are clearly reflected in the facial expressions of Hubert and the two Japanese soldiers. From the Japanese soldiers' standpoint, 'foreigners' like Hubert should not be 'still around' in Shanghai, which Japan has occupied under the imperial government's Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere vision. But they are unaware that this bias is also preventing them from realizing the absurdity of their own words: in Shanghai, they are also foreigners, just like Hubert.

This scene epitomizes the apparent benefits of globalization: people from disparate backgrounds gathering in an international metropolis, communicating with each other by freely switching among multiple languages. However, instead of the bright future or cosmopolitan ideal promised by globalization, what is made manifest here is in fact people's estrangement and mutual hostility: mirroring the conflict unfolding between the nation-states that they came from, which were constantly scrambling for opportunities for expansion and power. The Japanese soldiers feel lonely and nostalgic in a foreign battleground far away from their hometowns. This sentiment, common to all of humanity, could form the basis for a mutual understanding between them and Hubert. Yet the political hostility blocks out the possible emotional resonance, and the soldiers are even cheerful at the prospect of throwing 'foreigners' into concentration camps, as if they do not know how atrocious it would be to do so.

It is also significant that Hubert discards as rubbish the book he has treasured for years: a 1774 first edition of Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther, signed by Goethe himself, and with a few words written by Nietzsche when it was in the philosopher's possession. In Hong Ying's original story, Hubert gifts this book to Speyer, the Jewish manager of the Cathay Hotel, as a reward for his efforts to ensure Yu's safety. Lou changes that ending, and in doing so projects his own disappointment about the contemporary cultural environment onto Hubert's final actions. In the film, when Hubert first talks about the book with Speyer, he emphasizes its rarity and preciousness. But after the Pacific War has broken out, leaving him uncertain about whether Yu is alive or not, Hubert realizes in despair that no one needs the book or cares about its artistic value now.

In a similar way, for the people of Lou's time living through the global expansion of the capitalist market economy, the book looks no more useful than it did in war-ridden 1940s Shanghai – so it is fitting that its final destination in this film adaptation is a scrap heap. Considering these circumstances, Goethe's Werther, who devotes his young life unregretfully to passion and love, symbolizes a pure, romantic spirit; returning as a specter to cast its gaze on modern people drowning in a tidal wave of cultural commodification. Correlatively, Werther's era also represents a past for which not only Hubert, but also Lou himself, feels nostalgic: a time when literature, philosophy, and the pursuit of artistic autonomy were all viewed as integral to both personal life and public society.

By hinting at the present through this symbolic portrait of the past, *Saturday Fiction* implicitly reflects how, among the rivalries of various transnational interest groups, globalization may bring more estrangement than mutual understanding, and could lead to a loss of romantic ideals in favor of more utilitarian goals. In this respect, we can see that Lou maintains a critical attitude toward the embrace of capitalist globalization, and has remained ambivalent about the trend of cultural commodification – just as he and the other Sixth Generation directors did during the earlier years of their filmmaking careers. Perhaps, by evoking nostalgia for a lost period of romanticism at the end of the film, Lou is also suggesting an implicit hope for the rekindling of the youthful passion Werther symbolizes: a shared passion of both filmmakers and audiences for experimental freedom and vital creativity.

Literature, film, and intertextuality

For viewers who are familiar with modern Chinese literature, the English title of Saturday Fiction has three different, but interconnected, connotations: First, it refers to the name Lou gives to the play-within-the-film, though it seems unrelated to the play's content. Second, it suggests the literal meaning of the words in the title. The day before the attack on Pearl Harbor was a Saturday, the same day that Yu carries out her espionage mission; it is also the day the play opens, where the film plot reaches its climax in a fictional-real gunfight. Fiction – an invented, imaginary story rather than a 'true' history – may refer to both the play-within-the-film and the film itself. Third, it is also an intertextual reference to the Saturday School (礼拜六派, Libailiu Pai), as Lou indicates in his director's statement (Lou 2019).

Saturday (礼拜六, Libailiu) was a highly influential and popular literature magazine in early Republican China (1912–1949), largely consisting of serialized novels with recreational, rather than political or educational, purposes. As one of its chief editors Wang Dungen (王钝根, 1888–1951) explains in its inaugural issue: 'On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, everyone is engaged in their professions; only on Saturday and Sunday do they have leisure time to read novels' (Wang 1914). First launched in June 1914, the magazine ceased publication after its 100th issue two years later. In 1921, it was revived and produced another 100 issues before closing permanently in February 1923. Shortly after its revival, Saturday became the target of harsh criticism from the Literary Research Association, led by Mao Dun (茅盾, 1896–1981) and Zheng Zhenduo (郑振铎, 1898–1958). As advocates of the New Literature Movement, this group championed the principle of art for life's sake, and viewed literature as a revolutionary tool for enlightenment and modernization. They opposed aestheticism, popular recreational literature, and were particularly critical of works focused on themes like sexual desire and self-indulgence.

In May 1921, the Literary Research Association's official journal, Wenxue Xunkan (文学句刊), released its inaugural issue, which included some pointed commentary: 'Saturday

has been revived, yet it continues to treat literature as mere entertainment, which is deeply disappointing' (Wenxue Xunkan 1921). This statement encapsulated the New Literature advocates' disapproval of Saturday. Amid the relentless criticism, the term 'Saturday' soon evolved into more than just a magazine, becoming a derogatory expression. After Zheng first coined the term⁷, writers associated with Saturday – mostly based in Shanghai – were pejoratively labelled the 'Saturday School' by New Literature advocates (Luo 2016). Their works were dismissed as reactionary, decadent, escapist, and socially irresponsible, relegating them to the margins of Chinese literary history for several decades (Xie 2012).

In the film, by the time Tan writes his play Saturday Fiction in 1941, Saturday magazine had long ceased publication and faded from public sight. Lou's choice to name Tan's leftwing play Saturday Fiction suggests a deeper irony. While Tan ostensibly adopts a mainstream left-wing revolutionary narrative, his work remains deeply rooted in the romantic, sentimental, and entertaining tradition exemplified by Saturday magazine. Indeed, in the film we see Tan recreating on stage the shipyard bar where he and Yu first met, embedding their real-life affective encounters into the play's script. During rehearsals, he also repeatedly expresses his love for Yu, revealing that he is less committed to creating a left-wing story of anti-imperialist resistance than he is to crafting a romance centered on their relationship.

By calling a left-wing work about the May 30 anti-imperialist strike Saturday Fiction, Lou implicitly connects Saturday School writers, his male protagonist Tan, and himself as a contemporary art-house filmmaker. In the film (differently from the original novel), unlike other main characters, Tan is not connected with any political party or organization: not the Allies, the Axis Powers, the Nationalist government, or the collaborationist government in Nanking. He is merely a scriptwriter and director working in the foreign concessions of Shanghai, isolated from the warfare. Just like many Saturday School writers, he has little regard for politics; instead, he earns his literary fame by catering to the ordinary citizens of Shanghai. He has no idea of Yu's true identity or purpose in returning, but he writes the play to show his love for her, and in hopes of reuniting and rekindling their old flame. Tan sets the play in the political context of an anti-imperialist strike because, during a time of national crisis, mainstream society expects a writer to take on his social responsibility of mobilizing and encouraging people; further, his literary work should reflect a certain awareness of the goal to defend the nation.

However, even with a left-wing shell, the core of this play diverges greatly from that of typical mainstream leftist literature, as it is in essence a romance between Sanki and Qiulan. In this sense, despite Saturday School literature having been mostly unconcerned with leftist themes, Tan's play is nonetheless titled Saturday Fiction. This peculiar blend of Saturday School and an ostensibly left-wing work is not only a playful parody, but also suggests Tan's inner identification with the former despite his necessary conformity with the latter. Considering himself a peripheral scriptwriter/director, he values his love for Yu and believes that their love story has literary merit; it is neither insignificant nor meaningless, for him or his audience.

In the same spirit, by calling the film Saturday Fiction as well, Lou not only creates a postmodern literary pastiche, but also reveals his own stance. Just like Tan, who is alienated from his era's left-wing, revolutionary literary world, Lou hopes to distance his cinematic practice from the contemporary commercial and ideological mainstream. Yet just as Tan lacks much of a choice in the face of dominant social expectations, Lou has to make compromises in order to win support from both government and audience. With the title Saturday Fiction, however, Lou implies that - despite the film's mainstream packaging in historical themes and the commercial spy-thriller genre – it in fact centers on a Saturday-style work of fiction. This parallels the situation in which the Saturday School found themselves, as well as Tan's literary choices in the film, and indicates Lou's true inner thematic preference.

On the surface, Saturday Fiction tells a 'heroic' story of a female spy who, situated against a grand historical background, reverses both the fate of her own country and the world order with her beauty and wisdom. But upon further scrutiny, the diegetic focus is actually put on the heroine's emotions and inner psychological development. The turning point of the plot, which influences Yu's final decision, happens in the scene where she hypnotizes KMT agent Bai. Lou has exhibited an obsession with double characters since he directed Suzhou River. He drew clear inspiration from Hitchcock's Vertigo, especially in terms of the female double as a central narrative device, which an array of film critics and scholars have taken note.8 In Saturday Fiction, Bai is analogously set as Yu's living double to perform a central narrative function. The two women share a similar childhood experience, having both been orphans. They are similarly passionate about and talented at acting, and political forces are manipulating both of them. Bai projects her own desire to be successful in the field of performing arts onto the film star Yu; likewise, Yu also sees a younger, passionate self in her cinematic double.

Before the hypnosis, Yu and Bai's initial relationship is mostly based on mutual exploitation. The former is suspicious of the latter's intentions, and the latter is also tasked with finding out the former's hidden motive. Given these circumstances, the hypnosis starts as a deception. But during the process, Bai reveals her true self to Yu, and Yu reveals to Bai her complex emotions toward her foster father. Realizing that they are both lonely souls struggling to take control of their own fates, the two touch each other's hearts as well as bodies, and reach a genuine state of mutual appreciation and understanding. More importantly, each of them recovers a more complete self that she had suppressed in order to perform her political work.

After the hypnosis sequence, the next scene in which Yu appears consists entirely of emotional portraiture. From a low-angle, extreme long shot, we see the small figure of Yu standing on the rooftop of the high-rise Cathay Hotel. On the building level below, Speyer is walking toward her, as if an unforeseen future is impending and her fate will soon change. Composing the frame in this way makes prominent the contrast between the burden of history and the tiny, powerless individual easily affected by the undercurrents surrounding her. The camera slowly tilts up and cuts to a close-up of Yu's melancholy face. Zooming in further, we see tears welling in her somber, pensive eyes. Later, because of a sudden change in Captain Furuya's itinerary, Yu is informed that her mission has been changed accordingly (for Yu, this means that she will have to sacrifice her ex-husband's life). In her next scene, therefore, she tells Hubert very firmly that 'this is the last time'. Her determined words and attitude reveal that she is tired of deception and pretense, of being manipulated into doing things against her will; and that she has decided to no longer hurt those who love or admire her.

The espionage project proceeds as planned, and Yu successfully performs her role in it. Yet in this process, what is highlighted is nonetheless how Yu insists on finding Tan before escaping from the fatal situation; how she tries to protect Bai from danger but fails; and how she expresses her gratitude to Hubert in her final letter, for giving her a father. Yu fulfills her task of obtaining information from Furuya by again using hypnosis; specifically, by pretending to be Furuya's deceased wife, Miyoko, whom she resembles. Just like in the previous hypnosis session, both the hypnotist (Yu) and the hypnotized (Bai or Furuya) confront their true desires during a deceptive process. Furuya is immersed in his love and longing, and Yu realizes how much she herself also yearns for a faithful love like this. Interestingly, Yu's espionage operation is called 'Two-way Mirror' in the film. For the Allies, this 'mirror' (which also represents one of Lou's aesthetic obsessions) is obviously targeted at the Japanese military. But Yu, who performs a mirror image of Miyoko, is also connected to two mirror images of herself: Bai and Miyoko. Through these images, which reflect her innermost desires for freedom and love - perhaps long hidden and repressed given the political climate – Yu gradually confirms her determination to follow her heart from then on.

Throughout the emotional portraiture in these scenes, Lou's choice to highlight subjective feelings rather than the objective reality (whether deceptive, illusional, or not) also serves as an intertextual resonance with the idea of another literary group that emerged in 1920s Shanghai, known as the New Sensationists (新感觉派, Xinganjuepai). Resisting 'the increasing politization of art' as well as 'the tenets of realism and social engagement' promoted by left-wing writers at the time, the group focused on exploring subjectivity and sensations in their writings (Rosenmeier 2018, 168). In Hong Ying's original novel, the script of the playwithin-the-story written by the character Mo Zhiyin is called Foxtrot Shanghai (狐步上海, Hubu Shanghai). Seeing the similar pronunciation of their names, the similar titles of their works, and their similar life experiences working with the Japanese in an occupied Shanghai, it is not difficult to figure out that the prototype for the character Mo Zhiyin is New Sensationist writer Mu Shiving (穆时英, 1912–1940), whose most famous short story is none other than Shanghai Foxtrot (上海的狐步舞; Shanghai De Hubuwu, 1932).

While Lou replaces the original novel's New Sensationist playscript with a left-wing romance titled Saturday Fiction, the main characters of the play-within-the-film are drawn from Shanghai - a work by Yokomitsu, the Japanese writer who first formulated the theory of Neo-Sensationism and led the Japanese New Sensationists (新感覚派, Shinkankakuha), and whose work greatly influenced Mu's literary style (Field 2014, xxiii). In other words, by referencing Yokomitsu, Lou in his film adaptation actually retains the reference of Hong Ying's original novel to the New Sensationists. Additionally, in repeatedly blurring the boundary between fiction and reality (the inside and outside narrative layers) and emphasizing subtle, complex emotional portraiture, Lou prioritizes and highlights characters' subjective feelings and emotions, inviting the audience to perceive them through his cinematic language. This core idea precisely echoes the proposition and practice of the New Sensationists.

This intertextual resonance can be most prominently seen in the ending of the film. Instead of resolving the suspense like other spy thrillers,9 Saturday Fiction leaves many important questions unanswered, making the audience even more confused if they are aiming to construct an unequivocally realistic diegetic world. For example, in Hong Ying's original novel, Yu eventually tells Hubert the reason why she concealed the true target of the Japanese military attack: 'I didn't tell you yesterday, because I had to help China'. To help readers understand Yu's motivation more clearly, Hong reveals Hubert's inner thoughts:

Suddenly, he understood the obvious truth: The harder Japan attacks, the less room for retreat there is for the U.K. and the U.S., so they will join the all-out war against Japan without reservation. Only then will China not fight Japan alone. (Hong 2016, 420)

However, in the film, Lou changes the content of Yu's letter, and does not reveal or explain her intention. In doing so, he not only replaces the formulaic ending of the spy-thriller genre with an open, evocative one, but also conveys to the audience that the feelings and sensations they gain from this film are more important than a solid answer.

In *Saturday Fiction*'s finale, an injured Yu returns to the shipyard bar to meet Tan, as she had promised him. The two lean on each other as they silently wait for the Japanese, who are yelling outside, to enter the bar. In an extremely long take, the camera first slowly tilts down, allowing us to see the gun in Yu's hand fall to the ground. At this moment, unexpectedly, the jazz music that only accompanies the play-within-the-film starts. The camera, meanwhile, pans to the left, showing the band that once played in the fictional shipyard bar on the stage of the Lyceum. As the audience begins to feel puzzled again, the camera makes a slow 360-degree turn, bringing us back to the same scene presented in the title sequence. The dead bodies on the floor have disappeared, and the actors are dancing cheerfully to the jazz music, as if the gunfights and deaths from just a few minutes before in the film's diegetic time had never really happened. In the background, we even see the blurry silhouettes of Yu and Tan, or perhaps Qiulan and Sanki, sitting in the same chairs as before the camera began to pan. But when the camera makes another 180-degree turn from a reverse direction and turns back again to the same position, the chairs are already empty.

During this extremely long take, Lou reuses the technique that he used in *The Shadow Play* (风中有朵雨做的云; *Fengzhong You Duo Yu Zuo De Yun*, 2018), letting the camera smoothly move between the year 1989 and the year 2012, thus linking the two time-spaces with one single shot. In the finale of *Saturday Fiction*, Lou similarly connects Yu and Tan's real world with Qiulan and Sanki's fictional world. He uses this boundary-crossing technique to replace the final segment of the film (the second narrative layer) with the beginning: the first act of the play-within-the-film (the first narrative layer). In doing so, Lou not only allows the end to echo the beginning, but also weakens the tragic nature of the whole diegesis by providing the audience with cheerful fantasies (everything returns to the starting point) that are the opposite of the cruel reality. Alternatively, it is possible that the very end is actually just Yu's hallucination. Through the surreal, self-contradictory *mise-en-scène*, Lou exteriorizes and visualizes Yu's interior desire to return to the time when she had just arrived in Shanghai, or even the moment she first met Tan in the shipyard bar. In this way, Lou once again eliminates the distinctions between past and present, hallucination and reality, and subjectivity and objectivity.

Though the audience may not be sure which parts of the final long take are real, this ambiguity actually reveals the psychological and perceptual reality of Yu's desire at this moment: not to complete her political mission and stay alive, but rather to return to the place where she first met Tan; to lean on his shoulder, and watch the people in the bar joyfully dancing. By highlighting the subjective depiction of the heroine's feelings and emotions throughout the film and surrealistically representing her hallucination and inner desire at the end, Lou is asserting that psychological and perceptual reality is more important than external, physical reality. He thus transcends the conventional realistic mode of objective reproduction (just like the New Sensationists did) to evoke, arouse, and stimulate viewer empathy without catering to their demand for clarity and logic. While the film does not convey an unequivocal history, it offers its audience real, vivid sensory perceptions and thoughts.

Conclusion: New epoch for boundary crossings

Lou's *Saturday Fiction* traverses multiple boundaries: between fiction and reality; between history and the present; and among theatre, literature, and cinema. As discussed above,

Lou's incorporation of stylized art-house aesthetics within the framework of a spy thriller distinguishes the film from others of the genre, achieving a unique form of genre crossing. By turning to history and embedding contemporary social critiques within a historical setting, Lou demonstrates a sustained negotiation with the political and commercial mainstream, skillfully balancing between resistance and compromise. Further, in challenging and reworking boundaries and conventions, he both foregrounds his auteurist expression and explores possible future directions for both commercial genre films and art-house films. Whether or not he is successful, Lou attempts to accommodate the considerations of both societal demand and artistic autonomy, and even suggests a dialogue between the two. As a metaphorical self-reference, the play-within-the-film of the same title sticks to its author's habitual artistic pursuits, touches the hearts of its audience, and alters the course of history. In the outermost layer of reality, will Lou's film share the same fate as its play-within-thefilm? Time will tell whether it really opens up a new epoch for boundary crossings in filmmaking, and for maintaining and cultivating the critical, avant-garde, contemporary urban spirit in a more globalized and market-driven world.

Notes

- For scholars' discussions on the Sixth Generation's shift, see for example Zhang (Lanham 2006). See also Zhang (2007). Finally, see Lu (2021).
- 2. The May 30 Movement (五卅运动, Wusa Yundong) is a significant pro-labor and antiimperialist uprising that took place during China's Republican Period, under the reign of the Beiyang (北洋) government. It culminated in the tragic event known as the May 30 Massacre (五卅惨案, Wusa Can'an), on May 30, 1925, when the Shanghai Municipal Police resorted to using gunfire against Chinese protesters in Shanghai's International Settlement.
- A line from Lou Ye's 2000 film Suzhou River, which later became a Sixth-Generation manifesto.
- Berry provides a rough translation of Lou's general ideas during the video interview, but I use my own translation in this article.
- The term "British and French concessions (英法租界)" used in the film is inaccurate. There was no "British" concession in Shanghai after 1863. Rather, there was the International Settlement (British and American) and the French Concession.
- Here, I use my own English translation instead of the film's official English subtitles. 6.
- See Zheng (1922). 7.
- See, for example, Silbergeld (2004). See also Zhang (2007). 8.
- For example, Chen Guofu (陈国富) and Gao Qunshu's (高群书) The Message (风声; Fengsheng, 2009) is one of China's most representative and outstanding spy films. In it, all prior suspense and doubt are resolved or settled during the last few minutes of diegetic time.

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Notes on contributor

Chenfeng Wang is a Ph.D. candidate in Cultural Studies at the University of California, San Diego. Her academic journey began with a B.A. in Chinese Literature from Tsinghua University, followed by an M.A. in East Asian Languages and Civilizations from the University of Pennsylvania. Her scholarly interest lies in the domain of film and media studies within contemporary East Asia. Specifically, she delves into the nuances of transborder, transcultural, and transmedial experiences and practices in response to globalization and media technology advancements.

ORCID

Chenfeng Wang (b) http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7960-0946

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