

Provenance of Early Chinese Movie Publications

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Researching the past often depends on chance and serendipity. Sometimes an incidental discovery can unexpectedly fill a missing piece in a puzzle; often, a relentless search may result in nothing. A film historian's task is not always rewarding, and frustration abounds when the work needed is to seek materials of the early twentieth century, an era before there was a notion of a film library or archive. In the case of Chinese film, it is especially challenging, as many films before the 1930s did not survive, and many print sources such as handbills, posters, scripts, and company records were destroyed or scattered around the world. In working with the Media History Digital Library (MHDL) and curating books and periodicals for digitization, we find revisiting early Chinese film history an uneven path, though it sometimes seems miraculous or, more often, quotidian.

This chapter details the process of choosing, searching, and introducing key sources in early Chinese-language film history, including artifacts from China, Hong Kong, and, to some extent, Taiwan, while also balancing among three distinct sources of film history: periodicals, catalogs, and book-length publications. In every case, there were important influences from abroad, via Hollywood, Japanese, and European film industries. We single out the period before 1930 in this study, as it is less familiar to global researchers.¹ This phase is normally called “early cinema” by Chinese historians; that term is defined differently from its use in European and US film scholarship. Due to the scarcity of surviving films predating 1930, the “early” phase of cinema in China and Hong Kong usually refers to the period from the 1900s to early 1930s (rather than the period between the 1890s and 1910s). This periodization follows the time line of films made by the first Chinese producers to the advent of sound and the rise of left-wing cinema, two concurrent

developments in the early 1930s.² Recently this early phase has been extended to the 1890s, with growing interest in exhibition history and audience reception before the twentieth century. Not only must we acknowledge differences in periodization, but we should also emphasize the provenance of sources online, offline, and between the lines. What we call “historic” sources have their own background or derivation, not only their original creation and circulation but also the routes they may have taken to their online, virtual forms. And there are other materials that may be at least as important that were not or could not become available for digital scanning and upload. Even so, we can profit from dead ends, also-rans, and sources that may not arrive in the digitized forms of canonical history. Hence, we envision the personification of this process as a form of biography, a record of the recovery of the materials in their digital afterlives.

Following the focus on early cinema, our original proposed items for digitization in the MHDL were three of the earliest film periodicals published in Shanghai and Hong Kong, along with two authoritative sources on the industry and filmmaking techniques. These works all appeared in the 1920s, during the Republican era that commenced with the 1911 Revolution led by Dr. Sun Yat-sen, founder of the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT). This period corresponded with the formative, exuberant era of film exhibition, joined by an ardent production culture inspired by nationalism. Getting access to these materials was not always straightforward; often, under current copyright regimes, they could be consulted but not reproduced. Our tale is not triumphant, but partial, accidental, and provisional. In many cases, there were setbacks due to bureaucracy, the COVID-19 pandemic, and even avarice.

Our original plan was to digitize two very early film magazines in China—*The Motion Picture Review* (*Yingxi zazhi*, 1921) and *Movies Magazine* (*Dianying zazhi*, 1924–25). (All Chinese names in this chapter are rendered in the Hanyu Pinyin system, and the order of Chinese proper names follows the norm in Chinese, surname preceding first name.) *The Motion Picture Review*, allegedly the first film magazine circulated in Shanghai, released just three issues before it closed. It was put out by the Shanghai Photoplay Society, organized by a group of professional English translators and connoisseurs of Hollywood pictures. The cover image of its first issue features Harold Lloyd, indicating the international popularity of the US comedian and his slapstick turns. More vividly, the image foregrounds the magazine’s selling point: the stars of Hollywood, who constituted the silver screen’s main appeal for the middle-class audiences in China.³ *Movies Magazine* was launched in 1924, with a total of thirteen issues. Compared to *The Motion Picture Review*, which devoted most of its pages to portraits of movie actors, *Movies Magazine* covers more theories, film reviews, and filmmaking techniques, representing the rising importance of motion pictures as a major sphere of technical craft, aesthetic pursuit, and cultural consumption

in China. These two magazines are held in the Shanghai Library and the China Film Archive, in both print and microfilm. They, along with many other surviving film periodicals to date, were reprinted in *Republican Film Magazine Compilation* (2013), a 167-volume series of film periodicals between 1921 and 1949, a conservation milestone undertaken by the National Library of China.⁴ There was no copyright issue in selecting these two titles for the MHDL to begin with, as the original publishers no longer exist. And as mentioned, these magazines now have been restored and reproduced in hardcopy form for public use. We discussed the prospect of digitizing the items with one of the editors, who advised us that permission to create a digital copy of these two magazines must be cleared with the authorities of the National Library and that the layers of clearance would be forbidding.

We then discovered that the National Library produces microfilm originals of these two magazines for the use of researchers.⁵ We inquired about purchase but were told an antipandemic measure issued in Beijing prohibited any staff to enter the storeroom to retrieve any stock. After several rounds of inquiries—with staff in various divisions, including the microfilm office, circulation, and, eventually, reader services—we were referred to the bookstore of the National Library to check if there were copies available for sale. The bookstore staff told us that the government had just suspended all such sales until further notice. Due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, we were prevented from going to Beijing or Shanghai to personally negotiate with the authorities there to obtain usable materials, as the originals were not to be used by non-library staff and the printouts from the existent microfilms are usually hard to read. As a result, we had to abandon our attempt to secure these two items, either in person or by remote access.

Our third selection is the 1924 monograph *On Photoplay* (*Yingxi xue*) by Xu Zhuodai (1881–1958). More than two hundred pages long, it was among the first film books published in China, taking a systematic approach to film production, from scriptwriting to directing and other aspects of filmmaking. The title *On Photoplay* may not be the best translation, as there is *xue* in the title, meaning “learning,” “studying,” or “science.”⁶ Hence it could also be translated as *Photoplay Studies* or *The Science of Photoplay* to highlight the concept of *xue*, a form of pedagogy as well as a system of knowledge and techniques.⁷ The original copy of *On Photoplay* was held in Shanghai Library;⁸ a photocopy of the book is available in the holdings of the Chinese University of Hong Kong library, which we used to offer the digital scan to the MHDL. There was no issue with copyright, as the author Xu Zhuodai died in 1958 and the publishing firm Huaxian Commercial Press has since closed. More details on this book will follow in the next section.

Our next selection is *China Cinema Year Book 1927* (*Zhonghua yingyue nian-jian*), edited by Cheng Shuren, Gan Yazi, and Chen Dingxiu. At over 200 pages, this was among the first formal publications on the Chinese film industry. A print

version is held in the Shanghai Library, and a digital copy is available open access on Duxiu Academic Search, the world's largest online database for Chinese-language academic publications.⁹ Registered users can access only fifty pages at a time. We followed this path and offered the scanned copy to the MHDL.¹⁰

The last item in our curation is the first film periodical published in Hong Kong, *Silver Light* (*Yin Guang*). Five issues were published, beginning from the first issue in 1926 and closing with the fifth issue in 1927.¹¹ Launched by Hong Kong Chinese writers, *Silver Light* represents a key page in the indigenous film writing of Hong Kong.¹² In many respects, it resembles its Shanghai counterparts in layout, structure, and rhetoric. The inaugural issue foregrounds the need to create a local Hong Kong response to the new medium of the twentieth century, not letting those writers up north dominate the national cinematic discourse. Despite the mild regional competitive tone, most of the writers shared a similar agenda with their counterparts in Shanghai in their concern for the future of Chinese cinema and their vision of the role of motion pictures to propel social and cultural advancement. Seizing on screen performance as an effective vehicle for prompting spectators into a socially conscious position, writers of *Silver Light* put an emphasis on acting as cinema's "enlightening" function (echoing the title of the magazine, light on the silver screen). In its last two issues, cosmopolitanism was on the rise, marking the unique Hong Kong perspective in how Chinese cinema should be fashioned to be on par with its European and US counterparts.¹³ *Silver Light* is available to view in the library of the University of Hong Kong, in both print and microfilm, and digital versions of the five extant issues are also available in the MHDL.

With our failure to secure digital copies of *The Motion Picture Review* and *Movies Magazine*, we turned to the most important source on prewar Taiwan cinema, *A History of Cinema and Drama in Taiwan*, penned by Lü Su-Shang, published in 1961. This, too, was a failed endeavor, for financial reasons.¹⁴ *A History of Cinema and Drama in Taiwan* was self-published by the author, who was himself an actor, dramatist, and critic and had intimate knowledge of and connections with different sectors in Taiwan's performing arts, including cinema. His account took in the beginning of the Japanese colonial period to postwar Taiwan and remains to date the most comprehensive local chronicle of Taiwan performing arts. It has been used as the key reference for writing early Taiwan film history, especially the colonial Japanese era, which lasted until 1945.¹⁵ The 580-page volume is very thorough and well illustrated, with chapters on cinema, radio broadcasts, and performing arts, including Taiwanese opera, dramaturgy, music, and puppetry.¹⁶ We were pleased to have chosen this source, as its print quality is decent and the sheer volume of its coverage is impressive, a rare and valuable book on the history of media archaeology of Taiwan. Nevertheless, the rights holder's reluctance to share it with global readers embodies reverberations of the suppressed history of local culture in Taiwan. The resentment felt by the author's descendant and others

like him might take years to resolve. In the following, we provide more detailed accounts of the two book-length publications in our selection.

ON PHOTOPLAY (1924)

Adapted and translated by Xu Zhuodai from Kaeriyama Norimasa's *The Production and Photography of Moving Picture Drama* (1917), this primer is an introduction to screenplays, stagecraft, camerawork, lighting, editing, film stock, and other subjects. Film was a new medium, different from drama, according to Xu. It was something modern, taken from abroad, and needed to be handled with knowledge and special attention. The book is divided into eight chapters and an appendix:

1. Elements [or Essence] of Photoplay
 2. Forms and Classifications of Photoplay
 3. Making Meaning and Original Storywriters
 4. Methods of Writing Screenplays and Role of Scriptwriters
 5. Staging Directors [i.e., film directors]
 6. Actors
 7. Shooting Studios and Settings
 8. Methods of Cinematography, Tricks [or Techniques] and Technicians
- Appendix [a technical vocabulary of Japanese and Chinese translations of English-language terms about film stock, lenses, focal length, and even color]

In all chapters, following his Japanese source, Xu points to the materiality of making movies, the cinematic techniques, “tricks,” and many technical details. His second chapter, “Forms and Classifications of Photoplay,” provides genre classifications, including drama, comedy, slapstick, historical drama, fairy tale, social drama, action thriller, detective story, military, war, spectacle, education, philosophical, literary and art film such as the screen adaptations of Tolstoy's novels, and, finally, fine arts.¹⁷ These classifications are thorough and correspond to directions taken in studio filmmaking and criticism in later decades. Nearly all his chapters emphasize the uniqueness and novelty of photoplay creation, reminding readers to observe the special techniques required for making motion pictures; this is striking, as Xu Zhuodai propagated the concept of what we call “medium specificity” today. This specificity was noted by writers who were his contemporaries but never advocated as strongly as Xu did in this book. This, of course, could just reflect the sources that he adapted or translated from. Nonetheless, Xu's intent to introduce filmmaking as a craft to the Chinese audience is evident.

As a humorist in the popular fiction known as Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly School, Xu directed, wrote, and starred in at least fifteen films. He was a key

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徐卓呆譯著

三景戲學

鏡廬

華先商業社圖書部出版

中11726

FIGURE 20.1. Title page, *On Photoplay*.

譯名對照表

| | |
|-------|--------------------------|
| 影 片 劇 | Photoplay |
| 無 言 劇 | Pantomime |
| 題 目 | Title |
| 說 明 文 | Subtile |
| 卷 | Reel |
| 本 | Part |
| 編 | Act |
| 集 | Chapter |
| 場 面 | Scene |
| 畫 面 | Picture |
| 劇 | Drama |
| 喜 劇 | Comedy |
| 悲 劇 | Tragedy |
| 滑稽劇 | Farce comedy; Comic Play |
| 歷史劇 | Historical drama |
| 宗教劇 | Religious drama |
| 童話劇 | Fairly tale play |
| 社會劇 | Social drama |
| 興奮劇 | Sensational drama |
| 偵探劇 | Detective drama |

FIGURE 20.2. Bilingual glossary of film terms, *On Photoplay*.

representative from the Butterfly School in outlining the symbiosis between popular fiction and filmmaking. Like many of his Butterfly colleagues, Xu published widely in relation to cinema. He was also co-owner of a small production house, Kaixin (Happy), that specialized in slapstick and other comedies. At the peak of his film career, he was called the “Charlie Chaplin of the East.”¹⁸ In several of his slapstick productions, Xu employed “tricks” in creating comic effects, suspense, and surprise, indicating Xu’s practice of his preaching.¹⁹ Tricks are highlighted in his eighth chapter, “Methods of Cinematography, Tricks (or Techniques) and Technicians,” in a special section where Xu describes the mechanisms involved and the impressions made by careful setups and timing. It is interesting to speculate on where his knack for such tricks originated. Xu studied in Japan around 1902, majoring in industrial technology. But having visited a local gymnastics school, he decided to change his major to gymnastics. Upon returning to China, he set up a gymnastics school and, later, a film company, while pursuing a career writing popular fiction. From industrial technology to gymnastics, from fiction to slapstick, Xu was able to leverage his skills into film writing and filmmaking, exemplifying a “cultural entrepreneur,” a multitasking figure capable of sparking synergy between different registers, media, and platforms.²⁰

CHINA CINEMA YEAR BOOK 1927

Yearbooks are commonly known as annual publications prepared by graduating classes to commemorate their activities and achievements. They celebrate the community of students, teachers, staff, and parents, as well as myriad cultural pursuits, athletics, and special events. Yearbooks are a standard record for liberal arts institutions and high schools, to represent and remember a given class. The MHDL, on the other hand, describes “year books” as annual catalogs that provide directories of personnel, products, and services. They have a distinct industry purpose, especially their provision of space for advertisement and promotion.²¹ In Hollywood, year books were “issued annually by the leading trade paper publishers [and were used] in the 1920s to structure data” (i.e., annual records outlining and praising activities of the film industry).²² The *China Cinema Year Book* is an interesting mix of commemoration and industry catalog, serving chiefly to introduce readers to the top companies and people in Chinese cinema. *China Cinema Year Book* and other year books might be called the databases of their time, given their purpose of compiling, organizing, and making information “searchable.”

China Cinema Year Book was edited by three authors: Cheng Shuren (S. J. Benjamin Cheng), Gan Yazi (Atsu Kann), and Chen Dingxiu (D. S. Chen). This 1927 volume prepares a comprehensive view of Chinese film history, production, distribution, exhibition, performance, writers, directors, designers, projectionists, and censorship. It comprises forty-seven sections, surveying the filmscape in

年六十國民
鑑年業影華中
CHINA CINEMA
YEAR BOOK
1927

津 天 海 上 港 香

司 公  代 百

年六十三已今迄業事戲影辦創

師技片影器機之戲影製攝凡

國 全 孚 信 備 齊 不 無

FIGURE 20.3. Front cover, *China Cinema Year Book* 1927.

Republican China circa the mid-1920s, including a brief on the formation of the industry in the 1910s. The information collected is impressive. Since its publication, this book has provided primary materials and information for researchers working on Chinese film history.²³ For those who are serious about this topic, it is a must read. Below is an abridged list of the forty-seven sections, in which the catalog format is quite clear:

1. Foreword
2. The History of the Motion Picture Industry in China
3. Chinese Producers
4. Chinese Feature Productions
5. Chinese Comedy Productions
6. Foreign Producers
7. Productions Made by Foreign Producers
8. Supervisors of Productions [Signed picture of Anna May Wong, "Orientially Yours"]
9. Photoplay Writers and Their Productions
10. Scenario Writers and Their Productions
11. Chinese Title Writers and Their Productions
12. English Title Writers and Their Productions
- [. . .]
17. Laboratorymen [*sic*] and Their Products
- [. . .]
23. Title Card Writers
24. Specialists Trained Abroad
25. Makeup Directors
26. Stars and Their Productions
27. Actors and Actresses [Picture of Wu Bongfan, along with his character's name Mr. Weiwei, from *The Stormy Night*]
28. Chinese Productions (Arranged Chronologically) [Picture of G.E. Weiss]
[Picture of J. Bendorf]
29. Theater Companies (Chinese Management)
30. Theater Companies (Foreign Management)
31. Agencies for Foreign Pictures
- [. . .]
33. List of Theaters
- [. . .]

China Cinema Year Book gives a clear view of the types of pictures, division of labor, and technical work involved in making, distributing, and exhibiting films, both domestic and foreign. In sections 4 and 5, we see the listings of Chinese Features and Chinese Comedies. Is this a distinction between feature-length films and shorts? Not necessarily, though many of the comedies produced at this time in China are in fact shorts with two or three reels. The difference here is based mainly on their subject matters. The term *features* (*Zhuang ju*) is a translation of Italian *opera*, which has a connotation of serious drama, rather than light fare (such as *opera buffa*), hence a separate category is used for such light entertainment as “comedies.” Is there a difference between photoplay writers and scenario writers (sections 9 and 10)? Scenario writers work scene by scene, while photoplays span the whole work. The “Laboratorymen” who are listed in section 17 undertook the processing of negatives, making prints, so these were most likely employees of studios. Title writers (sections 11 and 12, Chinese and English) are distinguished from title card writers (section 23). Title cards are titles at the beginning of the film, whereas title writers are those who write or translate the many intertitles that help carry the story, a standard feature in the silent diegesis. The title writers enjoyed a high status in the early film industry, since their bilingualism and writing skills were instrumental in setting up the film business, first in exhibition and promotion and later in production. The film career of Cheng Shuren, one of the volume’s coauthors, exemplifies such a trajectory. Though written in Chinese, the *Year Book*’s basic format is bilingual, in Chinese and English, and so are the ads for products from Shanghai and environs. The international, cosmopolitan mode reflects the extraterritoriality of the foreign settlements in Shanghai where many of the production companies were located; similarly, in many other treaty port cities, it was common to see listings of foreign distributors and exhibitors. The dominance of foreign players in the film industry²⁴ is aptly represented in section 2, “The History of the Motion Picture Industry in China,” in which Cheng and his coauthors identified Benjamin Brodsky as the person who shot the first two films in China.²⁵ Sections 6 and 7 are lists of foreign producers and their films, while sections 30 and 31 catalogue foreign-owned theaters and agencies that distributed foreign pictures.

If school yearbooks look back, *China Cinema Year Book* looks ahead by casting a net for investors, talent, and leaders and inviting potential stakeholders to read about the pursuits of Chinese filmmakers and, perhaps, consider joining the game. It addresses itself to potential investors and players in the Chinese film industry, which explains its directory-like structure, a who’s who or calling card of people and companies active in this new business. They were anticipating big business blossoming in China’s film industry, and indeed, 1925 saw a significant rise in feature-length film production. It was the year when “film-making in China transitioned from an artisanal mode to an industrial output dominated by a few

big companies.”²⁶ For instance, *The Stormy Night*, directed in 1925 by Zhu Shouju, cofounder of the Grand China Liliu Film Company, is a sophisticated romantic comedy about a famous writer who almost falls into an affair. The writer goes to the country to rest and compose. He finds trouble in his involvement with a local woman, while his wife and children remain in Shanghai. This film is mentioned several times in the *Year Book* (sections 4, 28, and 46), as it had been released in the recent past.²⁷ The design of the *Year Book* volume is very much like a press kit, while the presentation is similar to advertisement, although the illustrations do not always align well with the section headings. For instance, there is an auto-graphed photo of Anna May Wong in the list of production supervisors, and several pictures of foreigners appear in section 8 on Chinese productions. These photos boast movie star glamour and hyperbole typical of Shanghai show-business swagger, displaying what would now be called the Republican China sensibility: mature, worldly, and opulent—in sum, the Roaring Twenties.²⁸ There is consistency between ad copy and design in detailing the successes of talent, directors, and technicians; the ad copy uses the rhetoric of advanced, cultured connoisseurs. Cheng and his coauthors were insiders who knew the community, the equipment, and the business.

Cheng’s film book has a nationalist bent in its rhetoric. In the prelude to the volume, a calligraphy couplet appears: “Our film enterprise is yet to prosper, we should all continue to endeavor.” This is striking, as it rephrases Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s last words enjoining his comrades to unify China by ridding it of imperialist powers when he died in 1925. This nationalist overtone returns in the foreword to the directory of movie theaters (section 33), and the zeal is pronounced. While applauding the promise and energy of China’s film industry, Cheng calls for more of it to be held in domestic hands, rather than by foreign owners from concession areas in many parts of China (e.g., Shanghai, Tientsin, Canton, Hankow, Harbin, and many more). In effect, the latter arrangement put China’s film industry in thrall to foreign entities, whether British, Russian, French, German, Japanese, or Spanish. The extraterritoriality policy allowed regulation of large businesses by foreign governments. While a movie palace might be doing huge business in Shanghai, its owner, manager, and programs were mostly foreign. Cheng writes: “Our Republican Chinese industry is on the wax, although we still work in a piecemeal fashion. Until now, we lack a bird’s-eye view of the movie landscape, and cannot command movement in the industry as a whole. In production we are doing well, but of the 156 cinemas running in our country, 90 percent of those are controlled by foreign merchants. This is a risk, as movie theaters can be places that uplift our people and give expression to ancient country values. We need to rise up and exert control over our Republican cinema industry.”²⁹

Given Cheng’s later movement, detailed below, it is odd that *China Cinema Year Book* does not mention the industry in Taiwan, which was then a Japanese colony. But it lists film enterprises in Hong Kong, Macao, Manila, Bangkok, Singapore,

Tokyo, Vietnam, Jamaica, and even the United States (in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Honolulu) that traded in Chinese films, labor, and craft. The Chinese diaspora is apparent in Cheng's mapping of his "China Film World."

Cheng Shuren exemplifies study-abroad returnees of the early twentieth century, in helping China rebuild itself in the modern world.³⁰ But it is Cheng's liberal arts education, rather than science and engineering, that facilitated his entry into the film industry, a nascent field ripe for cultivation. At age sixteen in 1911, he enrolled in Tsinghua, the liberal arts college founded by US expatriates in Beijing, by means of the reparations from the Boxer Indemnity.³¹ Besides academic subjects, he undertook extracurricular activities, including debate, drama, sports, music, and photography.³²

In the early 1920s, Cheng continued his education in the US, enjoying a government scholarship at Lawrence College in Appleton, Wisconsin, where he majored in education. After graduating from Lawrence he did not return home, but went to New York, where he earned a master of arts in education at Columbia University and a certificate in cinematography at New York Film School. Cheng then interned as a cameraman at the Famous Players studio, Long Island.³³ In New York, Cheng met Zhou Ziqi (Chow Tse-chi), a Chinese diplomat in the US who turned a page in his life. At this time Zhou, a former premier as well as the first president of Tsinghua and a Columbia alumnus, was looking for study-abroad graduates to help him run Peacock Motion Picture Corporation, a Sino-American joint venture that he cofounded with US businessmen in 1922. Registered as a US company, Peacock was a transnational enterprise backed by US capital and the former head of the British American Tobacco Company. Its main purpose, like many others before it, was to tap into the growing film market as well as the cut-rate labor force of China. Hence, Zhou invited Cheng to help propagate US imports distributed by Peacock.³⁴ For this, Cheng proposed to put translated intertitles (from English to Chinese) on screen to ease the viewing of foreign pictures.³⁵ During this time, Chinese moviegoers relied on handbills with detailed synopses to follow the story. Cheng's idea of projecting Chinese intertitles on screen would allow patrons to better grasp the story while watching the film.³⁶ He devoted himself to this task and translated the intertitles of twenty-one Hollywood pictures into Chinese, including most of the films distributed by Peacock, according to the number of works listed under his name in *China Cinema Year Book*.³⁷ This led Peacock to great success financially.

Cheng's ambition went beyond intertitle translation; he shot his first film, *Love's Sacrifice*, in 1925. But his further plan was shattered when Zhou Ziqi passed away. In 1927, Cheng finally completed his second feature, an adaptation of the classic *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Unfortunately, the film's poor reception pushed Cheng out of film production and Peacock altogether.³⁸ After Peacock, he managed two second-run cinemas and invested in restaurants and a department store. When the war broke out in 1937, Cheng accepted a job offer from the KMT to build railways



First National Pictures

LEAD-OTHERS FOLLOW

LEADING EXHIBITORS SHOW
First National Attractions
BECAUSE THEY GET THE MAXIMUM REVENUE
AT THE BOX OFFICE

品出司公片影家國一第國美

由片影之貴名最界世為確

理經家獨司公影電雀孔國中

白謹年錫朱理經總

SOLE AGENTS IN CHINA

PEACOCK MOTION PICTURE CORPORATION

LUTHER M. JEE - GENERAL MANAGER

116 SINZA ROAD SHANGHAI



FIGURE 20.4. Peacock Motion Picture Corporation was sole agent for First National Pictures, boasting a full-page English-language announcement.

in southwestern China,³⁹ where the government set up its temporary capital in Chungking to continue its war with Japan. He remained there until the end of the war. After the ensuing civil war between the KMT and the Communist Party concluded in 1949, Cheng moved to Taiwan, following the retreat of the KMT from the mainland. He became manager of the Taipei branch of China Travel Agency, a KMT government office.⁴⁰ In Taiwan, he quit film completely and kept a low profile the rest of his life.

China Cinema Year Book was published nearly a century ago. Despite the long duration, Cheng's image as a mover and shaker is clear, to the extent that his visibility eclipsed the contributions of the other two editors, Chen Dingxiu and Gan Yazi. Gan was a key staff member and scriptwriter at Peacock while Chen was Cheng's spouse and business partner. Chen Dingxiu (1900–52) was one of the first female college graduates in China and a celebrated student leader in the 1919 May Fourth movement, a massive student and worker protest that fought for national autonomy and equality. Chen was a versatile and prolific writer; she composed fiction and was active on stage. She married Cheng in 1924 and helped him realize his film ambitions, including coediting the first-ever cinema year book. She also worked on the titles of their first production, *Love's Sacrifice* (1925). But their marriage became estranged as Cheng had extramarital relationships. When Cheng followed the KMT to Taiwan, Chen remained in China with their four daughters.

The careers of Cheng Shuren and Xu Zhuodai, author of *On Photoplay*, are representative of study-abroad students returning to China who later made their mark on the country's developing cinema industry and culture.⁴¹ Such figures played a key role in the formation of the early Chinese film industry. These study-abroad returnees helped build the institution of cinema in China.⁴² Cheng studied education and film in the States while Xu went to Japan to learn science and sports. Together with many others who shared similar paths, they built up the transnational network of the Chinese film industry during this time, even though this network seemed limited in scope because they were study-abroad students who became cultural brokers upon repatriation. They were energetic but did not transform themselves into industrialists, unlike the Shaw brothers, who started their studio Tianyi in 1925, making low-budget costume dramas and growing into the vertically integrated Shaws Movietown after World War II. The kind of circuits and work the student returnees started were provisional and short term, lacking staying power in most instances. Everything Cheng and Xu did tended to be short lived. In the case of Cheng, he would settle down as a government employee, leaving his film dream and his family completely behind.

On Photoplay and *China Cinema Year Book 1927* are foundational texts for the formation of China's film industry. They are conscious of their transnational status, given the authors' foreign education and linguistic skills. Yet they intend to establish a solid national platform for the film industry in China, to meld the



FIGURE 20.5. From left: Cheng Shuren, Chen Dingxiu, and Gan Yazhi.

technology, craft, and business models of filmmaking with the stories and values of Chinese tradition. These two works have an extendable status, in that they could be transformed to a digital existence and become known far beyond their former intended audience. It would be nice to think that this fortuitous transition comes from their historical importance, but as mentioned above, this is just serendipitous good luck. Other periodicals and books published in the 1920s or earlier are at least as important, but they could not be digitized for various reasons. This indicates the unevenness of digital availability, which, in the case of our subject,

early Chinese cinema, remains precarious and unpredictable, especially given the strong possibility that there are “historic” sources that have not yet even been discovered. We must be open to the chance of encountering new materials, and more sensitive to the provenance of materials we already have.

Our own experiences with digitizing newspaper sources to databases is rich, however fitful. In reconstructing the Chinese filmscape in the first part of the twentieth century, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and her research partners targeted coverage of film exhibition in both Chinese and English newspapers and subsequently published two open-access online databases for movies and film criticism, one in Chinese and the other in English.⁴³ This was rewarding, in that press coverage in Hong Kong and three other Chinese cities, including Guangzhou, Hangzhou, and Tianjin, is now accessible worldwide. However, in numerous instances, relevant figures and coverage were not included in these databases. These missing links sometimes are crucial in filling the gaps and lapses in our historical narrative. Due to inevitable flaws in ocular scanning by humans, search keywords, or language renderings, it is possible and likely that key developments have fallen between the cracks. As Ramona Curry writes, we must have “a willingness to accept that despite recently much broadened access to historical resources, some knowledge gaps must remain unfilled.”⁴⁴ This is a remark Curry made about her “detective” work on the enigmatic Benjamin Brodsky, one of the major producers in early Chinese cinema, who sometimes deliberately exaggerated and attenuated names, dates, and places to tell a taller tale. We must bear this acceptance in mind when we decide what to write into the story and how to curate the vagaries of an ever elongated, diffused past of the medium. There will always be new materials to be excavated and old facts to be expanded, if not amended. A digital library for world cinema history is a good starting point.

NOTES

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1. There are only a few complete surviving prints from the 1920s or before; therefore, Chinese film history’s introduction to the world concentrated on the films made in the 1930s, the so-called “classics of Chinese cinema.” Zhen Zhang’s *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) is the first in-depth study on early cinema in China.

2. See Wong Ain-ling, “Foreword” [Qianyan], in *Chinese Cinema: Tracing the Origins* [Zhongguo dianying zuo yuan], ed. Wong Ain-ling (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Film Archive, 2011), 4–5; Li Daoxin, *The Cultural History of Chinese Cinema (1905–2004)* [Zhongguo dianying wenhua shi (1905–2004)] (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2004).

3. Stardom was the main focus in the film industry at the time. Stars, male and female, foreign and domestic, always occupied center stage in film news and reviews. China’s star power was invested in Ruan Lingyu (1910–35), whose premature death resulted in nationwide mourning. See the feature-length biopic of Ruan, *Center Stage* (dir. Stanley Kwan, 1992), and Richard J. Meyer, *Ruan Ling-Yu: The Goddess of Shanghai* (Hong Kong University Press, 2005).

4. Shanghai Library, Zhou Deming, and Zhang Wei, eds., *Republican Film Magazine Compilation* (Beijing: National Library Press, 2013).

5. Thanks to Yongchun Fu for providing this information.

6. Note that the other term *yingxi* in the title *Yingxi xue* is the same as that in the title of *Motion Picture Review*, *Yingxi zazhi*. In the 1920s, both *yingxi* and *dianying* were used to name motion pictures. Some scholars translated *yingxi* as “shadowplay,” an attempt to establish an indigenous provenance for motion pictures. Yeh has contested the translated term *shadowplay* by offering *photoplay* as an alternative, taking into account the exhibition histories in Hong Kong and South China. See Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, “Translating *Yingxi*: Chinese Film Genealogy and Early Cinema in Hong Kong,” in *Early Film Culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Republican China: Kaleidoscopic Histories*, ed. Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, 19–50 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

7. Zhang Yingjin calls it *film studies* in his *Chinese National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 50.

8. A photocopy of *On Photoplay* was reprinted in 2018, along with a few other volumes in a series called “Historical Materials of Chinese Cinema” published in 2018. See Xu Zhuodai, *On Photoplay* (Beijing: Dongfong chubanshe, 2018). This series is available in the library of Princeton University.

9. Duxiu is a database of Chinese academic materials including books, journals, newspapers, dissertations, conference papers, and other formats of documents in multiple disciplines from the 1930s to the present. Millions of e-resources are available in full text at <https://www.duxiu.com/>.

10. See <https://archive.org/details/chinese-cinema-year-book-1927-01>.

11. See the digitized December 1926 issue of *Silver Light* at <https://archive.org/details/SliverLight-1926-12>.

12. Formal Chinese writing on film in Hong Kong began as early as in 1924 in a weekly column called “Film Corner” (*Ying Hei Ho*) in *The Chinese Mail* (est. 1872). *The Chinese Mail* is the Chinese edition of *The China Mail* (1845–1974), one of the earliest English papers published in Hong Kong. Between 1923 and 1925, to satisfy the booming exhibition business in Hong Kong, *The China Mail* had a film column under three different names: “The Films,” “Cinema Chatter,” and “Screenland.” “Film Corner” was added to correspond to the film column in the English-language *China Mail*. It ran a total of thirty-eight issues before it was closed down in 1925. From then on, *Silver Light* filled the gap to become the leading voice in local film criticism. For a detailed analysis of “Film Corner,” see Ting-yan Cheung and Pablo Sze-pang Tsoi, “Indigenized Practice: Hong Kong Cinema in the 1920s,” in Yeh, *Early Film Culture*, 71–100. All thirty-eight articles can be previewed in Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, Feng Xiaocai, Liu Hui, and Poshek Fu, eds., *Early Chinese Film Database* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Baptist University Library, 2015), <http://digital.lib.hkbu.edu.hk/chinesefilms/>.

13. Courtesy of Enoch Yee Lok Tam’s observation.

14. The rights holder Lü Xianguang, the author’s son, asked for a price beyond reason, complaining that his father’s work has been underappreciated and never received due recognition.

15. For more coverage on early cinema in Taiwan during the colonial era (1900–1940s), please see Lee Daw-Ming and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, eds., *Historical Source Database of Cinema Studies on Taiwan Film History* (Taipei: Taipei National University of the Arts, 2016).

16. Like Cheng Shuren, Lü Su-shang attempted to provide a complete record of cinema since its first introduction to Taiwan, almost the same time as it became Japan’s colony in 1895.

17. Xu Zhuodai, *On Photoplay* (Shanghai: Hua Xian Shang Ye She Tu Shu Bu, 1924), 15–16. See also <https://archive.org/details/photoplay-1924-12>.

18. Fan Boqun, ed., *Hua ji da shi*, Xu Zhuodai [*The Master of Comedy*, Xu Zhuodai] (Taipei: Yeqiang, 1993). His pen name “Zhuo Fuling” (similar to Zhuo Bielin, a sinified pronunciation of “Chaplin”) pays respect to the comedy giant.

19. See Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Enoch Yee Lok Tam, “Forming the Movie Field: Film Literati in Republican China,” in Yeh, *Early Film Culture*, 244–76. A good example of Chinese slapstick is *Laborer’s Love* (dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1922), a clever burlesque involving traditional Chinese medicine. This film was recently restored by Bologna Cinema Ritrovato to 4K standard, as a signpost of centennial development.

20. Christopher Rea writes of “‘cultural entrepreneurship,’ a multifaceted approach to culture as business, embodied by inventive and entrepreneurial figures who actively engaged in multiple forms of cultural production, from fiction writing and translation to drama, filmmaking, radio broadcasting, and consumer product manufacturing.” Christopher G. Rea, “Comedy and Cultural Entrepreneurship in Xu Zhuodai’s *Huaji Shanghai*,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 20, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 40–91.

21. David Pierce writes for the MHDL, “The Year Books were published by industry trade magazines, and there was a tacit understanding that the purchase of ads would help ensure that no negative coverage would appear”—a quid pro quo between the industry and the publisher, a win-win outcome. See <https://mediahist.org/collections/yearbooks/>.

22. Eric Hoyt, “Arclights and Zoom Lenses: Searching for Influential Exhibitors in Film History’s Big Data,” in Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, eds., *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 88. See also Eric Hoyt, *Ink-Stained Hollywood: The Triumph of American Cinema’s Trade Press* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.122>.

23. For instance, Yoshino Sugawara in her book on Republican Shanghai’s film culture offers a thorough socioeconomic guide to the film industry, including its business models, technological advancements, and ownership of the movie theaters. Sugawara, *Eigakan no nakano kindai: eiga kankyaku no Shanghai shi* [*Modernity in the Space of Cinema: A History of Film Spectators in Shanghai*] (Kyoto: Koyoshobo, 2019). Yongchun Fu also relied on the source materials in *China Cinema Year Book* when he studied the contributions of foreigners to the Shanghai film industry, in Yongchun Fu, *The Early Transnational Chinese Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 2019).

24. Fu, *Early Transnational Chinese Film Industry*.

25. Cheng Shuren, Gan Yazhi, and Chen Dingxiu, eds., *China Cinema Year Book 1927* (Shanghai: The China Year Book, 1927), 17.

26. Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, “Wenyi and the Branding of Early Chinese Film,” *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 6, no. 1 (2012): 66.

27. For decades, *The Stormy Night* was believed to be lost. But in 2011, a print was discovered in the storage of the late Japanese director Kinugasa Teinosuke, who was presented with a copy of the film as a gift by Zhu Shouju when he visited Shanghai in the late 1920s. It is now in the collection of the National Film Center, Tokyo.

28. Yingjin Zhang, ed., *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1943* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

29. “List of Pictures” section 33, in Cheng et al., *China Cinema Year Book 1927*. Other sections from the *Year Book* are as follows:

13. Casting Directors

14. Directors and Their Productions

15. Assistant Directors

16. Cameramen and Their Productions

[. . .]

18. Foreign Producers

19. Productions Made by Foreign Producers

20. Supervisors of Productions [Signed picture of Anna May Wong, “Orientially Yours”]

21. Photoplay Writers and Their Productions

22. Cartoonists

[. . .]

32. Translators and Pictures Retitled

[...]

34. Offices of Different Companies
35. Reports of Chinese Pictures from Foreign Markets
36. Theaters in Foreign Countries
37. Buyers of Chinese Pictures for Domestic Markets
38. Buyers of Chinese Pictures for Foreign Markets
39. Motion Picture Organizations
40. Schools of Acting
41. Motion Picture Publications
42. Chinese Censorship
43. Local and Police Regulations
44. Past and Present Legal Advisors of Producers
45. Dealers in Motion Picture Equipments and Apparatus [*sic*]
46. Chinese Productions (Arranged According to Producers)
47. Projectionists

30. The literature on Chinese study-abroad returnees is wide. See Yung Wing, *My Life in China and America* (New York: Henry Holt, 1909). This is cited in Barbara Austen's "Yung Wing's Dream: The Chinese Educational Mission, 1872–1881" with a wonderful picture of the first group of Chinese students arriving in Connecticut in 1872. Connecticut History.org, 2019. See also Chen Yun-Chung, "The Limits of Brain Circulation: Chinese Returnees and Technological Development in Beijing," *Pacific Affairs* 81, no. 2 (2008): 195–215. A broad view can be found in Teresa Brawner Bevis and Christopher Lucas, *International Students in American Colleges and Universities: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

31. The Boxer Indemnity resulted from the Eight-Powers' war with Qing to tackle the Boxer Rebellion in 1899. It was one of the many "unequal treaties" between China and the world. It bound the Qing court to pay 450 million taels, or 67.5 million pounds, to the eight foreign powers at an interest rate of 4 percent for repayment over forty years. In 1908, the US decided to use its share to fund education, including scholarships for Chinese students in the US, as well as the building of Tsinghua University, Beijing.

32. According to Zhang Wei, in his fifth year in Tsinghua, Cheng was impressed by a Hollywood movie and decided to pursue a career in filmmaking. Zhang Wei, "Cheng Shuren: The First Generation of Overseas Professional Returnees in the Republican Film Field" [Minguo yingtian de diyi dai 'zhuan ye haiguo'—Cheng Shuren qi ren qi shi], in *A Collection of Film Essays: A Dusty Corner of Modern Chinese Films [Tanying xiaoji—Zhongguo xiandai yingtian de shen feng yi yu]* (Taipei: Xiuwei chubun, 2009), 3–5.

33. Zhang Wei, "Cheng Shuren," 6–7.

34. Liu Lu and Kong Lingqi, "Ershi shiji ershi niandai Kongque dianying gongci chutan" [A Brief Study on Peacock Motion Pictures Corporation in the 1920s], *Dandai dianying (Contemporary Cinema)*, no. 9 (2019): 119–20. According to a news report, Zhou was invited to this joint venture to help US manufacturers (e.g., American Textile Company and others) and the Dragon Film Corporation sell products in China; see "Big China Companies: Financed with American Gold," *South China Morning Post*, January 3, 1923, 7.

35. In January 1923, Zhou and Cheng returned to China and put Peacock on track by importing Hollywood movies. Zhang Wei, "Cheng Shuren," 8.

36. *Ibid.*

37. "Translators and Pictures Retitled," Section 32, in Cheng et al., *China Cinema Year Book 1927*.
38. Zhang Wei, "Cheng Shuren," 16–19. Peacock was still active when Cheng quit. It signed an exclusive deal with RKO on distributing RKO sound pictures. Courtesy of Yongchun Fu.
39. Zhang Wei, "Cheng Shuren," 20–21.
40. *Who's Who in Taiwan* (Taipei: Guoguang Press, 1947), 196.
41. Japan was one of the most popular destinations for study-abroad students in the late Qing and early Republican period. Lu Xun, the most eminent modern Chinese writer, was a study-abroad medical student in Sendai, Japan.
42. See Ramona Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877–1960): The Transpacific American Film Entrepreneur—Part One, Making A Trip thru China," *Journal of American–East Asian Relations* 18 (2011): 58–94. Brodsky had many Chinese study-abroad friends among his contacts in Hong Kong, Shanghai, and the US. See especially fig. 20.2 on p. 71, "Directors of the China Cinema Company," image originally published in *The Moving Picture World*, vol. 24, no. 2 (April 10, 1913): 224, https://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/movingpicturewor24newy_0238.
43. Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, Feng Xiaocai, Liu Hui, and Poshek Fu, eds., *Early Chinese Film Database* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Baptist University Library, 2015), <http://digital.lib.hkbu.edu.hk/chinese/films/>; Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, ed., *A History of Film Exhibition and Reception in Colonial Hong Kong (1897 to 1925)* (Hong Kong: Lingnan University, 2021), <https://digital.library.ln.edu.hk/en/projects/flim/>.
44. Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky," 63.

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