

Melodrama as Vernacular Modernism in China: The Case of D. W. Griffith

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In an article on the pitfalls of cross-cultural analysis, film scholar Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh has proposed replacing the term “melodrama” with “wenyi,” as it can “locate an intrinsic and perhaps more illuminating concept than melodrama to explain Chinese-language cinemas” (Yeh, 2009: 438). In Yeh’s view:

Wenyi and melodrama are literally discordant: letters and arts (wenyi) vs. musical theatre (melo-drama). One emphasizes literary value and artistic taste; popular fiction that aspires to serious literature. The other offers the theatrical display and emotional excitement of the sort found in stage musicals (cf. Broadway, operetta, vaudeville). (Yeh, 2009: 445)

Yeh is not the first to highlight the concept of wenyi. As early as 1985, Cai Guorong had already raised this issue. For him:

Chinese wenyi melodrama developed along two lines: those works that deal with family relationships and ethics, and those that depict romances. [...] First, films of this genre use contemporary or recent society as a backdrop; second, they deal with human emotions and are therefore lyrical to an extent. (Cai, 1985; in Zhang, 2012: 25)

Yeh has convincingly shown how wenyi connects with and departs from melodrama, and in particular, her historical account of wenyi is a highly valuable tool in interpreting contemporary Chinese films. By proposing to substitute wenyi for melodrama, Yeh has pointed to a set of conceptual tensions underpinning the term melodrama, which is in turn relevant to several issues, such as translation and cultural identity in the aftermath of colonialism and imperialism. Indeed, in the case of Chinese generic categorization, it is hard to find a synonymous term for melodrama. Currently the most common Chinese terms used to describe the films using melodramatic narratives include “qingjie ju” (films focusing on narrative), “yanqing ju” (films emphasizing the romantic plot), “jiating lunli pian” (films exploring family ethics), or “wenyi pian” (letters and arts) (Lu, 2001; Berry and Farquhar, 2006; Teo, 1997). Yeh’s claim for a non-Western theory is one way to reduce the influences of cultural colonialism and imperialism in Hong Kong and to highlight Chinese cultural heritage.

However, while Yeh indeed touches upon some crucial issues, some problems are left unresolved. What remains problematic in her analysis of wenyi and melodrama is that she fails to adequately account for the intimate connection between Hollywood melodrama and Chinese films using similar motifs in their large narrative and thematic structures in the 1920s and 1930s. After all, the impact of classic Hollywood cinema on Chinese cinema can hardly be ignored (Hansen, 1999; Neri, 2010). Furthermore, Yeh's argument suggests that melodrama is only relevant to explaining films of the Euro-American style, which looks implausible if we take into account the claim that melodrama is a cultural form developed in response to modernity (Brooks, 1976), and that the melodramatic imagination allows different cultures and cinemas to participate.

It may be instructive to bring forward Christine Gledhill's interpretation of melodrama. Gledhill argues that melodrama should be conceived "first, as an early cultural machine for the mass production of popular genres capable of summoning up and putting into place different kinds of audience; second, as a modality, understood as a culturally conditioned mode of perception and aesthetic articulation" (2000: 227). By interpreting melodrama as a "cultural machine" and a "modality," Gledhill has identified melodrama as a virtual "genre-producing machine," a machine that "generates" further genres (2000: 227-229) rather than an integral genre that has developed in and of itself over the past. As such, melodramatic structures can become relevant to a wide range of categories in the Chinese context. More importantly, the mass reception of melodramas should be located in a historical and cultural context. Melodrama serves to draw large audiences with different backgrounds but is locally produced and perceived in culturally specific ways.

Therefore, the danger with Yeh's argument is that it can easily reduce melodrama to a pure, single, and closed genre. Yet this is counter to the way in which Teo (1997) views melodrama and wenyi. For Teo, wenyi pian can be seen as a particular subgenre of melodrama, one which has its origins in "wenming xi" (civilized dramas) and the literature of the "yuanyang hu ie pai" (Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School). **[1]** I subscribe to the notion that melodrama is intimately tied to the emergence of modern life, and that the concept of melodrama is globally relevant, following arguments developed recently by Miriam Hansen.

In her study on classical cinema as vernacular modernism, Hansen argues that "modernism encompasses a whole range of cultural and artistic practices that register, respond to and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity, including a paradigmatic transformation of the conditions under which art is produced, transmitted and consumed" (1999: 66). Hansen's argument is primarily about

Hollywood cinema's hegemony as the "first global vernacular" (1999: 68). Later, Hansen introduces the term "vernacular modernism" into the study of Shanghai silent film. For her, "Shanghai cinema of the 1920s and 30s represents a distinct brand of vernacular modernism, one that evolved in a complex relation to American – and other foreign – models while drawing on and transforming Chinese traditions in theater, literature, graphic and print culture, both modernist and popular" (2000: 13).

The term "vernacular modernism" used in this article overlaps with Hansen's, but extends into the deeper layers of the complicated history during the first decades of the 20th century in China. I argue that the critical acceptance of Hollywood films in China during the first three decades of the 20th century contributes to the emergence and development of vernacular modernism. If we want to understand how melodrama has functioned as vernacular modernism and as a reflective and reactive discourse on the experience of modernity, we need a critical methodology that combines melodrama, vernacular modernism and historical-cultural analysis. Thus, this article focuses on the Chinese exhibition and reception of D. W. Griffith's melodrama films in the 1920s and the impact of Griffith on Chinese film history.

One may wonder: why Griffith and why now? My first concern comes from the fact that Griffith was one of the most influential Anglo-American filmmakers in China, one whose films were so popular in the early 1920s that film scholar Zheng Junli (1911-1969) identified the phenomenon as "Griffith fever" in *A Brief History of Chinese Cinema* (1936). From 1922 to 1924, eleven films by Griffith were shown, mostly in Shanghai theaters, including *Judith of Bethulia* (1914), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Intolerance* (1916), *The Hearts of the World* (1918), *The Girl Who Stayed at Home* (1919), *Broken Blossoms* (1919), *The Greatest Question* (1919), *Way Down East* (1920), *The Love Flower* (1920), *Orphans of the Storm* (1921) and *One Exciting Night* (1922).

Second, the collective memory of Griffith was erased in China, in accordance with the Cultural Revolution and the campaigns against Western influence. Griffith's works were devalued; his influence was also devalued conceptually through a connection with simplistic melodramatic binary coding, and with Western colonialism and imperialism. Since qualities such as high-Chinese unity, the national cultural heritage and national identity were highly valued, Griffith's name has remained in the periphery until more recent times. Chen Jianhua's 2006 article "David W. Griffith and Early Chinese Cinema" is the only detailed piece of research on Griffith and early Chinese films. He observes the influence of Griffith on film advertisement and newspaper film criticism in China, which has promoted not only foreign but also domestic films. More recently, in her 2012 article on Chinese melodrama, Zhang Zhen also describes briefly the

connection between Griffith and early Chinese narrative film.

The third reason concerns the significant role of Griffith in film history. Griffith was a master of the sensational melodrama in the silent era. According to Thomas Schatz, Griffith established for melodrama the fundamental “style, tone, and substance in films like *Hearts of the World* (1918), *Broken Blossoms*, *True-Heart Suzie* (1919), *Way Down East* (1920), and *Orphans of the Storm* (1922)” (1981: 222). Thomas Elsaesser claims that “ever since DW Griffith, there is no mystery about the importance of the family in mainstream cinema either as representation or as addressee” (1996: 122), which suggests on the one hand that the family relationship constitutes one of the dominant themes of Griffith’s cinema, and his success in bringing family issues to films on the other.

In what way can we argue that Griffith’s melodrama has contributed to the development of Chinese vernacular modernism? At the first and also the most basic level, we have to consider the historical distribution, exhibition and marketing of his films, as modern practice. Given modernity in China being an uneven process subject to spatial-temporal fluctuations, I will frame my discussion within Shanghai modernity. This position has to do with, on the one hand, the hybrid and cosmopolitan nature of Shanghai, a city that is more advanced in the modernization process, and on the other the fact that the exhibition of Griffith’s films was mostly taking place in Shanghai. Before we move on to the question of how Griffith’s movies were marketed and promoted to Chinese audiences, we first need to consider who constituted the major audience of melodrama films in the 1920s. These two questions are interrelated, and both are crucial to our understanding of the mentality of Chinese audiences. It is largely assumed that the majority of regular cinemagoers were foreigners living in China and well-educated Chinese people. However, Zhang Yingjin has noted a pattern of transformation in terms of audiences:

In the early years, traditional theater fans might venture side trips into the exotic spectacles offered by Western shadowplays. Typically, these early shorts featured smiling female dancers, a woman bathing in a tub, passengers on a giant steamship, a bicycle race involving a head-on collision, and the police and passers-by chasing a troublemaker on the street (Leyda 1972: 2; Y. Zheng 1982: 1-2). [...] As time went by, students, clerks and other educated urbanites were no longer content with action-filled slapstick. Instead, they would join the gentry and other urban leisure classes in appreciating the screen equivalents of butterfly stories in the 1920s. The adaptation of traditional narratives of legendary heroes and historical figures further

accustomed an audience of the literate and the illiterate alike to watching films as a satisfactory experience. (Zhang, 2004: 18)

Zhang's account contains two very solid points: the regular cinemagoers were not limited to the upper classes but included both the literate and the illiterate, and the films that attracted audiences' interest were largely romantic stories ("the screen equivalents of butterfly stories") and history ("narratives of [...] historical figures"). A closer look at the first point reveals a link between cinema and vernacular modernism. The second telling point indicates a strong link between the taste of the target audience and the strategic step made by the Shanghai film industry to promote moviegoing as part of a modern lifestyle.

Leo Ou-fan Lee has examined the ways in which urban venues including theaters, magazines, newspapers, and city guides contributed to the expansion of the market potential of the movies. According to Lee, Shanghai audiences' taste and viewing habits have been largely shaped by print culture – in particular the Mandarin Ducks and Butterfly school of popular fiction (Lee, 1999: 84). In a similar vein, Jay Leyda observes the vernacular taste exhibited by Chinese viewers, "the Chinese spectator's love of tradition, with all the security and serenity that tradition represents" (Leyda, 1972: 49). Leyda acknowledges that:

[T]hese 'old subjects' were so extremely popular with film audiences then that we are forced to look beneath the 'escapist' surface and beyond the ticket-buyer's wish to forget for a couple of hours the huge political issues and the prospect of disturbing change that were coming down upon Shanghai. (1972: 49-50)

Although Leyda was referring to the old popular sources, such as "Peking opera, fairy tales, myths, and folklore" (1972: 49), which largely inspired the Chinese films made in the 1920s, he also points in the direction from which we can understand the underlying reasons why Chinese audiences favored Griffith. Characterized by high emotionalism, stark ethical conflict, and the focus on the family home as the site in which conflict takes place, Griffith's melodrama films often side with the powerless and the oppressed. The interpretation fits easily into a certain collective imagination of a past China, as the society was under pressures of modernity and the continuing threat of colonialism and imperialism. Griffith's melodrama films were remote in the sense of not being about China, yet were relevant in some way to the Chinese situation.

If Griffith's films function as global vernacular, then it is the way his films were translated and reconfigured in their Chinese context of reception that connects with Chinese vernacular. Therefore, it is important to briefly examine how the alien entertainment form and popular culture – Griffith's

films in this case – became established. I argue that the process of domesticating and localizing Griffith's films can barely be separated from the popularity of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly school in the 1910s and 1920s.

The "Butterfly" genre is characterized by its sensationalism, sentimentality, patterned plots and politically and morally conservative stance, in comparison with the May Fourth New Culture that carries the idea of revolution in order to realize the goals of anti-imperialist and anti-feudal enlightenment. **[2]** The taste and the viewing habits of Shanghai audiences were in part shaped by this school, which led to the acceptance of melodrama. The year 1924 in particular witnessed the increasing involvement of the "Butterfly" writers in the Chinese film industry and in making melodrama films. *Yuli Hun* (*The Spirit of the Jade Pear*) by Xu Chenya (1889-1937) was adapted into film by Zhen Zhengqiu in 1924. Bao Tianxiao (1876-1973) was appointed by the Mingxing studio (Star Motion Picture studio) as a scriptwriter and wrote seven screenplays (Zhu and Rosen, 2010: 243).

One needs to be aware, though, that since the May Fourth Movement, there have been two major strands of melodrama. One type is moralist (known for the conservative position and intimately tied with the *wenyi* art), represented by Zheng Zhengqiu who turned to Confucianism for resolution. The other type is exemplified by Sun Yu's revolutionary romanticism (known as leftist melodrama), which looks for primary sources from the Marxist canon. **[3]** Two kinds of audiences can therefore be delineated, both linked to the two strands of filmmaking. One embraces the "Butterfly" tradition, which on the one hand reconstitutes the aura of traditional moral codes and glorifies the traditions, and on the other hand is suspicious of foreign ideology. The other type is more influenced by the principles of the May Fourth Movement, which awakens the conception of individual rights and freedom. However, these two strands are not as exclusive from each other as at first sight. In this regard, I would like to reassert Zhang Yingjin's point that "rather than opposing itself to realism and romanticism favored by May Fourth literature, melodrama combined elements from both and provided leftists and the non-leftists alike with an effective form in which to address social problems while articulating versions of idealism, be they Marxist or conservative in nature" (Zhang, 2004: 105). The leftist tradition in China became more powerful from the 1930s onwards, and therefore the influence of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School was still dominant in the 1920s. In the remainder of this article, I continue to argue that Griffith's relation to the literary genre of Mandarin Duck and Butterfly casts light on vernacular modernism. It is the local appropriation of Griffith that counts as vernacular education. The "Butterfly" School played one of the most important roles – if not the most important role – in the

process of appropriating Griffith.

The leading literary figures from the “butterfly” school endeavored to balance the distance between the vernacular taste of the mass viewers and the alienated texts. One of the distinguished fiction writers and translators in the “Butterfly” school, Zhou Shoujuan (1894-1968), was one of the first and most influential of those who introduced Griffith to Chinese viewers, when he was appointed chief editor of *Shenbao’s* [4] literary supplement, “Ziyou tan” (Free Speech). [5] In his article in *Shenbao* dated 16 December 1919, Zhou remarked on the great complexity or elaboration of plot, setting, theme and thoughts in *Hearts of the World*. He was deeply impressed with Griffith’s prime motivation for making films that informed a very general solicitude for the promotion of ethics and a shared understanding. On 12 February 1920, he published another article in *Shenbao* to praise Griffith’s artistic achievements. For Zhou, Griffith surpassed Harold Lloyd in turning films into an experience of enlightenment, more than “just” entertainment, judging by *Intolerance’s* depiction of the oppressed and exploited people under capitalism. Furthermore, after *Way Down East* was released for the fourth time in Shanghai, Zhou translated into Chinese the original novel on which the film was based. The book, illustrated with images from the film, was printed by the Shanghai Dadong Shuju press in 1926.

Not only were “Butterfly” writers and influential literary figures promoting Griffith’s films through newspapers and magazines, but many foreign film plot scripts were rendered in literary Chinese to cater to the taste of Chinese viewers. To further illustrate how foreign films have been tailored for the vernacular taste of the Chinese audiences, we now turn to the translation of Griffith’s film titles, which apparently marked them with the “Butterfly” label. This cross-cultural translation can in principle be viewed as the third factor that led to the local appropriation of Griffith. In a pragmatic sense, the translation indicates the negotiation between the diverse cultural resources that shaped this new cinematic culture.

Let me offer a very brief overview of the titles that have been translated into Chinese: *Judith of Bethulia* – *Jiefu jiuguo ji* (*Chaste Wife Saves the Nation*); *The Birth of a Nation* – *Chongjian guangming* (*See the Light Again*); *Intolerance* – *Dangtong fayi* (*Wiping Out Dissenters*); *The Hearts of the World* – *Tiexue yuanyang* (*The Blood and Iron Mandarin Duck Couple*); *His Majesty, the American* – *Taizi jiuguoji* (*Prince Saves the Country*); *The Girl Who Stayed at Home* – *Ouzhan fengliu shi* (*Romance in the European War*); *Broken Blossoms* – *Canhua lei* (*Tears of a Withered Flower*); *The Greatest Question* – *Zuida zhi wenti* (*The Greatest Question*); *Way Down East* – *Lai hun* (*Repudiate a Marriage Contract*); *The Love Flower* – *Xiaonv chenzhou* (*Dutiful Daughter Sinks the Boat*); *Orphans of the Storm* – *Luanshi guchu* (*Orphans of the Chaotic Time*); *An*

Exciting Night – Kongbu de yiye (A Night of Horror). The Chinese-translated titles seem to confirm Leyda's point about Chinese audiences' favorites themes: one is the family-ethics film that often included elements of romance; another is the historical film with nation as its narrative focus. Moreover, it is common that the Chinese titles borrowed language from classic Chinese poems, as "Butterfly" writers did. For instance, *Canhua lei* (as translation of *Broken Blossoms*) was derived from a poem by Shi Weibai from the Song Dynasty. He wrote, "Hudie youyi wei hua zui, canhua lei zai shuizhong jian" (literally meaning that while the butterfly is attracted to the flower, the broken flower is weeping under the water). Butterfly and broken flower are used metaphorically in the poem to refer to the unrequited love. In a way, the translated Chinese title points to the Chinese interpretation of the film *Broken Blossoms*.

In the process of creating the value of Griffith's films – by means of literary and cultural translation – the exotic and foreign have become localized and appropriated. A habitualized sensitivity was therefore developed, shaped and refined. I suggest that Griffith fever lies in the cohabitation of exotic and local, classical and vernacular, modern and traditional, which created a shared space for cultural sensibilities, common sense, collective memories and structures of feeling. In this regard, we also note that society's perception is not a passive reflection of whatever shapes the life of its citizens, but creates and recreates cultural and social trends. This became particularly evident in two cases – *Broken Blossoms* and *Way Down East*. Therefore, we move from the first level to a more symbolic level that articulates the uncertainties and anxieties in the minds of Chinese people caused by the specific historical situation. A study of Griffith at the symbolic level presents two clashes: the conflict between China and West and the one between traditional and modern values.

Let us begin with the case of *Broken Blossoms*, one of the first films to bring to focus a tragic love story between a Chinese man – who is also the main character – and a Caucasian girl. In the film, Cheng Huan (Richard Barthelmess) is a Chinese man who aspires to spread Buddhism in the Western world. When he is confronted with a reality in London that differs from his initial expectations, his ambitions start to fade away. When he meets Lucy Burrows (Lillian Gish) – who is often abused by her father, Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp) – he feels the urge to provide shelter for her. One day, after being brutally beaten by her father again, Lucy runs away to hide at Cheng's store. Cheng takes care of Lucy and protects her from her father's fists. The two characters start to develop an implicit romantic bond, until Lucy is accidentally found by an acquaintance of her father. The story ends very dramatically – Lucy does not survive her father's iron fist, Battling Burrows is killed by Cheng and then commits suicide after having carried Lucy's body to his place. Despite the

fact that the Chinese character is played by a Caucasian man in “yellowface” makeup, and with some cultural misinterpretations in the film, Griffith created perhaps one of the first major and sympathetic Chinese images, seeking to break away from the conventional narrative of yellow peril, which was prevalent in Hollywood cinema. While Battling Burrows is portrayed as an evil character brutalizing his own daughter, Cheng appears to be a man of peace and honor influenced by his Chinese cultural background.

Broken Blossoms was released in Shanghai in 1922 as *Canhua lei*. Interestingly enough, the distributor of the film came up with the slogan “zhongguo ren, xing ji renci” (the benevolent nature of the Chinese) – which was published in the newspapers – as a selling point to attract Chinese people to the cinema. It is important to note that the film was initially scheduled to be shown in theaters for one week, but after only three days it was withdrawn from circulation. This withdrawal was announced by the newspapers in an obscure manner, stating that the film was no longer on the running schedule due to some special reasons. When the film premiered in the cinema, audiences were provided with the complete original version. It was soon replaced by a cut and narratively inconsistent version with the scene of the Chinese man killing a Caucasian man removed. The film was further banned from circulation in Hong Kong. [6] The truth behind the abrupt cancellation and the cut version was exposed by Rui Kaizhi later, in *Shenbao* in 1923:

The intervention comes from outside, since the evil father with a British background certainly brings great lasting disgrace upon Britain; any citizen of the state – be it Chinese or British – should feel the same need for protecting the dignity of the country; any further imported films about Chinese should not deviate us from the spirit of this type of caution. (Rui, 1923)

[7]

Some Chinese viewers of the period considered Cheng Huan, the “Yellow Man,” as a positive image of Chinese in the West. Initially published in *Shenbao*, an anonymous article praised the film for its portrait of a pure love relationship: “Have we not seen enough films that were imported from abroad, wherein our people, whenever they were depicted, were (over half of them) found among gangsters and robbers. Only in *Canhua lei* could a Chinese perform noble and pure love. Can we not regard it as our honor?”

[8]

The cinematic construction of the ambiguous relationship between Lucy and Cheng Huan is a reflection of the anxiety of miscegenation, whilst the tragic ending is the inevitable result of the interracial romance. As Gina

Marchetti observes, “the narrative pattern most often associated with Hollywood dramas involving the ‘yellow peril’ features the rape or threat of rape of a Caucasian woman by a villainous Asian man” (Marchetti, 1993: 11). However, Griffith’s way of handling the intimate situations and the ritualistic suicide of the Chinese man could be interpreted differently in the Chinese context. According to this anonymous reviewer, the lack of physical involvement reflected Cheng’s nobility, which defined him as a man of noble character. As the ancient Chinese proverb goes, “junzi zuohuai buluan” (a man of noble character should be able to defy temptation), it is not surprising that Cheng’s repressed desire for Lucy could be viewed as a gesture of showing his respect. Moreover, because suicide was often seen as a positive action in terms of protecting one’s dignity and spiritedness, Cheng’s suicide was also perceived as his devotion to pure and noble love.

Critical voices also focused on issues such as Cheng Huan’s inappropriate clothing, the confusion of Buddhism with Confucianism, and the scenes of Chinatown filled with gambling and opium smoking. Among others, He Xinleng (1898-1933), the editor of the newspaper supplement *Shenbao*, claimed that *Broken Blossoms* in fact uttered a racial slur about Chinese people, given the film’s portrayal of a “white-faking-yellow” character who looks extremely unhealthy and decadent and acts like an emotionless puppet, the scene of gambling and opium smoking, as well as the indistinguishable categorizing of Chinese, Indian and Malaysian. Although He Xinleng acknowledged that Griffith’s impression of Chinese people was largely based on Chinatowns in the United States, he was outraged by the character chosen to represent the whole ethnic Chinese group. [9] In the same article he eagerly expressed the need for state censorship:

1) State government should strictly ban any film that contains a racial slur about Chinese people. Censorship should be applied to imported films, and action is needed when offensive images of the Chinese and China are spotted: either banning the film, or warning the production company; 2) Some Chinese immigrants might commit immoral acts, but diplomats and Chinese overseas students should take the responsibility to change the situation into a more promising direction; 3) Chinese film companies should endeavor to produce movies that depict Chinese virtue, and propagate them to Euro-American countries. The government should provide assistance. (He, 1925)

Leaving aside the question of whether *Broken Blossoms* offered a “positive” or “offensive” image of the Chinese, the thoughts of He certainly can be viewed as a direct result of the increasingly enhanced national consciousness arising from national crisis. The protest against offensive images of the Chinese in Hollywood films went hand in hand

with the resistance against imperialism in the 1920s and 1930s. Furthermore, it also reflected a close connection between the growing sense of nationalism and conceptions of the national on the level of cinematic representation, when film had become an important cultural industry in China whilst the media were considered an irreplaceable tool to engage people in both the public and private space.

Confronted with Western cultural and military threats, the Chinese started to question the validity and adaptability of traditional Chinese culture and values. This context alone could account for the wide appeal of *Way Down East*. The film tells a story of a beautiful but poor country girl, Anna Moore (Lillian Gish), being lured into a fake marriage by an upper-class man, Lennox Sanderson (Lowell Sherman), when she comes to visit her rich relatives in Boston. She becomes pregnant, but the baby dies soon after birth. Anna is left drifting, and later finds herself a job in a farm, where David Bartlett (Richard Barthelmess) – a farmer's son – falls in love with her. After David saves Anna from the freezing waterfall at the last minute, the film closes with their marriage – a notably happy ending.

While *Way Down East* was treated as an old-fashioned melodrama in the 1920s in the United States, **[10]** in China it touched on a number of sensitive issues arising from a changing society in which the acceptance of traditions was at stake. The established notions of partner selection and marriage in traditional Chinese society were questioned and challenged, when the idea of free love became more popular. The pursuit of romantic and free love was not something new, though. It came before the 20th century, if one takes a look at classical Chinese novels such as *Tale of the Western Chamber* or *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. Yet the old cultural practices such as a marriage of convenience, arranged marriage, or woman's faithfulness to her husband unto death were more frequently confronted in this changing social context. In line with the phenomenon, *Way Down East* was interpreted somehow as anti-feudal propaganda by the Chinese, as Zheng documented.

Zheng wrote that *Way Down East* was first shown in 1924, but in fact the film premiered in Shanghai in May 1922 and had run for one week in cinemas. Because of its popularity, the film was re-released in Shanghai in October. It was reported that President Li and his family went to the theater for this film, where it was screened in Beijing in 1922 in the Zhenguang movie house. The film was ultimately re-released three times. **[11]** To understand the historical popularity of this particular film, we can borrow Zheng's description:

The romance films were influenced considerably by American films, especially the early films of D. W. Griffith. In 1924, *Way Down East* arrived in China and caused a sensation among

spectators. Consequently, all the earlier Griffith films – *Orphans of the Storm*, *The Birth of a Nation*, *Broken Blossoms*, *The Fatal Marriage*, *Intolerance* and *A Flower of Love* – were re-released and re-evaluated. Theses such as Mr Cheng Bugao's "The Success of Griffith" in *Film Journal* were published. Scriptwriters, directors and actors were all eager to learn from *Way Down East*. The film was so successful because "what it depicts has a universal meaning and therefore conforms to Chinese social conditions..." (Mr San San, "Talking about Seven Griffith Films," *Film Journal* 2, 1924). [...] *Way Down East* and *Orphans of the Storm* reflected the difficulties of women in their struggle for free courtship in a semi-feudal society. Our social background against which our "romance films" appeared was quite similar to this. (Zheng, 1996: 1398)

In a very direct manner, Zheng Junli pointed out the influence Griffith had on Chinese romantic melodramas. Instead of detailing the connection between Griffith and Chinese family-ethics or romantic films, I focus on one case, *Gu'er jiu zu ji* (*Orphan Rescues Grandfather*, 1923), the first long film and serious drama, as well as one of the first domestic box office hits in China. The film was the production of Star Film Studio, owned by Luo Mingyou (1900–1967). [12] Luo brought *Way Down East* and *Orphans of the Storm* to Beijing audiences when he was running the Zhenguang movie house in Beijing (in fact, the survival of his theater owed much to these two films). More importantly, he turned the local theater into a nationwide film production company based in Shanghai. The company produced a large number of melodrama films, starting with *Orphan Rescues Grandfather*.

Orphan Rescues Grandfather was directed by Zhang Shichuan and written by Zheng Zhengqiu, who was often associated with Griffith. As Zhang Zhen notes, "[c]omparisons between Griffith and Zheng Zhengqiu, the 'father of Chinese cinema,' by critics then and now are legion, largely because of their shared interest in social and ethical issues or crises in the advent of modernity, as well as the desire to appeal to a wide audience through elaborate yet intelligible storytelling" (Zhang, 2012: 38). The dramatic story of *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* is set against the backdrop of a constantly changing society where the social and moral breakdown could be deeply felt. An initially happy and rich family with a newly married couple and father (Zheng Zhegu) is broken up after the husband dies in a horse-riding accident. While still suffering from the loss, the father is lured into an evil trick played by his nephew, who attempts to take over the family fortune. Accused of adultery, the daughter-in-law (Wang Hanlun) is driven out of her house, despite her pregnancy. Unable to commit suicide, she finds herself a small place to live and gives birth to a son. Ten years later, the son (Zheng Xiaoqiu) turns out to be a very

smart and diligent student, studying at the school that is financially supported by his grandfather. The film uses the encounter between grandfather and grandson to save the family eventually – the grandfather is rescued by the grandson from the hands of his nephew, who later confesses that he wrongly accused the daughter-in-law of having an affair.

In several respects, one can claim that the film is inspired by Griffith. First of all, there are some directly transplanted elements from Griffith's films in this film. The film is titled *Orphan Rescues Grandfather*, which refers in its title to Griffith's *Orphan of the Storm*. Moreover, the rescue scene in *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* echoes the hero-rescues-beauty sequence in *Way Down East*. However, it must be at least noted that there is an essential difference between Griffith's rescue scenario and the rescue scene in this film: while Griffith seeks to protect the girl, the orphan endeavored to save the family. **[13]** More importantly, *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* has to a certain extent established the structure for the Chinese family melodrama. First and foremost, the emphasis of this film is primarily placed on the conflict and tension in a family caught in the web of a traditional value system. The film touches on social issues such as the patriarchal family system by focusing on the personal, emotional trauma of an individual family member such as the woman protagonist, Yu Weiru. Similarly to *Way Down East*, *Orphan* remains patriarchal in its discourse but suggests the need to criticize the patrilineal, patri-local and patriarchal tradition in Chinese society.

The audience could easily identify with the film characters (Zhang, 2005: 127), especially the grandson and the daughter-in-law – the second important characteristic of this film. Wang Hanlun, who played the daughter-in-law, was the first leading actress in Chinese melodrama film. She was known as yinmu diyi beidan (number-one tragic female role). Much like Anna, Weiru is a suffering woman: she loses her husband, gets slandered, is driven out of the house, and lives in poverty with her son. Finally, both *Way Down East* and *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* are structured by the binary distinction of good/bad, virtue/evil or moral/immoral. The binary narrative is predominant in early Chinese film history, which is evidenced by the modernity/tradition and city/country antithesis in movie narrative. The clear moral stance of *Orphan Rescues Grandfather* suggests the concern of maintaining the moral order. The film takes the conflict to its inevitable conclusion by rewarding good and punishing evil.

Orphan Rescues Grandfather conveys one of the most important social functions of melodrama, as Brooks (1976) has pointed out – that being its appeals to familial order, which is subject to rapid social changes. The modernization process in China influenced the family structure and

destabilized family values, gender and generational relations within the family, as well as the function of the family in larger society. Because of a set of clashes arising from the process of modernization, for instance in wealth and poverty, urbanity and the countryside, and individual desire and social restraint, the expression of melodrama finds a resonance in Chinese cinema. By utilizing the cinematic form of family melodrama, the complexity of the family domain – where diverse forms of conflict among generations, gender roles, classes, cultures and nations occur – is brought into focus. Perhaps no other filmic forms of the same period projected such a paradoxical and complicated view of the Chinese situation, at once embracing and questioning the traditional construct of Chinese family structure and ethics. Thus a very crucial reason for the success and long-term popularity of the movie melodrama in China is its focus on family life: the dramatic and sensational depiction of family life in large part reflects and reshapes the new unfamiliar modern world, in which traditional order experiences transformations, and moral confrontations take place. In some ways, the obsession with the family theme explains why Griffith's films were easily absorbed by Chinese audiences.

One can hardly deny that Griffith had a direct impact on China's production and consumption of melodrama films, but any simplistic views that Chinese cinema is the mimicry of American film style should be rejected, as Hansen (2000) reminded us. The historical phenomenon of "Griffith fever," while reflecting many causes, lies partly in the fact that the understanding and appreciation of the film can be framed in relation to the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly School. The localized appropriation of Griffith contributes to vernacular education. To this end, one may recognize that the widespread appeal of Griffith in China in the 1920s is not simply a question of stylistics. Rather, his melodramatic approach to story addresses the kinds of moral, social, and political questions that seemed relevant to China at the beginning of the 20th century. Griffith's melodrama films in China thus served to articulate Chinese people's uncertainties and anxieties, which were caused by the contradictions of modernity as well as interactions and tensions within China itself.

The reception and production of melodrama films in early Chinese film history reveals that melodrama is a productive concept and that it functions as a thread of vernacular modernism. It is a transnational form but is culturally conditioned. I suggest here that adding a historical perspective to the ongoing debate over melodrama can open up new options to explore the many facets of the "melodramatic imagination" and to illuminate both the continuities and discontinuities in melodramatic expression. The melodramatic imagination permeates Chinese cinema throughout film history in the sense that the transnational Chinese cinema of today – including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas Chinese cinemas – still bears the influences of topical and thematic

choices and preferences formed in the early years of cinema.

Notes

[1] The literary school of the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly was very popular in the 1910s and 1920s, especially in the Jiangnan area around the Yangtze River. It not only influenced the development of modern Chinese literature, but also the production of Chinese movies. Many butterfly novels were adapted into films and TV shows.

[2] The May Fourth tradition refers primarily to the cultural and political movement starting on 4 May 1919, when students were protesting against the Treaty of Versailles regarding the Shandong issue. In the wake of the movement, there was a rising sense of Chinese nationalism. The May Fourth tradition is linked to the New Culture Movement from the mid-1910s to the 1920s, which aimed to destroy traditional Confucian culture and promote a so-called new culture characterized by democracy and science.

[3] Zhang Zhen (2005) identifies Zheng Zhengqiu's style as slow-paced ethical melodrama, and Paul Pickowicz (1993) traces the leftist melodrama in Chinese cinema.

[4] *Shenbao* is the oldest Chinese newspaper, founded by British merchant Ernest Major in Shanghai in 1872. From 1912 to the mid-1930s, it moved public opinions out of the confines of private and literary works and strongly developed a readership interested in political issues, when owned by Shi Liangcai (later assassinated in 1934 by arrangement of Chiang Kai-shek).

[5] These articles can be found in the movie supplement of *Shenbao* published mostly during 1919 and 1920: *Shenbao*, 27 June 1919, no. 14; *Shenbao*, 18 November 1919, no. 14; *Shenbao*, 12 February 1920, no. 13.

[6] The original text by San San can be found in San (1924).

[7] Author's translation. The original text was written by Rui Kaizhi and published in *Shenbao*, May 1923.

[8] Translated by Chen Jianhua. The original text can be found in *Film Magazine* 1.1 (May 1924): 4.

[9] Author's translation. The original text can be found in He (1925).

[10] The rejection of Griffith's reliance on melodrama can be found in

Han

Jacobs (2008).

[11] More information can be consulted in *Shenbao*, January 1923, no. 1.

[12] More details about Luo Mingyou can be consulted in the *Historical Dictionary of Chinese Cinema* (2013).

[13] As Gish recalled, Griffith's instruction to her was that her characters should be understood to represent "the essence of all girlhood, not just one girl" and to embody "the essence of virginity" (quoted in Grant, 2011: 16).

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