戲 劇 研 究　　第 35 期
Journal of Theater Studies
2025 年 1 月　　頁91-120
DOI: 10.6257/JOTS.202501_(35).091

Mimicry of Modernity: Yuan Muzhi's Cinematic Representations of Shanghai Urban Lives*

Jen-hao Walter HSU
Associate Professor, Department of Theatre Arts, National Sun Yat-Sen University

Cinema, as a medium of modernity, has always been closely intertwined with the representations of the city environment and urban conditions of life since its inception.[1] At a socio-historical level, the global spread of cinema at the turn of the 20th century was intimately tied to the rise of metropolises. Global capitalist ventures brought cinema to metropolitan areas around the world, and the subsequent local developments of cinematic cultures significantly influenced and transformed the urban landscape and human geography of these cities. Barbara Mennel's study of early Berlin cinema illustrates how movie places and cinematic culture became the subject of philosophical and sociological debates during the 1910s and 1920s, just as they drastically transformed people's living experiences and redefined their existential meanings[2]. Nevertheless, the narratives of capitalist globalization do not always depict win-win situations for all parties involved, nor do they celebrate collective

* This paper is completed with the research support of National Science and Technology Council in Taiwan (research project no. 108-2410-H-110-018-MY2). I would also like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for their feedback and comments which contribute to the final completion of this paper.

1 Stephens Barber, *Cinema and Urban Space: Projected Cities* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), pp. 13-60.

2 Barbara Mennel, *Cities and Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 19-45.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

prosperity and affluence. When delving beneath the glamorous façade, we uncover stories of dehumanizing colonization, exploitation, and injustice. Alongside the uneven economic developments of global capitalist expansion comes the drama of cultural compliance and resistance. While cinematic globalization is primarily dominated by the American studio system and its Hollywood aesthetics, non-Western cinemas—despite their aspirations toward the American model—must continually negotiate between homogenization and difference within the historical processes of coercive globalization.[3]

Along this line of critical inquiry, scholars of Chinese cinema have published numerous articles examining how early Chinese movies emulated Hollywood cinematic narrative structures while simultaneously transcending these frameworks, creating distinctive local aesthetics that reflects culturally specific expressions and, at times, resistance. Similar to other early cinema, the golden age of Chinese cinema was indebted to the rise and development of Shanghai as a cosmopolitan metropolis in the 1920s and 1930s. Leo Lee's seminal book *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* heralds a scholarly trend of rediscovering and re-theorizing the long-forgotten urban modernity of Shanghai during the Republican era in various cultural forms, among which the rise of cinematic spaces in the city plays a pivotal role.[4] Now celebrated as the golden age of early Chinese film industry, Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s earned its reputation as the "Hollywood of the East." As Christopher Rea observes, "Early Chinese filmmakers were deeply influenced by foreign films. Most of the films screened in China before 1949 were from Hollywood—the proportion in 1929 was as high as 90 percent—and some filmmakers trained in the United States."[5] Scholars investigating Hollywood's influence on early

[3] Mark Shiel, "Cinema and the City in History and Theory," in *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, edited by Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 1-18.

[4] Leo Lee Ou-fan, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), pp. 82-119; Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 1-88.

[5] Christopher Rea, *Chinese Film Classics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), p. 2.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Chinese films aim to show how it further helped engender local aesthetic styles, either for commercial purposes or for deliberate political objectives.[6]

It is no surprise that Chinese films during this time period were preoccupied with representations of the fast-changing city landscapes of Shanghai. The filmmakers expressed their awe-stricken experiences of first encounters with modernity through these cinematic portrayals of urban Shanghai. Positively, negatively or ambivalently, they projected their fascination, anxiety or even fear and loathing of the urban experience onto the Shanghai images on the screen. Shanghai on screen, similar to its depictions in novels, was represented as a Janus-faced figure. It is both fascinating and repulsive; simultaneously enchanting and disillusioning. The tug-of-war in representations of Shanghai on the silver screen became most intense in the 1930s when a series of national crises spawned Chinese left-wing and national-defense cinema. Shanghai, seen by leftists and nationalists as a metropolis engineered by Western imperialist ambitions and capitalist greed, slowly but surely became the city "witnessing the negative impact of Western cultural imperialism on China—this was a city polluted by sex, violence, alienation, materialism and human selfishness."[7] While pointing out the dark depictions of Shanghai, Laikwan Pang emphasizes that these seemingly negative representations in early left-wing cinema are far more intricate and complex than their rightist nationalist counterparts because "Shanghai was also the filmmakers' base to revolt against the established hegemony."[8]

Following Pang's observation, in this article I intend to re-read Yuan Muzhi's

---

[6] Leo Lee Ou-fan, *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*, pp. 96-106; Ma Ning, "The Textual and Critical Difference of Being Radical: Reconstructing Chinese Leftist Films of the 1930s," *Wide Angle* 11.2 (1989): 22-31; Pang Laikwan, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937* (Lanham, MD, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefiled Publishers, 2002), pp. 165-196; Sun Shaoyi and Nie Wei, "Daoyan: zai yingxiang de kuaguo liudong zhong fansi zhongguo dianying yu haolaiwu de guanxi." *Lishi guanpu yu wenhua dixing: kuaguo yujing zhong de haolaiwu he huayu dianying* (Guiling: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2012), pp. 1-10. Yeh Yueh-yu, "Historiography and Sinification: Music in Chinese Cinema of the 1930s," *Cinema Journal* 41.3 (spring 2002): 78-98.

[7] Pang Laikwan, p. 170.

[8] Ibid., p.171.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

(1909-1978) two films—*Dushi fengguang* (《都市風光》*Scenes of City Life*, 1935) and *Malu tianshi* (《馬路天使》*Street Angels*, 1937).[9] Scholars have long categorized Yuan Muzhi as one of the early figures in left-wing cinema and his frequently-discussed film *Street Angels* has been canonized as a classic Chinese left-wing movie. Pan Laikwan's research seeks to demonstrate the limitations of using the left-wing framework to evaluate these putative left-wing filmmakers by complicating the aesthetics and politics in their cinematic narratives and styles. For her, Yuan Muzhi is more than a left-wing filmmaker; he is undoubtedly "a master in depicting the metropolitan culture of Shanghai through cinema."[10] However, Pan does not provide detailed analyses of how Yuan's depictions of Shanghai extend beyond the left-wing framework.

Indeed, Yuan's representations of Shanghai urban culture are far more complex and complicated than those in the films by his alleged left-wing comrades. Unlike most scholars who focus solely on the content and form of his films, in this paper, I will take Yuan's earlier theatrical experiences, especially his dedication to acting, as the point of departure for my analyses and build upon where Pan left off. I will demonstrate that his earlier theatrical experience is not simply an experience of modern theatre but also "an embodied encounter with modernity" *per se*, which further leads him to create cinematic aesthetics that transcends ideological imperatives. Drawing upon theories of mimicry, I will explore how Yuan's unique cinematic aesthetics responds to and at the same time exceeds or even subverts dominant political conditions and ideological interpellations. Through the critical lenses of mimicry of modernity, I will first seek to understand the relationships between his theatrical and cinematic aesthetics in addfressing the existential crisis of modernity. This paper will illustrate how Yuan Muzhi's early theatrical experiences of mimetic modernity leads him, first in *Scenes of City Life* to create cinematic colonial mimicry satirizing the desiring logic

[9] This film is typically translated as *Street Angel* in most English scholarship. However, I agree with Christopher Rea that the angel in the film does not solely represent the songstress figure; rather, all the underclass lives depicted in the film are angels. Thus, it should be *Street Angels* instead of *Street Angel*. Please see Christopher Rea, *Chinese Film Classics*, p.159.

[10] Pang Laikwan, p. 63.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

of modern urban life, and then in *Street Angels*, to further transcend mimicry and achieve an aesthetics of alterity as an ethical response to China's colonial relationship with Western modernity. In so doing, this paper will also seek to understand how Yuan Muzhi's "left-turning" change is not a political one with nationalistic and revolutionary purposes but an aesthetic-ethical process turning to "the face of the other."

Modernity as Mimicry: From Theatre to Cinema

Yuan is mostly remembered as an important Chinese left-wing filmmaker in English scholarship. But Yuan actually started his artistic career in theatre, particularly with his dedication to the art of acting. We can find Yuan's firsthand account of his earliest theatrical experiences in a memoir article titled, "Interesting Scenarios of My Theatrical Life," first published in the special edition of "School Theatre Movements" in *The Chinese Student Journal* in 1930.[11] Unlike other pieces in the same volume that advocate using theatre as a tool for patriotic education, Yuan's article candidly reveals to us that he was first drawn to theatre by the impulse to seek pure artistic satisfactions and romantic love.[12]

Yuan's tone in the article reminds us of a typical melancholic youth of the May Fourth generation who seeks to reinvent his self-identity through art and love in the razzle-dazzle of the modern world. Yuan's coming-of-age was heavily influenced by the May Fourth spirit, which led him to dedicate himself to a career of modern theatre in China. The introduction of modern western theatre via Ibsenism was integral to the

[11] *The Chinese Student Journal* was overseen by Zhao Jiabi and published by Liangyou Company. It is one of the major journals spreading May Fourth enlightenment ideas among Chinese college students. The special edition on "School Theatre Movements" was edited by Zuo Ming, who became an underground Chinese Communist Party member during his studies at Peiking Arts College. Driven by political motivations and ambitions, Zuo Ming went to Shanghai to spread his political ideas among students through theatre, leading to this special edition.

[12] This is particularly evident in his short poem towards the end of the article. In this poem, Yuan uses the metaphor of a balance to convey his constant oscillation between art and love. Please see Yuan Muzhi, "Wo yanju shengya zhong zhi juqu," *Yuan Muzhi quanji: Lunzhu juan*, edited by Yang Xinyu (Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Publisher, 2019), pp. 146-152.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

May Fourth enlightenment project. Ibsenism inspired China's May Fourth novelists and playwrights to create various types of Nora characters, who were celebrated as symbols of rebellion against traditional parental authority as well as icons of fearless pursuit of self-identity via the ideal of romantic love.[13] In my previous research, analyzing archival accounts of Yuan's early theatrical life and his early one-act plays in the context of May Fourth modernity, I discovered that the absence of a guiding father figure had a significant impact on Yuan's coming-of-age journey. Like a typical melancholic youth lost in the maze of modernity, Yuan "was drifting in life, seeking kindred spirits and romantic love. His dedication to the art of acting was just such an attempt, an unreserved pursuit of beauty. Art and Love had become his compass to orient himself in life."[14]

Before Yuan was recruited by the Diantong Film Company（電通電影公司）to make socially conscious films in the 1930s, he was an avid reader of Oscar Wilde's works and a fervent follower of Hollywood movies. He led a free-spirit bohemian lifestyle, a city-flâneur who meandered around both the glamorous and the shadowy parts of the metropolis. His bohemian lifestyle lent itself to his art-for-art's-sake penchant, which was reflected in his earlier stage plays that treated topics of romantic love with intense, if not indulgent, emotional appeals, and more importantly, in his wholehearted devotion to the art of acting, to the extent that he transgressed the boundaries between stage and life. In his memoir piece, Yuan frankly told us how his early dedication to female impersonation in middle school led him to cultivate romantic feelings for a male friend.

> Back then, Chen Xianmo was also a student at Chengzhong. He was the leader of the theatre club. I had acted in plays with him a couple of times. But ever since *Peacocks Fly Southeast*, our fake emotions on stage became real passions

[13] Please see Tam, Kwok-kan. *Ibsen in China 1908-1997: A Critical-Annotated Bibliography of Criticism, Translation and Performance* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2001), p. 24-109.

[14] Hsu Jen-Hao, "Zai yishu yu aiqing zhijian: lun yuan muzhi zaoqi xiju shijian de zhuti bianzheng fa," *Journal of Theatre Studies* 30 (July 2022): 115.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

> in life. Homoerotic romance grew between us. Of course, he was the masculine one and I was the feminine one because he surpassed me in many aspects. Our romance was well-known on campus, and people spoke ill of us, spreading numerous rumors. In reality, we did not even share one single kiss. Not because I did not want to, but because he never asked for it. If he had asked for it, I would have said yes because I really loved him.[15]

Later in the same article, Yuan did not shy away from sharing more about his transgressive experiences. His efforts to embody the "real" characters often led him to blur the lines between his roles on stage and his roles in real life. His dedication to acting opened up a mimetic space for him to explore the dialectics between the real self and the fictional other.

Yuan dedicated himself to the art of acting so wholeheartedly that he earned the reputation of "the man with a thousand faces."[16] He even published two books on acting, *Theatrical Makeup Techniques* (《戲劇化裝術》，1931) and *Scattered Notes on Acting* (《演劇漫談》，1933). The former is a scientific approach to theatrical makeups through detailed studies of makeup properties and physiognomy; the latter offers critical reflections on his own acting experiences from which we can now tease out an underlying philosophy of subjectivity in theatrical mimesis. Both books have since become the earliest professional treatises on the art of acting in modern theatre in China.

In my previous research, based on analyses of his memoir, his publications on the art of acting, and existing biographical studies, I found that acting, as a form of art, for Yuan Muzhi, is not merely about techniques and skills but a way of philosophical

---

15 Translation mine. Please see Yuan Muzhi, "Wo yanju shengya zhong zhi juqu," pp. 147-148.

16 Yuan enjoyed dressing up as famous Hollywood actors and took pictures in photo studios. Many of his dressed-up photos were widely circulated in famous pictorials in Shanghai, such as *Liangyou*. This is how he gained the title as "the man with a thousand faces." His theatrical performance and pictorial images significantly paved the way for star culture to emerge in Shanghai. Guo Xueqin wrote a biography for Yuan Muzhi. She took the title and named his biography as "a life with a thousand faces." Please see Guo Xueqin, *Qianmian rensheng: Yuan Muzhi zhuan* (Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Publisher, 2005).

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

thinking regarding "the mimetic dialectical relationships between art and life," which further leads to the ethical question of self and other.[17] My research shows that his dedication to acting enabled Yuan to experience transgressive aesthetics and unstable subjectivity, which further opened up a new ethical space for him: deconstructing the self and becoming the other.[18] As Yuan tried to act like a modern man or woman on stage by drawing upon the characters he saw in various Hollywood movies and the westerners he encountered in cosmopolitan Shanghai, Yuan was also experiencing modernity at the level of embodied, if not colonial, mimicry of the modern West.

Theatre is the place where mimesis takes place. Yuan used this place of mimesis to explore his embodied understanding of modernity. Acting opened up opportunities for Yuan to constantly mimic modern subjectivities on stage and led him to realize that the constitution of modern subjectivities occur in constant negotiation between the self and the other, from which excess, ambivalence, and sometimes transgression emerge to disrupt the unity of selfhood. Cinema brings mimetic reality to another level with modern technologies of light and sound. As a medium of modernity *per se*, it celebrates a technology that can further complicate the mimetic relationships between art and life. When Yuan moved from theatre to cinema, it is no surprise for us to see that he would employ this new medium not to enhance illusionistic representations on screen but to experiment with or even lay bare the mimetic nature of modern life for its parodic representations.

Masquerading as Urbanites: *Scenes of City Life*

Yuan's experience of modernity through embodied mimesis is well presented in his first film, *Scenes of City Life*. This meta-cinema is his sarcastic reflection on the mimetic nature of modern life. The film's opening credits are already filled with visual effects designed to evoke impressions of an urban modern life. It starts with a shot of reflections of neon light on water and as the camera slowly tilts up, the audience

17 Hsu Jen-Hao, pp. 119-133.
18 Ibid., pp. 119-133.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

sees that it is a giant neon sign propped up on a riverbank, displaying the film's title characters, *dushi fengguang*（都市風光）. From reflecting to flickering lights, the title shot creates a tantalizing yet disorienting feeling. The following credit sequence introduces the names of cast and crew against moving kaleidoscopic backdrops, further enhancing the dazzling visual effects. The opening sequence meta-cinematically draws the audience into the narrative structure of the film. Through this visual device, Yuan invites the audience to consciously peek into the kaleidoscopic world of the film just like later in the film, the diorama man, acted by Yuan Muzhi himself, sings and hails the four main characters to look into the lens.

This meta-cinematic viewing structure is essential for understanding Yuan's depiction of urban life in Shanghai within the film. Through this lens, the audience aligns with the four main characters as they peer into Yuan's diorama, hoping for a glimpse of their potential future in Shanghai. These characters are typical country bumpkins arriving at the train station, eager to buy tickets to the city. Their movements and speech are characterized by an unrealistic pantomime style, portraying them as hyperbolic caricatures rather than fully developed characters with psychological depth. The four nameless country bumpkins march in unison towards a train station, their arms crossing each other. Goofy cartoon sound effects punctuate their funny, mechanical movements. As they march, the camera pans left and right to give us a panorama of the train station. It then zooms in on the train station master's room, where he naps at a table. A modern mechanical sound jolts him awake. Initially, he thinks it is the telephone ringing but soon realizes it is the alarm clock reminding him that it is about time to sell tickets. Through a shot-reverse-shot sequence, the audience sees a swarm of countryside travelers gather around the ticket booth pushing and shoving to buy tickets to Shanghai. This sequence is immediately cut to a close-up of the diorama man whose eerie smile on the face evokes a sense of imminent catastrophe. As the four characters move to the peddlers looking for food to eat, the diorama man starts to sing a catchy peddling song, attracting the crowd to buy a peep show. He sings, "Come! Have a look! Come see the sights! See streets ablaze with brilliant lights!" He successfully catches the attention of the four characters as they sit down and pay to peek into the diorama. What follows is a montage showcasing the

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Shanghai skyline, featuring churches, banks, and iconic neon signs from amusement arcades, theaters, dance halls, and advertising billboards. This montage invites us to peek into the diorama with the characters and catch pictures of Shanghai's lively daytime atmosphere as well as exciting, glamorous nightlife. The montage sequence circles back to the beginning shot of the neon lights of the Great World amusement arcade.[19] The camera lingers on this dreamlike image for a few seconds and then tilts down to show us a painting of four well-dressed modern characters with the head shots of the four country pumpkins. At the bottom, four Chinese characters reading *modeng renwu* (摩登人物 modern types) suggest that these four country bumpkins, after peeking into the diorama, start to envision themselves as modern urban dwellers in the metropolis of Shanghai. The camera zooms in on the young gentleman type, and the image slowly dissolves. This transition brings us from reality to fantasy, where the main story of an urban love triangle unfolds.

In this fantasy world, the four nameless country folks acquire names and become identifiable characters. They are Xiao Yun, her parents, and Li Menghua. Li Menghua is a struggling young writer who finds it hard to pay his rent for a typical *tingzijian* (亭子間 a small dark back room over the kitchen)[20] room in Shanghai. As the rent-collection sequence shows, despite poverty, Li takes great care of his look always dressing up like a modern gentleman even though there is a hole in the bottom of his shoe. He is a hopeless romantic type who would even use his rent money to buy an expensive coat to woo Xiao Yun. Xiao Yun is a highly sought-after young lady who lives with her parents in a seemingly well-to-do family. But as the story unfolds, this middle-class family is facing a financial crisis, much like many others in the city. Despite this looming financial disaster, Xiao Yun, continues to aspire to acquire an

[19] *Dashijie*, the Great World amusement arcade, was first built in 1917 and immediately became a landmark of Shanghai. It housed a variety of entertainments for Shanghai petty urbanites, ranging from traditional opera to all kinds of modern stunt shows. It has become a symbol of Shanghai urban modernity.

[20] This is the most affordable unit in a typical Shanghai alleyway house. Many aspiring young literary talents without the means would move into such a unit when they first arrive in Shanghai. Therefore, *tingzijian wenren* (literati) has become a type in the history of modern Chinese literature.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

expensive wedding banquet outfit against all odds. Driven by her materialistic desire, Xiao Yun becomes embroiled in a love triangle involving Li Menghua and Wang Junsan, a tea merchant who enjoys an upper-middle-class lifestyle.

As the story progresses, we see Xiao Yun's father busy himself visiting various pawn shops for cash to make ends meet, while the love triangle among the young characters intensifies as Xiao Yun manipulates them to satisfy her material needs. These two parallel plotlines eventually converge in the scene where Xiao Yun's father takes her to Wang's office for a marriage proposal. This marriage proposal sequence is the highlight of the film, in which Yuan, through the contrasting effects of juxtaposed marriage and business conversations, reveals that in an urban life driven by capitalist need and greed, we are all alienated and commodified as goods ready for exchange. Xiao Yun's "greatest event in life"[21] is quickly decided through a bargaining process between Wang and her father, just as Wang simultaneously finalizes a business deal with a quick bargain.

Yuan's critique of alienation is key to unpacking how he employs mimicry as a critical visual device in representing Shanghai's urban modernity. Driven by their desires for money, love, and material goods, the characters in the film navigate various social milieus in Shanghai, including residential areas across different classes, a movie theater, a café, a dance hall, pawn shops, a bank, a gold exchange, and boutique clothing shops, among others. These diverse social settings create a mirroring of Shanghai's dual worlds—the hyper-visible glamorous world on the surface and the invisible, squalid world underneath. It is through the dialectics between these two worlds that Yuan situates the characters in a relationship of mimicry to one another. The lower-class Li Menghua mimics a gentleman's image, hoping to one day enjoy a comfortable bourgeois life with a house and a car, just like Wang Junsan, as evidenced in the bank sequence after Xiao Yun leaves him for Wang's car ride following their movie date. Similarly, the lower-class characters, including Xiao Yun's maid and

[21] I borrow this term from Hu Shih's famous modern spoken drama play, *Zhongshen Dashi* (*The Greatest Event in Life*), the now tokenized play of China's Ibsenism, to further imply that Yuan, through this critical sequence, also engages in a self-reflexive critique of his past propensity for May Fourth Romanticism.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Wang's attendant, also aspire to become like their masters, as suggested by their theft of Wang's car and Xiao Yun's wedding banquet outfit in the final runaway scene. However, what truly strikes at the core of Yuan's critique of modernity is Xiao Yun's mimicry of a modern, elegant young lady. The entire drama of this love triangle-turned-marriage bargaining is driven by Xiao Yun's desire to acquire a complete collection of wedding banquet outfits, projected onto a Western yet fictional image of an urban female type. By visually associating Xiao Yun with this fictional ideal and the mannequin in the boutique clothing shop, Yuan suggests that modern urban life is a precarious game of mimicry, enticing us to become these glamorous yet lifeless, commodified images produced by capitalist greed at the expense of our true selves.

All the modern types in the fantasy are stripped of their dignified appearances and forced to reveal their true, unbearable realities as each descends into poverty by the end of the film. The mimicry of modernity within this fantasy spins the dialectics of appearance and reality until the audience feels giddy and dizzy. Just like the characters who become lost among the hyperbolic, commodified images of the metropolis, the audience, along with the four country bumpkins, must awaken from this fantasy-turned-nightmare in the diorama. The final meta-cinematic structure brings the four country bumpkins back to reality. After this disheartening reality check, these four characters, caught between an arriving and a departing train, can no longer decide whether to go to Shanghai or return to the countryside. They pull each other in opposite directions, stuck in a limbo, unsure of where to go, much like the large question mark superimposed on the neon lights of Shanghai.

Through this meta-cinematic structure, Yuan creates layers of mimetic relationships that engender a transgressive carnivalesque viewing effect. The concept of carnivalesque, as introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin, enables us to see how lower-class people, through the power of hyperbolic mimicry, can subvert hegemonic attempts to totalize or even dominate social lives. These popular festive carnivalesque acts mimic hegemonic culture not to reaffirm its totality and superiority but, by turning things upside down in a parodic mode, they reveal the cracks and loopholes in the dominant

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

culture, thus challenging hierarchies and privileges.[22] Yuan's mimicry of Shanghai urban modernity in *Scenes of City Life* is very much done in this carnivalesque spirit, producing "mimetic excess"[23] for an aesthetics of "symbolic inversion and transgression,"[24] crumbling social codifications and revealing lived realities. Yuan's meta-cinematic deployment of mimesis, therefore, unleashes a demystifying potential to deconstruct the appearance of urban glamor and splendor, resulting in an effect of colonial mimicry, *à la* Homi Bhabha. According to Bhabha, colonial mimicry entails "the desire to emerge as 'authentic' through mimicry—through a process of writing and repetition" but in the end "is the final irony of partial representation."[25] For Bhabha, this desire to emulate the colonial master through mimicry "is not the familiar exercise of dependent colonial relations through narcissistic identification so that, as Fanon has observed, the black man stops being an actional person for only the white man can represent his self-esteem."[26] While Bhabha talks about colonial writings in India and Africa to analyze the colonized racial subjects' mimicry of colonist whiteness, we can also observe similar colonial power dynamics between the four country bumpkins in *Scenes of City Life* and their idealized urbanized others. In the process of becoming their urbanized others, the four country bumpkins engage in practices of colonial mimicry that ultimately prove to be "the final irony of partial representation." However, Yuan adopts this parodic strategy in the film not to deprive the characters of their dignify and self-esteem but, with the final dilemma scene and overarching question mark, seeks to facilitate "a double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority,"[27] allowing the audience to reflect on their own desires to emulate the westernized urban class of the modern life and, in

22 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1984.

23 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 252.

24 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 18.

25 Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis) (Spring 1984): 129.

26 Ibid., p.129.

27 Ibid., p. 129.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

so doing, he destabilizes the dominating force of oppressive modernity. This is what Bhabha means by "the menace of mimicry."[28]

The Limits of Mimicry: *Street Angels*

The Scenes of City Life, though a social critique of urban life in Shanghai, does not resonate with the tragic or sympathetic tones of other leftist films. It is first and foremost a screwball comedy that mimics the styles of western musical comedies.[29] Its parodic mode, nevertheless, goes beyond mere emulation and enables a cinematic colonial mimicry of modern life that disrupts Shanghai urbanites' desire to embrace western modernity. Yuan's second film, *Street Angels*, shot in the shadow of the Mukden Incident, also presents a topsy-turvy world filled with music and love; however, as the plot unfolds, this romantic world between a happy-go-lucky young trumpeter and a sing-song girl slowly descends into a damned, hopeless existence. Once again, Yuan invites the audience to enter his cinematic portrayal of urban Shanghai, but this time, his camera deliberately departs from the superficial, glamorous upper-class scenes to dwell on the deprived yet vibrant lives of the lower class.

The opening credits are projected onto the same montage of city neon lights used in *Scenes of City Life* only to emphasize the shift in focus in this film. After the opening credits, the camera cuts to a medium shot of the upper tiers of Broadway Mansions, which were commissioned by Sir Victor Sassoon in 1934 and quickly became the tallest building in Shanghai. The shot indicates that it is fall 1935, shortly after this tallest building was completed. Instead of lingering on the grand façade of this

28 Ibid., p. 129.

29 Yuan Muzhi watched Charles Chaplin's *City Lights* in 1931 and published an article expressing his admirations for Chaplin's outstanding abilities to create a tragic-comedy that appeals to all classes, including the propertied, the proletariat, the intellectual and the anti-intellectual classes. For him, this film is a perfect combination of entertainment, advocacy for the proletariat and philosophical musings on appearance and reality. Obviously, his use of mimicry in *Scenes of City Life* is heavily influenced by Chaplin's strategies. Please see Yuan Muzhi, "Kanle chengshi zhiguan yihou," *Yuan Muzhi quanji: Lunzhu juan*, edited by Yang Xinyu (Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Publisher, 2019), p157.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

magnificent structure, the camera immediately tilts down to the underground beneath the building, bringing the audience to the "downtrodden class of Shanghai" as the surtitle suggests.

Rather than leading us into a suffocating, squalid world, Yuan's camera presents a vigorous and vibrant underclass. This vibrancy is created visually and aurally. As Christopher Rea notes, Yuan is keen on using the newly invented technology of sound not just to enhance representational realism but also for socio-political critique. Therefore, the soundscapes in the opening sequence convey both representational and symbolic meanings. Christopher Rea observes,

> We hear the rattle of a snare drum, followed by a marching band and the sound of celebrants shouting out at a bridal parade on the streets of Shanghai…Songs transform socio-political critique into sentimental refrain. 'Songstress at the Ends of the Earth' sings plaintively of a female figure who could be taken to be a stand-in for the lower classes in general. *Street Angels* follows other leftist films of the 1930s in representing the plight of marginal and underprivileged figures in society through attractive female leads.[30]

The contrasting soundscapes of the boisterous parade and the melancholic songstress's teahouse introduce the respective social milieus of the male lead and female lead. The male lead, Xiao Chen, strives to survive independently, occasionally working as a trumpeter among the crowd of the underworld. He constantly has to jostle and shove to carve out his own space and share a cramped apartment with his newspaper-selling friend, Wang, and three lowlife stooges who work as a barber and street peddlers. Xiao Chen's social milieu is cramped but teeming with compassion and solidarity. He and his friends vow to "share prosperity and face adversity together." They always keep each other's company and help one another through difficult situations as they arise. In contrast, the female lead, Xiao Hong, lives in a social milieu that appears spacious and comfortable but is, in reality, characterized by exploitation and oppression. She and her

[30] Christopher Rea, *Chinese Film Classics*, pp. 168-169.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

sister, Xiao Yun, fled their home in northeastern China after the Japanese invasion and ended up at the mercy of a married couple who owns the tea house. They force Xiao Hong to sing for the customers and demand that Xiao Yun work as a hooker.

As a showman of theatre, Yuan Muzhi, much like in his cinematic debut *Scenes of City Life*, employs the art of mimicry in this film. The male lead, Xiao Chen, is a lively young man with a strong mimetic talent who always dresses like a Western soldier and occasionally performs a Western-style dumb show with his stooge friends from his window to entertain and court Xiao Hong, who lives across the alley. His ability to mimic Western modernity gives him a sense of superiority over his faithful, clownish companions, as he hits their heads, calls them fools, and often shouts at the stuttering character, asking him to shut up for not speaking properly. Xiao Chen is not portrayed as a sympathetic character for the audience to channel their frustrations about the underlying social issues in the film. Instead, he is depicted as a frivolous and capricious bully who is later fooled into believing that Xiao Hong chooses a rich thug over him and throws a fit, forcing Xiao Hong to sing for him as she does for the rich thug. The real crisis of this young couple's romantic comedy is not Xiao Chen's foolish misunderstanding but the thug's further offer to buy Xiao Hong from the controlling couple. Upon overhearing the thug's plan, Xiao Hong seeks to reconcile with Xiao Chen and asks for his help. Upon learning about this impending misfortune, Xiao Chen and Wang decide to seek a lawyer's assistance. Socially inept as he is, Xiao Chen devises a plan to wear his fancy Western outfit, pretending to work at the customs with Wang as his chauffeur. He naively believes that his act of mimicry will win the lawyer over. Soon after, he is humiliated in an upper-class office in a modern skyscraper, realizing that going to court is not merely about putting on an act but requires a large sum of actual money. Yuan uses the art of mimicry in both films; on one hand, it entertains the audience by enhancing the drama; on the other, it serves critical purposes. With the comical framework of *Scenes of City Life*, mimicry produces a transgressive, subversive power; however, in *Street Angels*, where tragedy eventually overtakes romantic comedy, mimicry is only set up to expose its own limitations. As Xiao Chen's acts of mimicry suggest, while mimicry might provide comic relief, it cannot effectively resolve real socio-legal problems.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

After realizing that the juridical approach is well beyond their capabilities, Xiao Chen rallies all his companions to save Xiao Hong from the hands of the couple. Together, they sneak out of the apartment at midnight to hide in a secret location. This moment marks a turning point in the film, which gradually takes on a tragic tone as imminent threats loom large. The central sympathetic character dramaturgically deployed to enhance this tragic sentiment is actually Xiao Yun, the fallen woman, rather than the female lead, Xiao Hong.

A trend of scholarship emerged around the year 2000 that began to compare and contrast the images of China's "New Woman" and "Modern Girl" on the silver screen, analyzing how these images are constructed within the context of vernacular and enlightenment modernity to shape new ideas about gender and sexuality and to negotiate changing ethical boundaries in the 1920s and into the 1930s, serving either dominant political ideologies or the desire economy of the growing star culture.[31] As Zhang Zhen further informs us, this cinematic battle over representations of modern womanhood became most intense in the 1930s, when left-wing films and the Nationalist New Life Movement challenged modernists' insistence on cinema as merely an entertaining medium, subsequently redefining Shanghai cosmopolitanism and the modern women born from it. She concludes,

> The medium of cinema, which until the turn of the decade had been primarily used for entertainment and enlightenment outside the intellectual mainstream, was now charged with the burden of radical social change to save the nation. More crucially, and disquietingly, the war between hard and soft films yielded a cacophony of explanations of the sensory and political economy of the time embodied in the fate of the modern girl and her sexuality; she had to be objectified or domesticated, one way or another.[32]

---

[31] Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Fallen Women, Rising Star and New Horizon: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism," *Film Quarterly* 54.1 (Fall 2000): 10-22; Pang Laikwan, pp. 91-137; Zhang Yinjin editor, *Cinema and UrbaCulture in Shanghai, 1922-1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 99-160; Zhang Zhen, pp. 244-297.

[32] Zhang Zhen, p. 297

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

In a similar vein, Pan Laikwan analyzes the modern women characters in left-wing cinema and finds that they are constructed as fallen women, partly to serve as symbols of maternal sacrifice or victims of social vices, only to be saved or transformed by their superior male counterparts. They are also designed to function as an ideal of the newly liberated independent woman who calls for revolutionary or nation-building actions. In Pan's own words, this project is, after all, a project of "male self-allegorization" aimed at securing a collective male yet sentimental subjectivity.[33]

One might wonder whether Xiao Yun is simply another fallen woman character created in a similar fashion. Interestingly, Yuan Muzhi's films are not included in Pan's discussions as examples to illustrate her points. Although she does not specifically address the female characters in Yuan's films, I would argue that Xiao Yun in *Street Angels*, as a contrasting image to Xiao Hong, transcends serving the political purposes of ideological interpellations and instead subverts the gaze of a nationalistic male subject.

Through mimicry, Yuan once again creates a mirroring social structure even within the underworld of Shanghai. The male and female leads form a relatively bright world of romantic comedy, supported by darker and shadier characters. This mirroring effect is further enhanced as the story evolves, and with a twist of crisis, it turns into a tragedy. The final part of the film shifts between these two mirroring worlds. While Xiao Chen continues to perform as a heroic leader, managing to shelter Xiao Hong and the group under his protection, Wang and the voiceless Xiao Yun, in a parallel street world without any shelter, slowly develop a romantic relationship. In contrast to Xiao Hong, who is now temporarily safe and hidden away, Xiao Yun has to endure the hardships imposed by the manipulative couple, the surveilling police, and the cold weather outside. With this parallel mirroring structure, Yuan has constructed Xiao Yun, rather than Xiao Hong, as the quintessential suffering figure for the audience to empathize with.

As the empathetic character, Xiao Yun is further used by Yuan to deconstruct Xiao Chen's male subjectivity by revealing his hypocrisy and false sense of moral

[33] Pang Laikwan, pp. 91-137.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

superiority. One time, when Xiao Yun tries to escape from the police in search of a hiding place where the group is staying, Xiao Chen, out of rage, scolds her and ruthlessly turns her in to the authorities instead of welcoming her into the room. Forsaken as she is, Xiao Yun still manages to endure all the hardships and persevere by herself until she is stabbed in the heart for refusing to tell her foster father the whereabouts of Xiao Hong. Learning about Xiao Yun's dire situation, Wang wants to go to her rescue but is stopped by Xiao Chen, who believes it is not worth "risking one's neck over that kind of woman."[34] Since the beginning of the film, Xiao Chen has been rejecting and despising Xiao Yun because she is a morally dubious prostitute. He fears that Xiao Hong will become another fallen woman like her sister, prompting him to make efforts to rescue and redeem her; hence, his self-righteous sense of heroism.

Xiao Chen's hypocritical self-righteousness is about to be exposed. First, his closest friend Wang finally stands up against him for Xiao Yun, and the three stooges follow suit. Xiao Chen cries and softens, but he does not truly come to terms with his foolishness and arrogance until he looks directly into Xiao Yun's eyes on her deathbed.

The deathbed sequence is key to understanding how Yuan departs from other left-wing filmmakers. On her deathbed, Xiao Yun, the fallen woman, finally confronts Xiao Chen, the self-proclaimed male hero. As Xiao Yun gazes directly into Xiao Chen's eyes, this fallen woman, who has been objectified and nullified by his male gaze, emerges from invisibility with her irreducible difference as the absolute other, excluded from the respected world safeguarded by Xiao Chen. Ultimately, Xiao Chen proves himself to be a failed follower of the order of the seemingly civilized world of modern Shanghai, as his mimicry of modernity serves no purpose. In contrast, Xiao Yun, now staring back with anger and determination, resurfaces as "the face of the other," in the sense of Emmanuel Levinas, demanding our ethical responses to those relegated to the shadowy margins of modernity's order. As Roger Burggraeve explains, Emmanuel Levinas's concept of radical alterity arises from our encounters with "the face of the other," a moment of ethical demand that pierces through any form of racism (in its

[34] This is the exact same line spoken by Xiao Chen in the movie. It shows how much he has been detesting her.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

broadest sense, an ideology that hierarchizes the superior us versus the inferior them). This demand "consists not in the denial of similarities between people, but in the denial of, or better said, the failure to appreciate and value, people's differences, or better still, the fundamental and irreducible otherness that places them outside every genre, making them 'unique': 'Alterity flows in no sense out of difference; to the contrary, difference goes back to alterity.'"[35]

By superimposing the previous images of Xiao Chen bullying Xiao Yun onto this final moment of repentance, Yuan deconstructs Xiao Chen's moral superiority and restores Xiao Yun's dignity. Voiceless as she has always been, Xiao Yun, in her last moments, finally opens her mouth and speaks: "We are all sufferers." She does not ask for retribution or revenge; she simply forgives everyone and vehemently protests against police violence in a delusional mental state, believing that the police are coming to apprehend Wang. After uttering her last words, "Ants! Ants," she passes away, leaving the distraught crowd in the room. At that moment, Wang finally returns from the doctor, only to inform everyone that he did not have enough money and that the doctor would not come. Xiao Hong cries out, and the helpless crowd is plunged into despair.

The ending sequence of *Street Angels* presents a powerful yet ambiguous social critique. In general, the suffering women characters in other left-wing films often end on a positive note, showing hope or light at the end of the tunnel, such as the nameless mother figure in *Goddess* (《神女》, dir. Wu Yonggang, 1934), the final woman survivor in *The Great Road* (《大路》, dir. Sun Yu, 1935), or the poignant final cry of "I want to live!" in *New Woman* (《新女性》, dir. Cai Chusheng, 1935). These women symbolize collective suffering and serve as rallying points for future political actions. In *Street Angels*, there are no ideological interpellations associated with Xiao Yun's last words. If there is any, it is the ethical response in the phrase, "we are all sufferers," which seeks to evoke in Xiao Chen and the audience a strong sense of empathic ethical

[35] Roger Burggraeve, "Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other: The Vision of Emmanuel Levinas on Moral Evil and Our Responsibilities," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 30.1 (Spring 1999): 40.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

response. Her "fundamental and irreducible difference" is finally recognized by Xiao Chen and the audience; the close-up of her dignified face becomes a site of radical alterity, through which we ultimately encounter "the face of the other," leading to the emergence of an ethical demand. For me, *Street Angels*' aesthetics of comic mimicry ultimately yields to an ethical call to recognize the radical alterity in the face of Xiao Yun. Instead of resorting to a left-wing nationalistic and revolutionary political agenda, this aesthetic-ethical approach in the film reflects Yuan Muzhi's call for possible social action.

Xiao Yun dies with her dignity restored, deconstructing Xiao Chen's male subjectivity and his sense of moral and civilized superiority. If *Street Angels* is, according to Pan Laikwan's analysis, a left-wing "male self-allegorization," it is only in the sense that Yuan deconstructs his own male identity as a pretentious intellectual-revolutionary. This characterization of Xiao Chen mirrors his attempt to resolve national crises or social issues through his acquired skills in mimicking Western cinematic arts, but ultimately to no avail.

Conclusion: From Mimicry to Alterity

As a young man drifting in the urban (read: Western colonial) modernity of Shanghai, Yuan Muzhi plunged into the world of theatre to anchor himself in the pursuits of art and love. Shanghai captivated Yuan with the glamour and splendor of modern Western urban culture, while simultaneously uprooting him from a traditional worldview that could no longer hold, throwing him into existential limbo. Theatrical mimesis became the means through which he could navigate experiences of Shanghai's urban modernity. His dedication to the art of acting ultimately equipped him with remarkable skills in mimicry, which, on the one hand, helped him experience the transgressive possibilities of modern urban life at an embodied level, and, on the other, opened up an ethical space for him to explore the self/other dialectics in the formation of modern subjecthood.

Between the fictional characters he dedicated himself to enacting on stage and the real life he lived off stage, as indicated in his treatises on the art of acting,

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

he experimented with self-fashioning and re-fashioning—a practice of self-image making that is inherently modern, raising existential questions about the politics of representation and identification. He avidly watched Hollywood movies and dressed himself in the images of famous Hollywood actors; he fervently observed the Westerners he encountered in real life to emulate their facial expressions and bodily movements for his stage performances. On the surface, one might view Yuan as a typical May Fourth youth with aspirations to be completely Westernized, as his left-wing colleagues vehemently attacked him, calling him "a shameless, soulless artist!"[36] Yuan's obsession with Hollywood movies and Western decadent arts placed him in a dangerous situation in the 1930s when a series of political crises in China propelled the intellectual and artistic circles in Shanghai to gravitate toward left-wing ideology, if not be directly guided by the underground Chinese Communist Party.

In my previous research, I showed that Yuan did not shy away from attacks by left-wing critics, asserting that, as a modern youth in China, one is always already influenced by the West.[37] For Yuan, it would be absurd to draw a clear cultural boundary between what is Chinese and what is Western in modern life. That kind of fascist policing of cultural authenticity represents a nationalistic desire resulting from Western colonial oppression. Nevertheless, drawing upon Fanon's theory, I reveal that this anti-colonial nationalistic desire, more often than not, underscores, in the sense of Homi Bhabha, a "narcissistic identification" with the colonizers—a desire to become as powerful as they are. From Yuan's responses, we see him repeatedly articulate the "no-self philosophy" behind his art of acting. In my earlier paper, I argued that this "no-self philosophy" acting approach distinguishes Yuan from other May Fourth male intellectuals dedicated to reforming modern drama in China, such as Tian Han and Hong Sheng. For Tian and Hong, the reformation of modern drama in China must primarily serve the nationalistic and revolutionary purposes of strengthening the nation and enlightening the masses. For them, theatre is a means to the end of revolutionary nation-building, whereas for Yuan, theatre is primarily an end in itself. This distinction

[36] Hsu Jen-Hao, p. 126.
[37] Ibid., p. 127.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

is made explicit in Yuan's ongoing practice of female impersonation and his lingering tendency toward decadent plays, even amidst diatribes against female impersonators and romance-themed plays in the name of enlightened progress.[38]

Indeed, since the 1930s, with the collective turn toward left-wing ideology, it has become increasingly difficult for Yuan to continue his previous practices. Yuan himself published articles criticizing his decadent past as "losing touch with reality."[39] But should we consider Yuan's phase at the Diantong Film Company as an intentional "left-turning" decision guided by the CCP, as his biographer Guo Xueqin believes?[40] Or should we adopt film scholar Zang Jie's perspective, which suggests that "Yuan did not immediately turn left in the early 1930s, as mainstream film historiography describes. He is not a born revolutionary; he is an 'anomaly'"?[41] Echoing Zang Jie's observation, theatre scholar Ge Fei's nuanced historical studies also describe Yuan's "left-turning" as an organic, gradual process pushed forward by the coercive dominant political atmosphere and his own continual struggles with artistic ambitions. Situating his theatrical practices within the larger context of Shanghai in the 1930s, Ge Fei argues that Yuan and his cohort's artistic tendencies are actually quite "right-leaning."[42] In line with the perspectives of Zhang Jie and Ge Fei, this paper complicates Yuan's left-turning process by re-reading his two putative "left-wing" films.

By connecting my previous research with this paper's textual analyses, we find that Yuan's approaches to issues of colonial oppression in his films are markedly different from those in other left-wing movies. In *Scenes of City Life*, he departs from theatrical carnivalesque mimesis to create a cinematic colonial mimicry with a double vision that disrupts the authority of the modernity project. In *Street Angels*, he further

38 Hsu Jen-Hao, pp. 119-134.

39 Ibid., p. 134

40 In her biography of Yuan, Guo describes Yuan's left-turning process as an unwavering political decision to fight against KMT's oppression of the proletariat movements. Please see Guo Xueqin, p. 54.

41 Please see Zang Jie, *Minguo yingtan de jijin zhenying: Diantong yingpian gongsi minxing qunxiang* (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2011), p. 29.

42 Please see Ge Fei, *Xiju, gemin yu dushi xuanwo: 1930 niandai zuoyi juyun, juren zai shanghai* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2008), pp. 97-99.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

exposes the limits of mimicry in the face of life and death and, taking a step forward, through the dignified face of Xiao Yun, the fallen woman, his aesthetics of mimicry yields to an ethics of "the face of the other," the quintessential excluded suffering figure of Shanghai modernity.

The nationalistic and revolutionary intents in other left-wing cinema often underscore a narcissistic identification with the colonizers, which instead of disrupting the colonizers' logic, actually reinstates their authority. In *Scenes of City Life*, Yuan's deployment of colonial mimicry, rather than maintaining it, subverts the authorities of modernity; in *Street Angels*, Xiao Yun, the fallen woman, is not appropriated for self-allegorization as a left-wing revolutionary male savior, as is often the case with other left-wing filmmakers. Xiao Yun resurfaces from oblivion and total silence at the end of the movie as "the face of the other." With her irreducible otherness, she demands our final recognition and ethical responses.

For Yuan, theatrical mimicry is not about becoming a commodified star or succumbing to identifications with modern Westernized enlightened authorities, but an ethical attempt to understand one's own subjectivity in the face of the other.[43] In the 1930s, after the Diantong Film Company recruited him to make socially conscious films, he carried this theatrical experience with him and produced two classic movies that seem to align with other left-wing films but, as my analyses have shown, are indeed significantly different. Michael Taussig's study of Cuna ethnography has led him to rethink postcolonial modernity from the perspective of mimetic faculties and colonial histories. Taussig tells us, as the stories of colonial contacts reveal, the self/other divide in colonial power dynamics cannot be sustained:

> Mastery is no longer possible. The West as mirrored in the eyes and handiwork

[43] In a speech delivered to female students at Peiming Girls' High School, Yuan Muzhi shared his acting experiences to guide them on a path to the art of acting. In this address, he strongly discouraged the students from aspiring to become stars; instead, he emphasized that this path also leads to the ultimate meaning of life. Please see Yuan Muzhi, "Xinqu, zhiyuan, shenghuo," *Yuan Muzhi quanji: Lunzhu juan*, edited by Yang Xinyu (Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Publisher, 2019), pp. 210-219.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

> of its Others undermines the stability which mastery needs. What remains is unsettled and unsettling interpretation in constant movement with itself-what I have elsewhere called a Nervous System-because the interpreting self is itself grafted into the object of study. The self enters into the alter against which the self is defined and sustained.[44]

To conclude this paper, I would like to echo Michael Taussig's idea of "mimesis and alterity" to illustrate how Yuan Muzhi's theatrical mimicry of modernity allows him, from *Scenes of City Life to Street Angels*, to gradually create cinematic aesthetics of alterity as an ethical response to China's colonial relationship with Western modernity, fundamentally changing the narcissistic power dynamics underlying nationalistic and revolutionary identifications with the colonizing West. In this sense, Yuan's "left-turning" process is not a conscious and deliberate immediate political choice, especially one aligned with the revolutionary apparatus of party politics;[45] rather, it is a slow and gradual process resulting from his ongoing aesthetic and ethical explorations of the dialectics between self/other and the colonialist West/the colonized Chinese amid the Janus-faced nature of Shanghai modernity.

---

44 Michael Taussig, p. 237.

45 Yuan Muzhi had been wavering among different political forces until he joined the CCP in 1940 in Yan'an. He decided to go to Yan'an because Zhou Enlai told him there was an opportunity for him to learn how to make documentaries. Yuan was never a politically savvy person. He was first and foremost an artist with a big heart whose primary concerns were art and society rather than one's own career in the political apparatus. This is why he failed to read the political climate after PRC was founded and very quickly became a victim of political struggle. Please see Zhu Ying, *Hollywood in China: Behind the Scenes of the World's Largest Movie Market* (E-book, New York: The New Press, 2022), pp. 98-197.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Mimicry of Modernity: Yuan Muzhi's Cinematic Representations of Shanghai Urban Lives

Jen-hao Walter HSU

Associate Professor, Department of Theatre Arts, National Sun Yat-Sen University

In this article I intend to re-read Yuan Muzhi's (1909-1978) two films—*Dushi fengguang* (*Scenes of City Life*, 1935) and *Malu tianshi* (*Street Angels*, 1937). Scholars have long categorized Yuan Muzhi as one of the early left-wing filmmakers and his frequently discussed film *Street Angels* has been canonized as a classic Chinese left-wing movie. Unlike most scholars who only focus on the content and form of his films, in this paper I will take Yuan's earlier theatrical experiences, especially his dedication to acting, as the starting point for my analyses. I will show that his earlier theatrical experience is not simply an experience of modern theatre but also "an embodied encounter with modernity" *per se* which further leads him to create cinematic aesthetics that transcends ideological imperatives. Via the critical lenses of mimicry of modernity, I will first seek to understand the relationships between his theatrical and cinematic aesthetics in terms of attempts to address the existential crisis of modernity. This paper will illustrate how Yuan Muzhi's early theatrical experiences of mimetic modernity leads him, first in *Scenes of City Life* to create cinematic colonial mimicry satirizing the desiring logic of modern urban life, and then in *Street Angels*, to further go beyond mimicry and achieve an aesthetics of alterity as an ethical response to China's colonial relationship to Western modernity. In so doing, this paper will also explore how Yuan Muzhi's "left turning" change is not a political one with nationalistic and revolutionary purposes but an aesthetic-ethical process directed toward "the face of the other."

Keywords: Yuan Muzhi　Chinese Left-Wing Cinema　*Scenes of City Life*　*Street Angels*　Colonial Mimicry

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

現代性諧擬：
袁牧之電影中的上海都會生活再現

許仁豪
國立中山大學劇場藝術學系副教授

在這篇論文中，我將重新閱讀袁牧之（1909-1978）的兩部電影——《都市風光》（1935）和《馬路天使》（1937）。學者們長期以來將袁牧之歸類爲早期中國左翼影人之一，他的電影《馬路天使》更被認爲是經典的中國左翼電影。不同於大多數僅關注其電影內容和形式的學者，在這篇論文中，我將以袁牧之較早的戲劇經歷，特別是他對表演技藝的深入鑽研，作爲我分析的出發點。我將說明，他的早期戲劇經歷不僅只是現代戲劇的經歷，其本身就是與現代性的一種「具身性」（embodied）遭遇，這經驗進一步引導他創造超越意識形態需求的電影美學。援引現代性諧擬的批判理論視角，我將首先試圖理解他的戲劇美學與電影美學之間的關係，尤其是在應對現代性存在危機的方面。本文將說明袁牧之如何從早期演出的現代性模擬經歷開始，首先在《都市風光》中創造出諷刺現代城市生活欲望邏輯的殖民諧擬電影手法，然後在《馬路天使》中更進一步超越諧擬手法，讓「基進他者」（radical alterity）美學浮現，作爲中國遭逢西方殖民現代性的倫理回應方式。通過這樣的方式，本文也將試圖理解袁牧之的「左轉」變化並不是具有民族主義和革命目的的政治過程，而是一個轉向「他者的臉」（the face of the other）的美學——倫理過程。

關鍵字：袁牧之　中國左翼電影　《都市風光》　《馬路天使》　殖民諧擬

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Works Cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Barber, Stephens. *Cinema and Urban Space: Projected Cities*. London: Reaktion Books, 2002.

Bhabha, Homi K. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis) (Spring 1984): 125-133.

Burggraeve, Roger. "Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other: The Vision of Emmanuel Levinas on Moral Evil and Our Responsibility." *Journal of Social Philosophy* 30.1 (Spring 1999): 29-45.

Ge, Fei 葛飛. *Xiju, gemin yu dushi xuanwo: 1930 niandai zuoyi juyun, juren zai shanghai* 戲劇、革命與都市漩渦：1930年代左翼劇運、劇人在上海. Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2008.

Guo, Xueqin 郭學勤. *Qianmian rensheng: Yuan Muzhi zhuan* 千面人生——袁牧之傳. Hangzhou: Zhejiang Renmin Publisher, 2005.

Hansen, Miriam Bratu. "Fallen Women, Rising Star and New Horizon: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism." *Film Quarterly* 54.1 (Fall 2000): 10-22.

Hsu, Jen-Hao 許仁豪. "Zai yishu yu aiqing zhijian: lun yuan muzhi zaoqi xiju shijian de zhuti bianzheng fa 在藝術與愛情之間：論袁牧之早期戲劇實踐的主體辯證法." *Journal of Theatre Studies* 30 (July 2022): 103-138.

Lee, Leo Ou-fan. *Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China, 1930-1945*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Ma, Ning. "The Textual and Critical Difference of Being Radical: Reconstructing Chinese Leftist Films of the 1930s." *Wide Angle* 11.2 (1989): 22-31.

Mennel, Barbara. *Cities and Cinema*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008.

Pang, Laikwan. *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932-1937*. Lanham, MD, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefiled Publishers, 2002.

Rea, Christopher. *Chinese Film Classics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021.

Shiel, Mark. "Cinema and the City in History and Theory." *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*. Edited by Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001.

Stallybrass, Peter and Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.

Sun, Shaoyi 孫紹誼 and Nie Wei 聶偉. "Daoyan: zai yingxiang de kuaguo liudong zhong fansi zhongguo dianying yu haolaiwu de guanxi 導言：在影像的跨國流動反思中國電影與好萊塢的關係." *Lishi guanpu yu wenhua dixing: kuaguo yujing zhong de haolaiwu he huayu dianying* 歷史光譜與文化地景：跨國語境中的好萊塢和華語電影. Guiling: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2012.

Tam, Kwok-kan. *Ibsen in China 1908-1997: A Critical-Annotated Bibliography of Criticism,*

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

Translation and Performance. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2001.

Taussig, Michael. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

Yeh, Yueh-yu. "Historiography and Sinification: Music in Chinese Cinema of the 1930s." *Cinema Journal* 41.3 (spring 2002): 78-98.

Yuan, Muzhi 袁牧之. "Wo yanju shengya zhong zhi juqu 我演劇生涯中之劇趣." *Yuan Muzhi quanji: Lunzhu juan* 袁牧之全集（論著卷）. Edited by Yang Xinyu. Shanghai Culture Publisher, 2019.

---. "Xinqu, zhiyuan, shenghuo 興趣・志願・生活. " *Yuan Muzhi quanji: Lunzhu juan* 袁牧之全集（論著卷）. Edited by Yang Xinyu. Shanghai Culture Publisher, 2019.

---. "Kanle chengshi zhiguan yihou 看了《城市之光》以後." *Yuan Muzhi quanji: Lunzhu juan* 袁牧之全集（論著卷）. Edited by Yang Xinyu. Shanghai Culture Publisher, 2019.

Zang, Jie 臧杰. *Minguo yingtan de jijin zhenying: Diantong yingpian gongsi minxing qunxiang* 民國影壇的激進陣營：電通影片公司明星群像. Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2011.

Zhang, Yinjin editor. *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Zhang, Zhen. *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Zhu, Ying. *Hollywood in China: Behind the Scenes of the World's Largest Movie Market*. E-book, New York: The New Press, 2022.

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫

臺灣大學學術期刊資料庫