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Fractured Shanghai, Flourishing Cinema: Politics and Ideology in Early 20th-Century Chinese Film

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the paradoxical flourishing of Shanghai's film industry amid political fragmentation and chaos of Republican-era China (1912-1949). While conventional wisdom suggests political dysfunction would hamper economic growth and cultural production, the situation in Shanghai was exactly the opposite. The city's unique status as a semi-colonial city, with multiple foreign and domestic administrative zones, created conditions that enabled economic and political dynamism along with industry expansion. The city's film industry reached its peak during this period, ultimately influencing Asia and the globe. Through analysis of key films, industry documents, and historical records, this paper demonstrates how competing political ideologies and powers shaped both film content and industry development. The research reveals that Shanghai's fractured political structure provided a unique environment where filmmakers could survive under – if not navigate between -- different political conditions and censorship regimes, enabling commercial innovation and industry expansion despite (or because of) the political instability.

The Shanghai Film Industry's Birth Under the Political Divergence of The City (Administration)

The Rise of International Settlements (Concessions)

To begin with, we must understand the origin of Shanghai's fractured political landscape which lasted for nearly a century. Present-day Shanghai is a thriving metropolis near eastern China's coast, but the city had already become "one of the most cosmopolitan cities on the globe" by 1913 (Collie 1913). To investigate the film industry in Shanghai and its connection with politics, we must first concentrate on the history of its political development and the emergence of the industry from these foundations.

Before the mid-19th century, Shanghai maintained a reputation as a small, negligible county (the "Shanghai Xian" or "Songjiang Fu") belonging to Jiangsu province (Ren and Li 2003). Before 1841, the start of the First Opium War, the imperial Qing government strictly followed a diplomatic tactic of closing the vast majority of its coastal borders and heavily regulating trade with the Western world (Zhao 2013). Consequently, the lack of influence from the Western world's industrial boom caused Chinese civilization to lag behind global technological advancements (Zhao 2013). Therefore, in 1841 when the British Navy attacked the Chinese coastal settlements because of the Qing government's ban on the opium trade, the imperial government suffered a tremendous military defeat for its outdated military system (Cui and He 2015).

The British almost effortlessly forced the Qing government to sign the first unequal treaty in modern Chinese history: the Nanking Treaty (Zhao 2013). Unlike Hong Kong, which was directly occupied during the course of the war and conceded to the British authorities, portions of Shanghai were defined as trade ports, leased to the British and open for trade with British merchants who enjoyed extraterritoriality (The Treaty of Nanking 1842). In the treaty, a clause granting the right of British citizens to trade and reside in Shanghai later became an agreement with the British consul and the Taotai, the local Chinese prefect, setting a specific location in Shanghai for Britain to place its initial

settlements in the region (Davis 1926). Specifically, the designated settlement area was the region around the creeks of Yang-King-Pang, beside the Whang-poo River (Davis 1926). In 1844, the British moved into their first Settlement in Shanghai. The United States followed and moved into the British Settlements with the support of its "Open Door Policy," claiming that the US was entitled to claim any land with equal rights in other nations' concessions or economic zones in China (Davis 1926). Soon, in 1863, the British and Americans joined in the election of a Municipal Council for the International Settlement, which thus became essentially a self-governing entity (Davis 1926).

The UK-US settlement later changed its name to the "Foreign Settlement at Shanghai North of the Yang-King-Pang," but it was more commonly referred to as the International Settlement (Hudson 1927), as the settlement soon opened to merchants from other nations such as Japan, Austria and Portugal (Davis 1926). The Municipal Council's members also expanded in the evolution to allow more members and nations to enter, though Britain was still in a dominant position (Davis 1926). By the late 19th century, it covered a large region spanning across the Northern West Coast of the Whang-poo, surrounding the Lujiazui and the Hongkew region (Davis 1926). The French also settled in Shanghai, but they instead chose to separately reside south of the international settlements (Davis 1926). According to the 1895 census conducted by the Shanghai Municipal Council, there were 1936 British, 328 Americans, 314 Germans, 138 French, and 250 Japanese along with other foreign citizens in total residing inside Shanghai (SMC 1895).

However, as one source points out, "one country is conspicuous by her absence – China" (Hudson 1927). In the 1925 census, the Chinese population consisted of 96 percent of the total population of the International Settlement (SMC 1925). Locals were not given the actual right to have a seat on the municipal council, despite being the majority of taxpayers to the council (Hudson 1927). The Shanghai Municipal Council, with its members primarily consisting of foreign nations' consuls, was the fundamental governance structure inside the Shanghai Foreign Settlements, as they were fully responsible for enacting legislation and making economic decisions (Davis 1926); however, the Qing government lacked even the right to interfere with the organization's affairs, as evidenced by the following official Taotai proclamation: "the entire area of the International Settlement shall be within municipal control, excepting temples founded by Imperial sanction and sites employed officially by the Chinese Government; with these exceptions, the existing regulations shall operate and must be obeyed" (Hudson 1927).

Thus, the international settlements and the French settlements were completely separated from the control of the contemporary Chinese government. These policies in fact ensured that Shanghai was insulated from the internal political conflicts of the late Qing dynasty, which made it especially suitable for foreign trade. Due to its geographic and political advantages, Shanghai gradually became the most economically important city in mainland China. These "Foreign Settlements" over time came to be called "Concessions" (Hudson 1927), signaling the increase of control of the non-Chinese over the land. This unique political arrangement, paradoxically, created spaces where firms and enterprises could develop with relative autonomy, sheltered from both foreign colonial control and domestic political censorship.

The Beginning of the Shanghai Cinematic Industry

Motion pictures were first exhibited on December 28, 1895, when the Lumiere brothers displayed their first films in Paris (Li 2006). It was not long before this new technology was imported into Shanghai, via French merchants in the French Concession (Zhong and Shu 1995). The first documented release of a movie in China happened in Shanghai on August 11, 1896 (Zhong and Shu 1995). On that day, the playground in the Xu Yuan in Shanghai for the first time introduced a new form of entertainment, *Xi Yang Ying Xi* (西洋影戏) (Zhong and Shu 1995), which can be directly translated as "Western Shadow Shows." (The shadow show is a type of traditional Chinese theatrical performance whose visual language provided a rough local analogy for the new cinematic medium.) Later, in July of 1897, a small American contingent from Hollywood also came to Shanghai to screen films (Xie 2017). Starting in 1899, Spanish merchant A. Ramos brought short narrative films into the city for the first time, later setting up a professional cinema in China in 1909: the Hongkew Grand Cinema. The success of this venture demonstrated the early commercial

viability of film exhibition in Shanghai's International Settlement, where the international settlers viewed cinema as a modern entertainment compatible with their vision of the city as a forefront of western culture in China (Liu 2009). Thus, the foreign film industry in Shanghai was established and began to expand rapidly.

Yet outside of Shanghai, film took a much longer time to penetrate the Chinese mainland. It was not until 1904 that the film was presented to Cixi, the de-facto leader of the conservative imperial Qing dynasty in Beijing (Zhong and Shu 1995). This first film screening for her turned out to be a failure as a photographic film caught on fire and exploded, reinforcing conservative opposition to the medium, and the film was forbidden inside the Forbidden City (Zhong and Shu 1995). Simultaneously, the nationalistic Boxer Rebellion, often interpreted as dangerously xenophobic and destructive by liberals but admirably anti-imperialist by later communists (Bo 2022), created a stranglehold on the spread of the movies among the population and territory under the Qing's control. Lastly, the already split warlord control of the whole Qing continent in the very last years of the dynasty acted as another factor resisting the income of cinematography inland into China (Theda 1976).

Therefore, Shanghai's unique characteristic of being a free city shared by multiple foreign nations in a relatively democratic manner, its dependency on trade, and the less strict or dictated political control it then nurtured, gave the city its advantage in trade and economics to become the birthplace of the Chinese film industry. Furthermore, the lack of effective interference from the Chinese in the area's affairs also facilitated the movie industry's development in the region.

The Development of the Native Film Industry in Shanghai

Initial Steps

The domestic film industry of Chinese-made films during the late Qing period was very limited; indeed, it would be impossible to speak of a "national cinema" at this time. The first commonly recognized local Chinese movie was "Ding Jun Shan" released in 1905 (Li 2006). The film was shot by Reng Qing Tai, who self-studied photography during his time working in Japan. The actual film was completely made in his photo studio in Beijing (Li 2006). However, Reng was no professional moviemaker, he also operated other kinds of shops such as a pharmacy, furniture shop, and soft drink factory (Li 2006), and produced movies as an amateur hobbyist. Later, he and his team also filmed other sections from other Chinese operas, and in fact, attracted a lot of people to come to watch (Li 2006). Yet compared to contemporary Western imported films, which already had complete plots and came fully formed with specific cinematographic techniques, this attempt was limited in its implications and scope.

The end of the Imperial Qing Dynasty changed everything. For the movie industry, it marked the destruction of obstacles to the development of films outside the foreign concessions at the governmental and political levels. From here on out, a truly local film industry began to develop which gradually found its subjects and techniques.

The Xinmin Company, the first native Chinese film company, was formed in Shanghai one year after the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1913 by Zheng Zhengqiu and Zhang Shichuan. Zheng Zhengqiu, a Shanghainese native born in 1889, started his career as a drama critic and was a member of the editorial group of the radical modernist newspaper [Minquan Bao]. Although it marked a great leap forward in China's movie industry, the company itself was a small company; its only purpose and business was to help the foreign-owned Asia Film Company outsource filmmaking duties and personnel. The Xinmin Company's initial strategy of subcontracting for the foreign-owned Asia Film Company demonstrates how Chinese filmmakers used the international settlements' foreign access to technical expertise and industry connections. In later years, the Xinmin Company would utilize their local sources and equipment knowledge gained from subcontracting to the Asia Film Company to make their own movies instead (Ai 2010).

In 1913 the pair made the film "Nan Fu Nan Qi," the first local feature film in China (Zhong and Shu 1995). The film focuses on a marriage between two people who haven't even met each other before the wedding but still reluctantly marry each other under their parents' orders per traditional Chinese custom. This film advocated the

abolition of the social structures of the old Qing regime and its "old-fashioned" traditions (Zhong and Shu 1995). This movie also expressed the political ideology of the contemporary upper-class elite revolutionists, reflecting the readership of Zheng Zhengqiu's previous employer, [Minquan Bao]. The local movie industry, at its very start, reflected strong pro-Western and pro-capital leanings that were popular in modernist circles at the time.

Preconditions for Prosperity: Giving Rise to Local Chinese Films

Opportunities Brought by World War One

Shanghai, as an international city, had already established specialized cinemas – 8 by 1914 (Zhao 2022), giving the opportunity for this movie to profit. However, this infant industry was still highly reliant on foreign trade, and with the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, critical supplies of film strips from Germany were no longer available for import. This supply shock acted as a spring frost for the budding industry, and consequently, both the Asia Film Company and the Xinmin Company were shuttered within the year (Xie 2017).

The economic turbulence during the initial growth stage of Chinese local films would leave a profound mark on the industry as it found its footing in later years. Future producers and moviemakers in Shanghai would be highly sensitive to the financial returns and profitability of their movies, shaping the ideological flavor of their films to bring maximum box-office returns.

Fortunately, the outbreak of the war eventually didn't bring the Shanghai Movie Industry to its end but made significant shifts toward its formation and future. European films, particularly French productions that had dominated local markets, suddenly disappeared from Shanghai's screens. Replacing them was the rise of movies from Hollywood, and the influence of Americans in China more broadly (Wang 2001). Shanghai Municipal Council census data reveals that the American population in Shanghai grew dramatically, from 940 in 1910 to 2,2644 by 1920. The US population growth rate from 1915 to 1920 is also the greatest overall (SMC 1920). By 1919, the Shanghai cinema market was monopolized by US-imported movies (Liu 2009). An article published by the magazine *Scientific American* in 2016 wrote:

The films displayed in the theaters prior to 1914 were almost entirely of French manufacture and furnished by French firms. Subsequent to the outbreak of war several American film companies succeeded in creating a demand for their films among the picture theaters of the Orient. (Scientific American 1916)

However, the rising cultural influence of Hollywood films proved controversial. Hollywood films often portrayed Chinese characters problematically: "When in places needing Chinese, the character if not acting as a lackey of bandits will act as servants of others... the person... be in a disgusting physical shape, intentionally insulting Chinese" (Ai 2010).

The limitations of Hollywood's appeal to Chinese audiences became increasingly apparent. A contemporary observer writing in *Scientific American* also noted:

… There is a big field in China for the development of native films, and it is along this line that the greatest opportunity undoubtedly exists for American film producers. A few foreign films will always find a place in the Chinese motion picture show, but it is doubtful indeed if the Chinese public would continue to patronize these theaters if they exhibited foreign film only. (*Scientific American* 1916)

Local concerns extended beyond cultural representation to social impact and value systems as well. Many Hollywood films focused on themes that were not highly favored by the local Chinese audiences. Typical Hollywood movies at that time depicted plots about robbery, corruption, criminal syndicates, and so on, which were not appreciated by the generally conservative Chinese audiences, while possibly also generating social instability inside Shanghai (Wang 2001). These concerns would later influence both government censorship policies and the development of local Chinese cinema as an alternative to foreign imports.

Political Instability in the 1910s-1920s

While the movie industry was growing, the political situation in Shanghai throughout these years was turbulent. After Republican China was established in 1912, the expected democratic, unified nation did not come; instead, China entered its fractious warlord period (Zhao 2013 [2]).

Shanghai, as the city with the largest economy in China, held crucial political importance to the warlords (Davis 1926). The international city's distinct characteristic of being the trade center of imports and exports from the Western world, plus the fact of it being a free and independent Western international settlement with a grand and diverse population of nationalities residing inside it, also gave the warlords the opportunity for trade and political connections with the Western residents. This, and fear of foreign military intervention, afforded Shanghai a degree of stability and protection from the internecine conflicts of the dueling warlord factions (Zhang 2018).

The civilian population living in Shanghai was also keen to entrench its special political status to provide protection from the political tumult. Shanghai in the early years of Republican China belonged to Jiangsu Province, an affiliated administrative district under the regulation of the central government; however, when compared to its crucial economic position among the whole country, this position proved inadequate. Accelerated by the increase of citizen's anxiety caused by the 1923-24 warlords' war, in January 1925, though disputed by the central government, Shanghai was declared to be an administratively special region. The new city in its charter was declared (Ren and Li 2003):

"No troops are to be permitted in the Shanghai Area. Public security should be organized by the local merchants" (Ren and Li 2003).

"[This Area] is to be self-governing, employing a democratic governance system and voting to deal with its internal affairs."

(These lines are both translated from Chinese to English by the author.)
(Ren and Li 2003)

Summarizing the points, by the enacted pressure from the foreign countries, the resistance of Shanghai's own citizens, and the later establishment of the relative independence of the whole region, Shanghai in the warlord period was relatively autonomous and stable. This stability, in turn, ensured the local Shanghai movie industry's accelerated growth and development.

The Ming Xing Company

In 1920, the founders of the failed Xinmin company Zheng Zhengqiu and Zhang Shichuan again established a new film company, the Ming Xing Film Company, marking a new chapter in Chinese cinema. The company’s founding reflected the heady economic boom that followed the economic shock of WWI, and the majority of its initial capital came from stock market speculation.

Early on the company faced a crucial dilemma that would characterize the entire Republican-era film industry: balancing commercial viability with ideological and artistic goals. Zheng Zhengqiu articulated this challenge explicitly:

…The current audience's aesthetic sensibilities are quite limited, and the creation of films that are too advanced is not conducive to their dissemination … In the current era of China's development, the selection of materials for works of cinema should not be too profound, and distributors should not only consider the educated few but instead focus on the majority of ordinary viewers as the primary target.
(translated from Chinese)
(Wang 2022)

The company’s breakthrough came with its first film "Gu Er Jiu Zu Ji.” The film covers the schemes and machinations of the infighting, fall from grace, and later recovery of a wealthy Shanghai family. The film, upon its release, caused a sensation among the Shanghai public and earned hefty revenues.

The movie's success stemmed from its acute understanding of Shanghai audiences' tastes. While Hollywood films emphasized romantic love and Western family ethics, "Gu Er Jiu Zu Ji" deliberately emphasized traditional Confucian values such as filial piety and family loyalty. The film's storyline, focusing on family intrigue and moral redemption, resonated with audiences by addressing familiar ethical frameworks rather than attempting to critique or reform society. (Zhang 2007).

This strategic shift proved commercially decisive, and the Ming Xing Company model generated a round of investment fever in the local film industry and a surge of native creatives. As Li Shao Bai, the author of "China's Cinematographic History," concludes: "The establishment of Ming Xing Film Co., Ltd. played a decisive role in the development of China's film production industry. This began the business operation period of China's film production industry in a complete sense." (translated from Chinese) (Li 2006). The success generated a wave of investment in local film production, demonstrating the viability of Chinese cinema as a commercial enterprise. This culturally specific approach to storytelling, combined with increasingly sophisticated production techniques, established a template that other studios would follow.

The Ming Xing era thus symbolizes a crucial transition in Chinese cinema from experimental cultural production to sustainable industry. The company's success demonstrated that Chinese films could compete with foreign imports by addressing local cultural preferences while maintaining high production values. This balance between commercial and cultural imperatives would influence Chinese film production well into the 1930s and beyond.

Political Contestation in the Cinema in the 1930s

The 1930s marked the peak of Shanghai cinema's strategic exploitation of political fragmentation. During this period, filmmakers developed increasingly sophisticated techniques for showcasing affiliations between competing power centers—particularly the Nationalist government, Communist influences, and Japanese imperial pressures. Consequently, movies diversified in both their plots and themes they wanted to propagate. This produced some of the industry's most influential works.

Government Censorship and Suppression of the Film Industry

The rise of Chiang Kai-shek's authority marked a significant shift in Chinese film regulation. In 1927, Chiang led the "First Northern Expedition" from his southern power base, and by 1928, with Soviet tactical support, he had achieved nominal control over most of China, forcing regional warlords to pledge allegiance to his Kuomintang (KMT) government (Wang 1987).

As a result of Chiang's efforts, China was nominally unified under a single administration for the first time since 1912. This unification not only marked the end of the warlord period but also marked the sudden increase of power and political position of a single political party, the Guomindang or China Nationalist Party. Chiang's consolidation of power had particular significance for Shanghai. The city's wealthy industrialists, especially the influential "Chekiang group" of financiers, provided crucial support for his regime. These business leaders advanced Chiang to three million yuan when he promised to regulate labor-capital relations. This funding notably supported his April 12, 1927 purge of Communist Party members, demonstrating the close alliance between the KMT and Shanghai's business class Coble (1980).

On October 26, 1932, a newly written law, "Interim Standards for Film Inspection," was passed by the Nanking Government. The "Standard" specifically contained clauses prohibiting actions such as "Propagating for other countries, harming the Republic of China," "Propagandizing all doctrines other than the Three Principles of the People is harmful to the Party and the state," and "advocating the propagation of class struggle." The new standard thus severely curtailed the freedom to advocate for political ideologies that ran counter to the political aims of the Nanking government (Gong 2012). In fact, such censorship had already begun in 1930, when on November 3 the initial version of this standard was published, stating that "Any film not checked by the government is not allowed to be screened" (Zhou 2013), and containing clauses banning movies which violate the "Three Principles of People" (Zhou 2013).

These restrictions proved particularly contentious given rising nationalist sentiment following Japan's September 18, 1931 invasion of Manchuria. (Lu 2002) describes how this event "made tens of millions of North-Eastern Chinese citizens suffer from bereavement for their motherland." The situation intensified with the January 28, 1932, Japanese attack on Shanghai itself, which continued until May 5. Although fighting mainly occurred outside the foreign concessions, the proximity of conflict dramatically impacted Shanghai residents (Lu 2002). Yet despite this context, the Nanking government prohibited anti-Japanese themes in films (Zhou 2013), creating a stark contradiction between official policy and public sentiment.

This tension between government control and popular nationalism would become a defining feature of Shanghai cinema in the 1930s, forcing filmmakers to develop increasingly sophisticated strategies for addressing political concerns while avoiding censorship.

The Film Industry's Influence Around the 1930s: A Clash of Political Ideologies

What became extensively popular in the 1930s was the use of movies as political propaganda by political groups in China. To understand how and why, we must first introduce the Film Group of the Chinese Communist Party. After April 12, 1927, when Chiang Kai-shek launched a massacre against Communists in Shanghai, resulting in the death of over 1,000 members, the Shanghai branch of the party was forced underground. Later, Chiang Kai-shek also turned his army to attacking and eliminating those areas under the control of the Communist Party (Yang 2002). Despite this suppression, the Communist Party developed new strategies for cultural influence. In August 1930, they established the China Left-wing Theater Industry League, a subdivision of the China Left-wing Writers League founded earlier that year. In September 1931, the Left-wing Dramatists outlined their strategy in their official document, "Recent Program of Action – Current Protocols for Movements in Anti-Left-Wing Areas" (Lu 2002). The program explicitly called for members to write movie scripts and sell them to film companies for distribution.

But for the time, these developments meant little to the Nationalist-led Republican government. The Yi Hua Film Company is a typical representation. The Yi Hua Company was started in October 1932 when three local Shanghai movie producers, after the January 28th Incident in the Battle of Shanghai, were sparked by patriotic emotions and made the collective's first two films: "Min Zu Sheng Cun" and "Rou Bo." Since its inception, the Yi Hua Company focused on producing highly patriotic, anti-imperialist films saturated in political ideologies driven by war concerns; consequently, the following year, the company experienced a dramatic increase in size – later historians noted this as a youth-led trend. However, this politically charged content led to violent repression. On November 12, 1933, a group claiming to represent the "Shanghai Film Industry Anti-Communist Association" vandalized the company's facilities, destroying equipment and leaving a declaration accusing Yi Hua of being "a propaganda agency of the Communist Party." While Yi Hua was not officially affiliated with the CCP, Zhou (2013) suggests the attackers were likely acting under the Nanking government's direction.

The incident forced Yi Hua to modify its approach. The company survived by publicly reframing its mission as "striving for cooperation between artistic geniuses and the increase of technical profession to supplement the development of the national fate in order to compete against the foreign movies" (Zhou 2013). However, this superficial compliance masked continued left-wing influence in production.

Therefore, although the KMT influence played a somewhat dominance, political tensions and conflicts acted in the Shanghai Film Industry around 1930 to create a phenomenon where films of drastically different themes were concurrently produced within the same market. By representing the conflicting political ideologies within the nation, local films in Shanghai flourished in their theme and subject matter, acting as not only outlets of political expression – along with defiance -- but also symbols of some of the most progressive thoughts in contemporary society. The following section analyzes three films produced in the context to exemplify all the characteristics of the 1930s Shanghai Film Industry mentioned in this paragraph.

"Queen of Sports" (1934) -- Patriotism as Cover for Social Critique: "Queen of Sports," produced by the Lian Hua Film Company, exemplifies how filmmakers could use ostensibly patriotic themes to advance more controversial

social criticism. The film follows Lin Ying, a young athlete whose journey to sporting success becomes a lens for examining broader social issues. Director Sun Yu masterfully positioned the film between multiple political demands by wrapping its social critique in the acceptable discourse of national fitness and athletic achievement.

The film's opening establishes this dual narrative when Lin Ying tells her father, "Daddy, I know why China is not strong! The first reason is that its body is too weak!" While this dialogue satisfies nationalist censors with its theme of "fitness to save the country," the film quickly moves to more controversial territory. Through Lin Ying's observations of Shanghai—"Some places people live are as big as palaces, while others are as filthy as dog houses!"—the film delivers a veiled critique of class inequality in the international settlement, running against the Guomindang's censorship directives forbidding class struggle. Perhaps it is no surprise that the Lian Hua Film Company bought multiple scripts from the Film Group of the CCP (Song 20214), indicating its willingness to harness national rejuvenation narratives that resonated with its audiences in Shanghai and Hong Kong, thereby turning a sizable profit. The company's access to Southeast Asian distribution networks via its dual registration in Hong Kong provided additional financial security and access to a large audience of overseas Chinese. This trans-jurisdictional position effectively shielded politically sensitive content through foreign connections while still maintaining access to mainland audiences.

"Scenes of City Life" (1935) – Explicit Communist Influence: Yuan Muzhi's "Scenes of City Life," produced by the Dian Tong Company, demonstrates an even more sophisticated exploitation of Shanghai's fragmented political structure. The film used its innovative form to mask sharp social criticism of urban capitalism and class inequality. Its story of love and financial ruin in Shanghai becomes a vehicle for examining the human cost of the city's rapid modernization.

The movie's production company, The Dian Tong Company, was well connected with the Chinese Communist Party. The company, created in 1934, had members from the film group of the CCP in the same year to advise and lead its filmmaking process (Hu 2013). However, the film's production company suffered from its closer ties to Communist influences, ultimately forced to close under Nationalist pressure only a year later in 1935 (Hu 2013). This outcome highlights both the opportunities and risks of Shanghai's fragmented political landscape, demonstrating how companies needed to carefully balance their political associations to survive.

"Bible for Daughters" (1934) -- Negotiating Multiple Ideologies: The Ming Xing Film Company's "Bible for Daughters" reveals perhaps the most nuanced approach to navigating Shanghai's complex political environment. Through its examination of women's lives in Republican-era Shanghai, the film manages to address feminist themes while avoiding direct confrontation with censors. The film's structure—presenting multiple women's stories through a series of interconnected narratives—allows it to incorporate diverse political perspectives while maintaining plausible deniability about its ultimate message. Furthermore, its claim as an adaptation of classical Chinese literature provided it with a shield of tradition that would make its message more palatable to the Nationalist government in Nanjing.

The film's sophisticated handling of gender politics exemplifies how Shanghai's fragmented political structure could enable rather than constrain artistic expression. By presenting multiple perspectives on women's roles in society, the film satisfies different political constituencies while maintaining commercial viability. The film's treatment of traditional gender roles, Western feminist influences, and nationalist themes demonstrates how filmmakers could balance competing ideological demands within Shanghai's unique political environment.

The Ming Xing Film Company was the largest company in the contemporary Chinese Film industry in Shanghai by market share(Ai 2010). However, they also had extensive links with the Communist Party's Movie Advisory Group. In 1932 three party members -- Xia Yan, A Ying, and Zheng Bo Qi – joined the Ming Xing Film Company. The Ming Xing Film Company is also the company with the highest amount of production of Left-Wing movies between April 1933 and June 1935, according to the Kuomintang's statistics (Song 2014), yet the company was never shut down, a testament to its skillful combination of left-wing messaging and profit-seeking cinematic expansion.

Conclusion

The evidence presented throughout this study demonstrates how Shanghai's political fragmentation in the Republican era paradoxically fostered one of the most dynamic film industries in early 20th-century Asia. While conventional wisdom suggests that political instability hinders cultural production, the case of Shanghai cinema reveals how divided political authority created conditions conducive to commercial success and industry expansion, along with political representation.

The city's unique status—divided between foreign concessions, nationalist-controlled areas, and quasi-independent regions—gave filmmakers unprecedented opportunities. During the birth of the Movie Industry in China, the fractured political landscape of Shanghai first provided the city with a dynamic Western cultural influence and loose administrative control from the conservative Qing government, along with the equally conservative domestic society, to help the technology plant its roots in the nation. Later, the free-market economy that such political circumstances enabled and the significant influence that World War I brought to Shanghai's market also made foreign films lose their market dominance in the city's cinemas, providing opportunities for Chinese filmmakers to capture the market share by more effectively grabbing local audiences' tastes.

Later on, the politically fractured Shanghai also made film production in the city possible even under Chiang's authoritarian national regime, with filmmakers navigating between different power centers – not drawing the line clear -- while none of any single regime exercised monopolized control over the city. In other words, different political forces in China developed indirect means of influence rather than direct control over the free city. The Nationalist government exercised influence through a formal censorship regime and informal pressure via organizations like the "Shanghai Film Industry Anti-Communist Association," while the Communist Party operated through its Film Group, which provided scripts and placed party members within commercial studios. Both approaches recognized that direct control was impossible in Shanghai's fragmented environment, leading to sophisticated systems of indirect influence. Commercial studios like Ming Xing and Lian Hua became sites of ideological contest, balancing Communist-authored scripts against Nationalist censorship requirements while maintaining their profit-seeking imperatives.

This history ultimately challenges our assumptions about the relationship between political stability and cultural production. Rather than requiring unified political control, creative industries may thrive precisely in environments where multiple power centers create spaces for innovation and experimentation. The Shanghai film industry's remarkable achievements during the Republican era stand as testimony to how political fragmentation when strategically navigated, can enable rather than inhibit pioneering and commercial success. The parallel development of indirect influence systems by competing political forces filtered through profit-seeking commercial studios created a unique environment for cultural innovation that remains instructive for understanding cultural production in politically complex environments today.

Still, the author does not claim here to have represented the entire spectrum of ideas and stories during this tumultuous time, only some representative currents. In producing this research, the author aims to provide further evidence for future research and shed light on the various factors -- political, economic, and cultural -- that shape the ideological makeup and development of a given population. Besides the Lian Hua Company, the Dian Tong Company, the Yi Hua Company, and the Ming Xing Company, many other production houses also flourished and deserve their attention and research. Internal structures, finances, and decisions of all these companies are topics worthy of discussion on their own.

The Shanghai film industry was briefly ended altogether during the Pacific War. But by 1941, the movie industry and the international character of Shanghai had struggled on and could be evidenced. Researchers classify this era as Shanghai's "isolated island period" (Zhang 2018 [2]). Today, of course, Shanghai and China's cinematic legacy continues, though without the drama and influence of that early period in Shanghai. Yes, mainland post-Cultural Revolution Fifth and Sixth Generation directors are sometimes cited by cineastes and scholars, but by and large PRC films were eclipsed by their Hong Kong and Taiwanese commercial and arthouse counterparts during this period (Hu 1997), while today big-budget *Wolf Warrior*-type Chinese productions largely alienate foreign audiences. While

auteurist cinema is alive and well in contemporary China (Bi Gan, Wang Bing, and others), it is worth wondering what has been lost since the raucous years of Shanghai cinema's golden era—and what still might be possible under different conditions.

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