Players of the 1920s: Interconnecting, Mediating

Zheng Zhengqiu was informed by a servant of the visit of a guest. It was an ordinary day in early 1913. The guest was Zhang Shichuan, whom he had known for a while. Zhang made the visit to discuss a proposition. Two American friends of his uncle, Yashell and T. H. Suffert, had taken over a small film company and planned to make a film based on a stage play which was very popular with Shanghai audiences. Zheng Zhengqiu was a renowned theater critic and was writing diligently for local newspapers at that time. He had many friends in this circle including the actors of the play. Zhang Shichuan's proposition, on behalf of Yashell and Suffert, was to ask Zheng to introduce these actors to the Americans. This plan did not work out, but films still needed to be made. Zheng, Zhang and several others thus invented some short comic stories, recruited actors, rented a house with a yard, and produced several 'shadowplays.' This event gave birth to the so-called ‘first Chinese short feature film’ (Nanfu nanqi, The Difficult Couple) and the ‘father of Chinese cinema’ (Zheng Zhengqiu), information that is contained in standard accounts of Chinese film history. This event was also the prelude to the cooperation between Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu on filmmaking throughout the following two decades. Seen in this light, the visit—along with the numerous visits, meetings, and encounters that defined interpersonal networks—was important.

Looking through the eyes of three tour guides—Zheng Zhengqiu, Bao Tianxiao, and Xia Yan, this chapter and the next piece together a picture of the people who founded, managed, or worked for Mingxing in diverse ways. While these figures conventionally fall into separate categories, i.e. Butterflies, Left-wingers, and Right-wingers, my study will render visible various interconnections and power relations that united them. The Mingxing story—or the story of early Chinese cinema in general—involves double games of power. On the one hand, the official version of the story provided in Fazhan shi resulted from a game of power. Although it was written as an official history supposedly

---
1 See Zheng Zhengqiu, “Zi wo daoyan yilai,” ZWD, 398; also see Zhang Shichuan, “Zi wo daoyan yilai,” MB 1.3 (16 May 1935): 10–14. The film company was called Yaxiya (其 own English name was China Film Company), founded in 1909 by a Jewish-American, Benjamin Brodsky. The play was entitled Heiji yuanhun (Wrong Ghost of an Opium Victim).
2 ZDFZS, 18–19; Tan Chunfa, Kaiyidai xianhe. For a revisionist study of Nanfu nanqi, see Huang Xuelei, “Nanfu nanqi yu ta de jingdian hua.”
in line with the ideological orthodoxy of the Communist Party, the writing process was more complicated than assumed. It mirrored the volatile political climate of the early Mao era. The project was sponsored by Xia Yan, the Vice Minister of Culture (Wenhua bu 文化部) between 1953 and 1966. Since Xia's film career started in Shanghai in the 1930s, his political rivals—mainly those with career backgrounds in Yan'an—could easily accuse him of following the 'bourgeois cultural and artistic line' (zichanjieji wenyi luxian 資產階級文藝路線). Therefore Xia and his associates felt the urge to defend themselves by stressing the 'leftist' orientation of their 1930s films. The publication of Fazhan shi reflected this political need. By creating what Xiao Zhiwei calls ‘the myth of leftist cinema’ and simultaneously devaluing so-called Butterfly and Right-wing productions, Xia Yan and his political allies attempted to cast themselves as revolutionary heroes in order to win, or at least survive, the power struggles. This is the invisible game of power hidden beneath the ‘official’ narrative of Chinese film history.

On the other hand, there was another game of power in which the real historical figures participated. This game differs from what the official historians tried to make us believe. This chapter and the next seek to debunk the widely accepted ‘myth’ and to tease out the power relations at work in the real historical temporality. Defining these Mingxing people as ‘cultural brokers,’ I attempt to reveal how their individual life trajectories converged across media and ideological borders and how interconnected personal lives contributed to the mediating dynamics of Shanghai filmmaking. This chapter focuses mainly on the 1920s. It begins with a summary of the standard story about relevant figures. This is followed by a new look at these people based on contemporary source materials. These people include (1) five founding members of Mingxing; (2) Bao Tianxiao and Hong Shen, the first two screenwriters; and (3) a group of publicists and screenwriters conventionally labeled as Butterflies.

---

3 See Shen Yun, “Xia Yan shengping nianbiao (disi gao),” 50–51.
4 For the Yan'an-Shanghai cleavage, see Paul Clark, Chinese cinema, 129ff. For the ‘anti-rightist campaign’ in the film world, cf. Hu Jubin, Xin Zhongguo dianying yishi xingtai shi, II, 135; For political attacks on Xia Yan, see Benkan bianjibu, “Pipan Xia Yan tongzhi de zichan jieji wenyi luxian,” Dianying yishu 3 (1966): 8–16.
5 Zhiwei Xiao, “Sanshi niandai ‘zuoyi dianying’ de shenhua.”