

**Affective Authenticity: the Opera Film in Early Chinese Cinema**

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Since film entered China in the late 19th century, it has been received as a new technology and art form related to theater. This study intends to find a tripartite connection between traditional Chinese theater, Western cinematic theories and practices, and Chinese film/literary critics in their contribution to the development of Chinese cinema aesthetics in the first half of the 20th century. I argue that conventional theater extensively influences early Chinese cinema regarding its aesthetics and construction of affective spectatorship. In particular, the opera film finds a middle ground in negotiating the cinema sphere's realistic and abstract aesthetics and functions. In contrast to cinematic realism, the authenticity in Chinese opera films is presented through authentic feelings, and I name it as affective authenticity. The feeling is fulfilled through participatory spectatorship and cinematic affect that vibrate between the viewer, the screen, and the cinematic sphere. In traditional Chinese theater, where abstraction is one of the main characteristics, the authenticity perceived by the audience is not conveyed by the stage settings but through a kind of emotional transmission. Similarly, the opera films of the Republican period also carried on such interactive effects on their audience.

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## 1.0 Introduction

China's early exploration of cinema captured a wide range of influences from the world, and was from the beginning embedded in local cultural landscapes. It is a medium that reflects the social, political, and cultural transformations that took place in China during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The comprehensive study of early Chinese film history began as early as 1960s. Early works that provide detailed narratives of Chinese film history include the *History of Chinese Cinema* by Cheng Jihua and the *History of Silent Film in China* by Li Suyuan and Hu Jubin. The two works concurrently define early Chinese cinema as ranging from 1896 to 1937. Early Chinese film historians have extensively excavated primary materials such as original film clips, newspapers and magazines from archives; thus outlining a general timeline for the Chinese history in the first half of the twentieth century. Subsequently, overseas Chinese film scholars approach early Chinese film studies from different perspectives. For example, Zhang Zhen's *An Amorous History of Silver Screen* examines the early Chinese film history through the lens of modernity and vernacular movements. Bao Weihong's *Fiery Cinema* interprets the early Chinese cinema as an affective medium via the lens of apparatus, spectatorship, and technology. In the first chapter of *Primitive Passions*, Rey Chow discusses a story about a renowned Chinese intellectual, Lu Xun, whose encounter with a shocking lantern slide about Japanese

solders' execution of a Chinese spy during his study in Japan manifests the influence of film as a medium to influence one's thought in terms of spectatorship.<sup>1</sup>

Despite detailed documentation of the history and theory of Chinese cinema in previous scholarly publications, Chinese film studies have not systematically touched on the concept of affect in opera films. As a traditional art form, opera has existed since the Song Dynasty (960 – 1127), and represents a genuine Chinese aesthetic. It is within the unique cultural environment of the opera-based visual art landscape that opera films emerged. Meanwhile, there is also limited discussion about aesthetic issues in terms of authenticity in the context of Chinese early cinema. Even though the film has been widely perceived as a medium of presenting reality since its invention, its realistic aesthetics conflicted to some extent with the abstract aesthetics of the traditional Chinese opera. Thus, this paper argues that the opera film reconciles two distinctive aesthetic approaches by embodying the concept of “authenticity.” “Authenticity” is a perceptual reality rather than in the sense of visualization. Although the visual effects of opera films do not completely reproduce the real world that people see on the screen, the audience still has an authentic experience of watching an opera performance in front of the screen.

In this study, I want to concentrate on space, participatory audiences, and cinematic apparatus to discuss “affective authenticity” in the aesthetics of Chinese opera film to describe the unique viewing experience and artistic expression brought to the audience by opera films.

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<sup>1</sup> Chow, Rey (1995), 'Visuality, Modernity, and Primitive Passions', *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press), 9.

I argue that traditional theater extensively influenced early Chinese cinema in terms of aesthetic constructions and affective perceptions. In particular, the opera film found a middle ground in negotiating the aesthetics and functions of the cinematic realism and theatrical abstraction. In contrast to realism, the authenticity of Chinese cinema is rendered through authentic feelings, which I refer to as “affective authenticity.” That is, the feeling of authenticity is achieved through participatory viewing and affect that vibrates between the audience, the screen, and cinematic space. In the following sections, I will first provide the definition of “affective authenticity” as opposed to the cinematic realism in a broad sense with a focus on opera films. In the first chapter, I will discuss the concept of realism in cinema studies and how it relates to the early Chinese film theory. Orthodox theories of cinematic realism by Andre Bazin and Jean-Louis Baudry will be further explored here. Then I will introduce Chinese art and film theories of Bao Weihong, Rey Chow, and Gao Minglu to compare and contrast how “realism” is alternatively interpreted under the Chinese artistic and cultural context, thus leading the discussion to the opera film, which I characterize its aesthetic traits as “affective authenticity.”

The second chapter discusses opera space and its relation to the early cinematic space in the Republic of China. The chapter first discusses the various types of traditional opera space and their relation to its surrounding environment and spectator engagement. Due to the aesthetic nature of the Chinese opera, opera stage design is largely flexible. It also prioritizes spectatorship and emotional interaction between performers and audiences rather than the artistic pursuit of stage design. The stage design is mainly served as a foil for the atmosphere. For example, the waterfront stage, garden stage, and stage set up in the commercial places, all



reflect the aesthetics and needs of the viewer. Thus, space is also an essential element of affective experience in traditional opera performances.

Early Chinese cinema had a solid spatial connection to traditional opera. Such a connection also influences Chinese audiences' understanding of the function and aesthetics of the cinema. Early films were initially screened in opera spaces in China, including private gardens and tea houses. Instead of being received as a story-telling medium, film was believed to have similar functions and roles as opera – people took it as entertainment and an atmosphere-enhancing device. As the revolutionary crescendo spread in the Republic of China, the opera stage was moved to modern theaters with lights, grand stages, and neatly organized auditoriums. Since film and opera existed in a shared space, film screenings were also moved to modern theaters. At the same time, a new form of theatrical art called “serial play” emerged in Shanghai, which simultaneously combines theatrical and film space and creates unique experiences for audiences. Even though it only existed for a short period for commercial reasons, it invited further exploration into combining opera and film. For example, Mei Lanfang's opera films use many long shots to achieve the illusion of continuity between the screen space and the theater space.

The third chapter discusses the theoretical connections between Chinese opera and film. The ideological reforms of the Republican period also extended to the theater arts – traditional opera underwent a series of transformations and innovations during this period. Many film directors were also famous screenwriters at the time, so they gradually applied opera theory to film practice. The opera film reflects some filmmakers' will to preserve traditional theatrical

art via a new medium, an experimental field in revolutionizing Chinese opera while maintaining traditional theatrical aesthetics.

Finally, the paper concludes with a case study of one of the most successful opera films titled *Murder in the Oratory* in 1937. The film was based on one widely performed opera in China, and its storyline was set in the Han dynasty. Despite the accusations that the film received from many revolutionaries, the film blends opera and film well together regarding the viewing experience. The film, then, manifests the idea of affective authenticity via its construction of an operatic-cinematic space, preservation of traditional aesthetics of abstraction, and its experiment of affective apparatus and performances. The director's creation of a fluid space and use of cinematic language not only express the abstract aesthetics of traditional Chinese opera, but also strengthen the emotional expression of the film, allowing the audience to be captivated by the aesthetics of "affective authenticity" delivered by the film.

## 2.0 Theoretical Foundations of “Affective Authenticity”

The appearance of motion picture intensified the discussions of realism when people discuss the aesthetics and functionality of film. In the tradition of mimesis in cinema, film is considered as the “slice of life” not only because it preserves the impact of realism in visual terms to give audiences the illusion that they are exploring the “real world” in the dim cinema, but also because the reality of life and society is brought to the screen after artistic treatment. The filmic realism has been extensively discussed by western theorists such as Andre Bazin, Jean-Louis Baudry and Siegfried Kracauer. For cinematic realism theorists, the invention of cinema and the development of visual technology have always been accompanied by a discussion of reality, and they believe film is a medium that records reality, presents the reality, and provides audiences with the chances to experience reality.

As one of the pioneers of realist cinema, Krakauer believes that cinema, through its special medium, presents the audience with the absolute reality of the world.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Bazin also believes that cinema is a realistic medium. However, he takes issue with Krakauer’s view that early cinema could not completely replicate reality due to some technical limitations.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> Kracauer, Siegfried (1960), *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 42. Krakauer’s seminal work, *The Theory of Film* published in 1960, thoroughly explains his theory of cinematic realism. The basic idea of his concept is that cinema is capable of capturing staged reality. In the first section of his work, he regards film as the extension of photography, and moves towards realistic and formative directions. Kracauer believes that the film’s material manifestation lies in cinema’s “recording” and “revealing” function. “Revealing” is another realistic function of the film as it “reveals” minor details that are usually unnoticed by photographers and audiences.

<sup>3</sup> Bazin, André (2009), ‘The Ontology of the Photographic Image’, *Film Theory & Criticism* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press), 161. In the writing, Bazin famously writes, “for the first time an image of the world is

“complete realism” is the ultimate goal for the cinema.<sup>4</sup> Arnheim counterargues that film could not be exclusively considered as the replication of reality while overlooking its artistic contribution. The obsessive pursuit of reality only undermines the artistry of cinema.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Baudry believes the cinema should provide viewers with an immersive and realistic experience beyond the screen considering the cinematic apparatus. By comparing the movie theater to Plato’s cave, he remarks that the film theater space is deceptive in a way that viewers are convinced that the optical light and shadow reflected on the wall represents reality.<sup>6</sup> The

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formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. The personality of the photographer enters into the proceedings only in his selection of the object to be photographed.” The difference between Bazin and Kracauer lies in their divergence over formalist films – while Kracauer perceives the formalists preexist fine arts, thus cannot demonstrate the unique value of film, Bazin believes that multiple artistic effects and their film technique’s evolution will expand the realism of film. Film languages may not reproduce reality on the screen as it is, but they can minimize the shortcomings of camera shots and montage in reproducing a sense of reality, namely, the indexicality of real-life images.

<sup>4</sup> Bazin (2005b), 'The Myth of Total Cinema', *What is Cinema?* (1; Berkeley: University of California), 17-22. The essay was initially published in 1946 suggests Bazin’s idea that cinema will finally reach its completed form through progressive imaginations of the human mind. The idealist goal of cinematic technological development is from the unlimited imagination of the human being about the real world that can be presented in the film theater. The potential of film, in terms of its ontology, is never constrained by edges of the screen, but extends to the material ends of the reality. Since human’s imagination is the creative foundation of the realistic future of the cinema, the artistic portion of the cinema is still grounded on the technology behind-the-scenes. The technological basis of the cinema might not confine the artistic potentiality of the cinema, but recreates reflections of the magnificent world within human mind based on the material reality.

<sup>5</sup> Arnheim, Rudolf 'The Complete Film', in Leo; Choen Braudy, Marshall (ed.), *Film Theory & Criticism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press), 156. Arnheim emphasizes on the artistic function of film and believes film shall also be considered as a form of art since there is a huge gap between the perception of reality and the reproductions on the film screen. He believes that the pursuit of reality can harm the artistry of the film as filmmakers ignore the imitating nature of the film image and discard other possibilities of visual technology and instead pursue reality.

<sup>6</sup> Baudry, Jean-Louis (1986), 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press), 291. Baudry explains the mechanism of the projector behind the issues as follows, “the subject is put forth, liberated by the operation which transforms successive discrete images into movement meaning.” Indicating operations of cinematic apparatus conforms to the pattern of human perception and also dominates/subverts human’s perception in the theater space.

invention of film achieved, to some extent, the goal of realism that arts such as painting and sculpture had been unable to achieve due to the limitation of medium. At the same time, realism is also an ongoing goal pursued by directors and film technicians with regard to film language and equipment. As a result, unlike painting and sculpture, which only mimic the reality, film is a more direct copy of them.

In addition to the representation of reality, the cinematic realism also concerns with human emotion and perception. Benedictus de Spinoza interpreted the term “affect” as the actual effects of external objects that the body senses pleasure or pain from, and the subjective idea that external matters have an effect on our bodies.<sup>7</sup> His idea of “affect” can be further used to explain Baudry’s explanation of cinema’s ideological effects on the spectator. Cinematic hallucinations triggered by cinematic spaces and devices can be interpreted as an effect that unconsciously draws the viewer into a hypnotic state - the viewer's perceptions are controlled by the visual mechanisms of the film. Gilles Deleuze further examines the mechanisms by which “affect” is transmitted between the screen and the audience. He believes that while the action is the result of the body movement mediated by audiences’ perception of the film image, it is the “affection” occupies the interval in between the two limit-fact. The “affect” is something disturbing and hesitant that surges between action and film image.<sup>8</sup>

Despite film theorists’ comprehensive discussion of cinematic realism and their insights into “affect” in film studies, it is not enough for me to offer my take on opera films in early

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<sup>7</sup> Spinoza, Benedictus de (1997), *Ethics - Part 1*.

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze, Gilles (1986), 'From the Movement-Image to Varieties', *The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 65.

Chinese cinema, which I have termed “affective authenticity.” The cinematic realism’s perceptual perspective only partially applies to early Chinese cinema, especially the opera film. Opera film, as a unique genre that brings theater elements into the film, does contain realistic features by extending the “feeling of the real.” However, its stylized and abstract performance of Chinese opera defies the realism claim in the Western sense. Therefore, I argue opera film is not only realistic but also authentic in terms of the sensory experience it brings to the audience. “Affective authenticity” describes the early opera film’s feature of engaging audiences in abstract opera performance through affective, participatory spectatorship and the fluid space between opera and film theater.

My theory also draws on Chinese film scholars such as Victor Fan, Rey Chow and Weihong Bao on their discussions on cinematic realism, affect, apparatus and space in the particular context of Chinese cinema. Zhong Dafeng and Victor Fan’s discussions on cinematic realism in China inspired my ideas about “authenticity” in early Chinese cinema. In the past four decades, many Chinese film scholars endeavor to answer questions of how to interpret cinematic realism under the special Chinese cinematic context to avoid overgeneralizing the realism theory. Due to the deep connection between early Chinese film and Hollywood cinema, some scholars in early Chinese film studies tend to search for evidence or prove Chinese films mirrored Bazin’s theory of realism or vice versa.<sup>9</sup> Another school of scholars believe that Chinese cinema should develop its own film theory considering the cultural and historical peculiarities of film development in China, and they tried to find Chinese film theory from its

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<sup>9</sup> Fan, Victor (2015), *Cinema Approaching Reality* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press), 17.

relationship to the traditional opera performance. For example, the Chinese film scholar, Zhong Dafeng, published a journal article titled “On Film-Theater”, stating the opera has a key influence on the development of cinema in the Chinese context. By pointing out “the theatrical film was in the specific context of early Chinese film development, and therefore a specific art history phenomenon,” Zhong doesn’t believe Chinese cinema emerged and developed with the premise of “replication of reality” as its primary aesthetic pursuit. The cinematic realism theory is not entirely applicable for him in Chinese cinema.<sup>10</sup>

Building on the theoretical debate between Chinese film theory and cinematic realism, Victor Fan found a middle ground between the realist theory and Chinese film, and opened a cross-cultural dialogue in early film theory in his monograph, *China Approaching Reality*. Fan has browsed through early Chinese film critics’ writings, and found that they share similar interest in representing reality with the western scholars since both sides consider cinema a photographic medium that reveals “spark of life” unreservedly to its audiences.<sup>11</sup> Fan further states that the reality in Chinese film is not the objective reality as explained in the mainstream cinematic realist theory, but rather, something “approaches reality.” In this case, audiences have adequate room to reflect on the social and moral issues when watching films. To put it simply, Fan’s theory of “approaching reality” explains that the early Chinese cinema did not completely share the cinematic realism of pursuing or establishing the reality on the screen. Films are conversely being applied by Chinese filmmakers to beautify life by lifting spirits of

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<sup>10</sup> Zhong, Dafeng (1985), 'On “Film-Theater”', *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, 2, 89.

<sup>11</sup> Fan (2015), 36.

the audience. Prior to entering the cinema, the audience has tacitly accepted the content of the film as unreal, but after entering the cinema, the glorified world of the film gives the audience the dream that this is where he wants to be. After audiences leave the theater, they will apply the moral and aesthetic ideal suggested by the film to gradually transform the reality that they live in.

Fan's theory is also under the influence of Baudry and Deleuze as they all agree on that the cinematic reality has inseparable relationships with audiences' subjectivity. In order to deceive the audience what they are watching is realty, the film will use its machinery to influence the audience's subjectivity subconsciously. When Chinese audiences are exposed to films, they relinquish their rationality not only because how well the images on the screen reproduce real objects, but also because of the actors' performances. To quote Fan's words, "[mechanical reproduction] is not in itself an entry point into reality. What it does is preserve and convey a powerful performance that can put the spectators into a shared affective state."<sup>12</sup> Thus, Fan explains the cinematic reality as an emotional state that connect spectator's sentiment to actor's performance on the screen.

Rey Chow and Weihong Bao's discussion of emotion also contributes to my discussion by combining the concepts of "authenticity" and "affect" into my theoretical framework. They introduced the idea of "affect" into the discussion of Chinese film theory. Rey Chow wrote a story about a renowned Chinese intellectual, Lu Xun, in the first chapter of her publication titled *Primitive Passions*. She illustrates the effect of movies on the human mind with a

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<sup>12</sup> Fan (2015), 35.



shocking slide of a lantern that Lu Xun encountered during his stay in Japan. Such an astonishing visual encounter for Lu Xun inspired Rey Chow's discussion of Chinese nationalism evoked by visuality, "national self-consciousness is thus not only a matter of watching 'China' being represented on the screen; it is, more precisely, watching oneself – as a film, as a spectacle, as something always already watched."<sup>13</sup>

Chow's discussion of Lu Xun's story resonates with Fan's idea. Fan believes that realism is a sentiment aroused by performance; likewise, Chow considers reality an emotional experience rooted in the power of image – by viewing figures on the lantern show, audiences are reflexively gazing back to themselves. The referential relationship between the audience and the characters on the screen sets up an affective state for the audience; although audiences clearly know that on-screen figures are not themselves, they are empathetic with them as if they are experiencing similar situations. The realism for Chow, therefore, can be explained as a fluid emotional experience between the audience and the characters in the film.

Bao coined the term "affective medium" to describe the influence of emotion and environment on the viewer in cinema, and the relationship between cinema and realism in the Chinese context. In the beginning of her book, Bao discussed a film-burning incident occurred at the Weiyi theater in Chongqing on January 27, 1940. Although the film catered to the taste of Chongqing audiences for its selling points of "dramatic narrative, comic relief and allegorical reference to the war," it still attracted the resentment of some Chongqing

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<sup>13</sup> Chow, Rey (1995), 9.

audiences.<sup>14</sup> After a young man took the stage to denounce the film director Bu Wancang for colluding with the Japanese army, the participating audiences were suddenly aroused to attempt to burn the cinema. Bao suggests that the boundaries of media be reconfigured due to the mediated environment beyond the screen, which led to unexpected responses. Therefore, it is crucial that we include the environment when considering the characteristics of Chinese cinema. Even though in a dimly lit cinematic environment, the Chinese spectator is distinct from Baudry's spectator in his apparatus theory – the screen no longer occupies the subjective position and the viewer is no longer passively imprisoned in the cinema. Chinese audiences are transformed into active spectators via the mediating environment that transcends medium boundaries among the screen, the audiences, and the vibrating air that permeates in the cinema; and thus they actively connect their body and emotion not only with the screen, but also the space and affective atmosphere around them.

Even though Bao does not directly mention "cinematic realism" in her articulation of cinematic affect, there is still a degree of connection between affect and realism. Baudry's writing on the cinematic apparatus states that audiences are surrounded by an illusion created out of the light and shadow. Meanwhile, cinematic devices and environments create a supposedly real experience for them; they equate the illusion to the real world. The historical incident that Bao describes nearly overturns Baudry's theory on spectatorship as she proposes the active spectatorship under the context of Chinese cinema. The Chinese audiences'

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<sup>14</sup> Bao, Weihong (2005), 'Introduction', *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915-1945* (Mommeapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press), 1.

perception has detached from the screen once the atmosphere vibrates in the cinema – the cinematic realism for them does not reside within the screen, but conversely interrelates with the affective atmosphere within the film theater. The realism is not limited to the screen’s faithful replication of objects, but extends to affective experiences that activate audiences and convince them. To conclude, the cinematic realism in the context of early Chinese cinema is intimately linked with the sensory experience; that is, what is observed is not necessarily genuine, but what is perceived reflects the real experience that the film brings to its spectators.

In other words, the theory of Chinese spectatorship regards the film as a stimulative art form that can bring them a near realistic affective experience instead of a type of technological advancement that captures both real imageries and light and shadow in the physical sense. Since “realism” doesn’t thoroughly explain the film’s affective impact on Chinese audiences, this study proposes that “affective authenticity” best reflects the sense of reality that Chinese films bring to audiences on the emotional level, which is reflected in the sensory rather than the visual.

In addition to realism and affect, the third aspects of “affective authenticity” is abstractness. Even though abstractness may sound contradictory to authenticity, it somehow reinforces the authenticity and effect of opera films through the combination of a set of traditional aesthetics and modern cinematic visual techniques. My theory has been inspired by Gao Minglu’s discussion of “Yipai/ Idea Expressionism.” As an art historian, Gao believes western art concepts are not sufficient to understand the nature of abstraction in Chinese visual art, especially those that inherit conventional ways of expression. To thoroughly interpret

Chinese art, one shall understand artists' intentions, the context of artistic creation and the historical background of the art piece.<sup>15</sup> Gao coins the term "Idea Expressionism" (*Yi Pai*, 意派) to describe Chinese art theory as one that differs from western modern and post-modern arts. "Idea Expression" as the core of Gao's Yi Pai theory, is transferred from conventional Chinese visual art to modern and contemporary arts. In Gao's theory, "idea expression" emphasizes the essence of most Chinese art – they are adept at turning appearance into concept, transforming matter into spirit. Gao also states that idea expressionism can be found in all kinds of visual mediums, including architecture, painting, film, and video installations, not limited to non-realistic paintings and sculptures.

In conclusion, the early development of Chinese cinema was heavily influenced by the tradition of realism; however, the distinctive Chinese cultural environment and aesthetics have given rise to many special Chinese film categories and visual culture. Early Chinese cinema offers a varied aesthetic manifestation of realism, which this paper explains as "authenticity". I believe opera film is one of the film genres unique to Chinese audiences, which, in terms of its subject matter, performances, and atmosphere, best manifests the concept of "authenticity." Despite its lack of realism, the Chinese opera film exhibits what I would call "affective authenticity" that effectively draws audiences in its realm of correlative rapport. The authenticity is one of the characteristics of the opera film as it represents authentic Chinese aesthetics in comparison to western cinematic realism. Such authenticity lies not in visuality,

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<sup>15</sup> Gao, Minglu (2009), 'Theory of Idea Expressing: a Theory Over-throwing Representative Theory II', *Journal of Nanjing Arts Institute*, 1.

but in how the film incentivizes audiences to grasp the feeling of authenticity through its affective cooperation with the surrounding environment and cinematic apparatus. In this chapter, the concept of “affective authenticity” has been further explored under the theoretical framework from cinematic realism, affect and the conventional abstract aesthetics in China. In the next chapter, the idea of “affective authenticity” will be further explored through the discussion of the Chinese traditional theater and opera films.

### **2.1 Melting Tradition into Modernity: Affective Authenticity in Opera Films**

Based on varied types of exploration of “realism” in western and Chinese film histories, the word “real” cannot thoroughly capture early Chinese cinema’s characteristics in artistry and audience experience from the sensorial perspective – especially for opera films. Compared to other Chinese film genres, opera film has its own unique artistic characteristics from stage design to narratives that distinguish itself. The purpose of opera films is not to show the audience real-life scenes such as bustling streets, tranquil nature or the interior of a household, but to transfer experience from the traditional opera theater to the cinema; meanwhile, providing spectators a similar sensory experience. Therefore, the opera film does not create “realism” as discussed in western film theory because the genre presents film in a theatrical way. The opera film emphasizes affect and aesthetics directly related to the conventional opera. The opera film, therefore, possesses a fictional characteristic embodied on stylistic dance

movements and simplistic stage settings, which is a far cry from the aesthetic of realism. Yet, however non-realistic the opera is, the opera film still holds the feature of “authenticity” in terms of the sensory experience it provides to the audience.

The idea of authenticity signifies an authentic experience reinforced by multiple aspects within the cinema, including apparatus, spectators, and the vibrating atmosphere that flows within the theater. Even if the audience is ready to watch a fictional film before they enter the theater, they are ultimately influenced by the atmosphere created through performance, editing, sound and the reactions of the surrounding audience, resulting in an affective viewing experience after they finish the film.

Among various genres of early Chinese cinema, the opera film best demonstrates the characteristic of affective authenticity due to its faithful adaptation of the traditional opera. Opera films combine features of traditional Chinese opera performance and cinematic languages to recreate an opera-viewing experience on the silver screen. In particular, as I will elaborate below, the opera film exhibits three aspects of affective authenticity: aesthetics of abstraction, performer-audience rapport, and affective space.

The combination of the conventional artistic form and modern visual technology has inspired an aesthetic communication and integration in opera films – while recording the actors’ performance with the camera, opera films also retain the authentic taste of the traditional opera by adding up details of traditional stage on the screen. Yet, the conventional opera and the cinema have opposing visual characteristics – while the opera calls for “imagination” and “vagueness,” film calls for “concreteness.” The “Yi Pai/idea expressionism” theory provides

an aesthetic framework for opera films. As a modern recreation of the traditional performance form, the opera film extensively preserves the aesthetic of abstraction and minimalism in traditional opera performances.

The 1937 opera film, *Murder in the Oratory* (*Zhan Jing Tang*, 斩经堂), presents to the audience the simplicity of opera performance. Although the film's adaptation of the opera adds a great deal of realistic backgrounds such as the battle ground, the structure of the house, and the interior of the oratory, the film still keeps the transformation of the scenes as simple as possible. The film's plot follows the linear timeline of the opera from the initial battle scene to the final outdoor scene where Wu Han (吴汉) makes his decision to follow Liu Xiu (刘秀) to reclaim the regime from Wang Mang (王莽). In the last chapter of *The Phantom Heroine*, Judith Zeitlin also discussed the feature of simplicity of traditional opera performance via presenting the illusive ghost in vagueness. The stage props and performance movements are highly symbolic and stylized. For example, the conventional theaters use special prop such as spirit kerchief (*Hun Pa*, 魂帕) to indicate the presence and disappearance of spirit in theatrical scenes. As Zeitlin describes, "the female lead removes the spirit kerchief not only to make herself visible to the human participants, but assure her ascent to the celestial realm, she is ghost no longer."<sup>16</sup> Compared to the traditional theater, most films apply the dissolving editing technique to reconstruct the appearance and disappearance of spirits, which is relatively realistic in terms of visual experience. The example of spirit kerchief also demonstrates Gao's idea

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<sup>16</sup> Zeitlin, Judith (2007), 'Ghosts and Theatricality', *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), 169.

expressionism theory. The theory expresses the concept of “being” through highly abstract symbols; thus leaving spectators with a taste of the supernatural instead of the copiously embodied visual imageries.

Through its creation of the affective authenticity, the opera film responds to the varying needs of traditional opera viewers and moviegoers for both stage art and cinematic aesthetics. Minimal stage settings without extra props and stylistic performances could be confusing for inexperienced audiences, yet they leave experienced spectators an authentic impression of opera. That is, the stage will be less authentic for seasoned audiences without all the abstract components that evolved from Chinese culture and history. The opera film as the modern conversion of the traditional theater, appeals to two distinctive types of spectators – the traditional theater goers who seek enjoyment from pure theatrical components and film enthusiasts who look for technological advancement on the conventional theatrical art. Thus, the opera film can integrate the conventional aesthetics with the advanced visual technology, allowing a variety of audiences to receive the visual and aesthetic experience they desire.

The abstraction of opera performance brings a profound emotional experience as the performance rules out excessive visual disturbance. This echoes Gao’s “idea expressionism” in that it grasps “the unified nature of subject, object and the overall environment.”<sup>17</sup> That is, the opera film establishes a tacit understanding with its audience by immersing them in its surroundings. Spectators are guided to be attentive to performers’ body movements and vocal performances that are designed to draw audience to empathize with actors as well as the with

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



the overall environment. The empathy between audiences and actors constructs an interactive relationship and introduces audiences into an emotional world of the performance. Ling Hong Lam has introduced the “emotion-realm” in the first chapter of his monograph, *The Spatiality of Emotion in Early Modern China*. He extends the aesthetics of pre-modern literature, “emotion-landscape mingling,” to visual arts such as painting and performance. The original interpretation of “mingling” in literature is the intrinsic connection between the “interior emotion” of the poet and the “exterior landscape” that the poet observes and delineates. Ling further connects textuality with theatricality by stating, “theatricality is a historical deviation from the theater, at the moment when drama becomes increasingly consumed through printed texts.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, literature has a strong connection to the theatrical art, and the text and visual performance also share a nearly identical pattern of artistic-emotional experiences. Regardless of the medium of the theatricality, Ling also extends his discussion to the idea of “spatiality”. He believes the space always exists in the pattern of emotional transmission and reception:

The term “theatricality” refers to an early modern mode of spatiality in which emotion is not interior to oneself but performed by others and, conversely, it is conceivable in oneself only as enacted on behalf of others or as exhibited to an audience without seeing it.<sup>19</sup>

The “emotion-realm” depicted by Lin is thus a characteristic of the Chinese theatricality as it builds a tripartite connection among the theater performers, spectators, and space. If the opera

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<sup>18</sup> Ling, Hon Lam (2013), *The Spatiality of Emotion in Early Modern China: From Dreamscapes to Theatricality* (New York: Columbia University Press), 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

performer is the emotional transportation port, the space/environment is the medium of emotional transmission, and the spectator is the receiver of the transmitted emotion. The theater space with interactive performance and participatory spectatorship together construct what Ling refers as the “emotional realm”. Ling’s idea suggests the opera performance is an authentic emotional experience as they are in the middle of the sensorial realm and immersed in the theatrical narrative even though the performance does not exactly replicate every detail of the narrative.

As the traditional opera forms being converted into films, the “emotional realm” has been transformed into a more sophisticated mode due to the shift in the medium of emotional transformation. In addition to the mediating affective “air” initiated by performers and transmitted between performers and audiences, the screen is another medium that influences the affective interaction between the audience and performer. Due to the less advanced filming technology of the Republican era, the recorded performances were less clear on the screen comparing to the real-life performances; thus, the low screen resolution may result in blocking the emotion transmission between the screen and the viewer. To compensate for the lack of spectacle caused by the medium, filmmakers developed special editing techniques and made special treatments of the mise-en-scene. Fei Mu was one of the most renowned film directors in the Republic Era, and he was also one of the predecessors who directed opera films and developed particular artistic treatments for the film genre, such as using the lens to create “air”. He had published his writing, *A Brief Discussion on the “Air”* (*Luetan Kongqi*, 略谈空气) on a film periodical, discussing how film transforms the atmosphere and creates an emotional

connection with the audience through cinematic techniques. In his article, he first highlights the influence of the environment on the viewer – if a film aspires to capture the audience, it must assimilate the audience with the environment of the figures in the film.<sup>20</sup> Environmental assimilation in his article does not refer to the construction of the equivalent setting in the film theater as on the screen, but using the “air” to align the atmosphere of the theater with the world on the other side of the screen. Fei further proposes four ways to generate the “air” for the participatory spectatorship such as taking advantage of the performance of the camera itself to adjust angles and light, combining light and setting to create unique aesthetics, utilizing the surrounding environment of the audience, and using sound technologies. Meanwhile, Fei also emphasizes the importance of simplicity so as to accentuate essential elements on each scene and amplify the impact of the “air”.

Fei’s theory shares significant similarities with traditional Chinese theatrical aesthetics as they both consider the emotional expressiveness as a crucial characteristic of visual art in comparison to the factual representation of reality. To immerse the audience in the “emotional realm” as in traditional theater, opera films employ a full spectrum of cinematic techniques to melt the boundary between film and theater; Thus, the emotional interaction that creates a connection between the audience, the screen, and the space brings an authentic taste of traditional theatrical experience and cultural aesthetics to the modern film spectators. *Murder in the Oratory* was the first opera film that directed by Fei in 1937, in which Fei

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<sup>20</sup> Fei, Mu (1934), 'A Brief Discussion on the “Air”/ Luetan “kongqi”', *Times Film (Shanghai) / Shidai Dianying (Shanghai)*, (6), 22.

comprehensively demonstrates his “air” theory. The film employs several real-life scenes to bring the story to life on the visual level. Meanwhile, the empty shot is another tactic that he applied to bridge styles of traditional opera performance and the film so that the film can best relate both opera and film viewers in a non-traditional artistic setting. The film will be discussed in detail in the final chapter, and the aesthetic of affective authenticity will be further explained under the context of the film.

In the next chapter, I will discuss how affective authenticity in the opera film is manifested through the spatial fluidity of the film, theater, and opera house around the concept of space.

### 3.0 The Space in Theater and Early Chinese Cinema

In the Republican Period, the influence of opera on cinema was manifested in space, participatory interaction, and artistic expression. Space has always been an integral part of theater art as well as of cinema, and the concept of space is both concrete and abstract for these two types of art. For example, the stage and opera house are concrete spaces for theatrical arts, but theatrical spaces also emerge in places where opera is performed. Likewise, for films, despite the limitations of cinematic apparatus, the cinematic space is not confined to the film theater, but anywhere film displays. Thus, the space is fluid for both cinema and theater, depending on where performance and screening takes place. The fluidity of space is also reflected in its changeable character in the dramatic space of opera and film. Since the space is always a medium for emotion flow between spectators and performances, the alteration of spatial characteristics also has a significant emotional impact on the spectators; thus contributing to the aesthetic of “affective authenticity” in opera films. Focusing on the concept of space fluidity and its relation to abstract and affective aesthetics, this chapter first discusses the diverse opera spaces and their functions; and subsequently discusses the diversity of cinematic space and the connection between the cinematic and opera spaces that are considered heterogenous in the Republican period. Finally, this chapter will address how opera films bring similar emotional experience of “affective authenticity” to the spectators through spatial connections and transformations between opera and opera films.

### 3.1 The Versatility of Traditional Theater

Even though it is widely known that the Yuan and Ming dynasties were a period in Chinese history when opera flourished and became prosperous, the earliest opera forms existed as early as the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE) for ritual purposes. However, opera for the purpose of entertainment developed with the advent of stage and theater. As early as the Song Dynasty, when commerce flourished, musical performances were gradually commercialized. Therefore, the special place to watch such performances – Goulan (勾栏) – also came into being. According to the description of *Dongjing Meng Hua Lu* (东京梦华录), Goulan was a theatrical viewing space enclosed by wooden fences in a commercial area in the city.<sup>21</sup> Since then, Chinese theaters have evolved, eventually creating a variety of stages to enhance the spectacle of opera. Despite the development of opera in various forms, opera performance still remains extremely open and flexible in its performing space considering its highly abstract minimalist aesthetics. Opera stages are usually open, either outdoors or indoors, public or private. The stage is also a part of the surrounding environment with entertaining functions.

Since the early days of cinema's introduction to China from the West, films have been exhibited in opera houses or private gardens. The first film screening in China was held at a private garden in Shanghai, called "Xu Yuan (徐园)" in 1896. After the first screening, it became a frequent event and lasted for several years, showing mostly French films.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Meng, Yuanlao (1187), *Dongjing Meng Hua Lu*.

<sup>22</sup> Chen, Congzhou (2010), *Unfinished Affection for Gardens/ Weijin Yuanlin Qing* (Beijing: The Commercial Press International Co., Ltd), 8.

Newspapers published at the time describe some scenes of the earliest screening activities in China. In his research, Huang Dequan quoted part of a report from *Shen Bao*, detailing the scene of the film screening in Xu Yuan:

On the seventh day of the month, the Qiqiao Festival (*Qiqiao Jie*, 乞巧节) will be held. All gentlemen who share the same interests are invited to gather in the garden. Various antique objects, exotic fruits, and rare flowers will be displayed. Traditional melodies will be played while we appreciate the beauty. On this night, there will be a spectacular display of fireworks and a screening of Western films in a village.<sup>23</sup>

The advertisement precisely describes the film screening at Xu Yuan – the film is presented as part of the festive celebrations instead of a singular screening event. This makes screening films in private gardens a novel entertainment, thus creating a festive atmosphere.

The event in the Garden of Xu shares similarities with garden touring in Ming and Qing dynasties in terms of opera-viewing. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the proliferation of garden culture brought opera from the public space to the private sphere. The opera was not only performed in indoor and outdoor areas such as courtyards and halls but also in more amusing places such as pavilions and terraces. In private gardens of southeast China, there are many pavilions near the water, in which operas were often performed. The audience can listen to magnificent music while enjoying the beauty of the gardens. Through the embellishment of the garden space, the opera performance adds an additional audio-visual layer to its original

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<sup>23</sup> Huang, Dequan (2014), *Overview of Shanghai Cinema in the Republic Shanghai/ Minguo Shanghai Yingyuan Gaiguan* (Beijing: Chinese Film Press/ Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe), 103.

atmosphere. The Chinese garden historian, Chen Congzou, has once expressed his sentiments when listening to an opera in an garden, “although it was a muggy summer day, people were singing in front of the lotus pavilion with great enthusiasm, making me feel like being in the heaven.”<sup>24</sup> The politicians and literati also take opera appreciation in the garden as a pastime and atmosphere backdrop. Qi Biaoja was a politician and playwright at the late Ming dynasty. After visiting the decaying Yugu Garden in Wuxi, he lamented that the garden was filled with opera performance in the past.<sup>25</sup> His garden visiting memory implies that the opera performances not only fashioned as an entertainment, but also served as an affective medium that mediates the overall environment and viewer’s emotions.

The operas were also staged in teahouses in the city and its history can be traced back to the Qing dynasty. The vernacular fiction titled *Qilu Deng* (歧路灯), written in 1777, has the following description of the setting of the teahouse theater, Tongle Lou:

Yunyou led two guests to the upper floor. There was a huge table with three seats around it, and waiters stood by the sides. On the table all kinds of snacks were available. Audiences could look down with a cup of tea in hand. There was no hindrance obstructing the stage view.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Chen (2010), 8.

<sup>25</sup> Fang, Shenghan (2020), 'The Development of the Theory of Garden Architecture and Opera Structure in the Ming and Qing Dynasties/ Mingqing Yuanlin Gouzhu yu Xiqu Jiegou Lilun de Fazhan', *Chinese Theater Arts*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Li, Luyuan (1748) *Qi Lu Deng* [online text], <<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=608952&remap=gb#p18>>.



The description of the teahouse theater suggests that the house is a multifunctional opera performance space, which is similar to the performance space in a garden. Besides the function of opera viewing, it is also a public space for entertainment and socialization.

After the 19<sup>th</sup> century, new types of opera stages started to emerge in Shanghai and gradually spread to other Chinese cities. The public opera performance at Shanghai's Lanxin Grand Theater in 1907 sparked movements to transform Chinese theater and stage into modern ones. Xu Banmei, an opera critic and reformer of the Republican period, suggested in his memoir that both the performance and the theatrical space were revolutionized at the Lanxin Grand theater. The theater managers built new-style stages and added background to Peking Opera performances.<sup>27</sup> Modern opera stages also drew design inspirations from other cultures – Xia brothers learned from the Japanese stage design, and replaced the rectangular stage of the original teahouse with a semi-circular stage. In the meantime, the stage can be rotated that greatly improved the stage visibility and elevated interactivity of opera performers with the audience. Xia brothers also made many technical improvements to the stage, such as using colored lights to illuminate the stage to portray the atmosphere they desire.<sup>28</sup>

The theatrical space has always been diverse since its beginning – from open-air commercial market to private gardens; from waterfront to inland areas. The fluidity of the performance space depends on the flexibility of the opera itself: it responds to the needs of the

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<sup>27</sup> Xu, Baimei (1957), *Memoir of Drama's Founding Period / Huaju Chuangshiqi Huiyilu* (Beijing Zhongguo Xiju Publishing House), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Goldstein, Joshua (2003), 'From Teahouse to Playhouse: Theaters as Social Texts in Early-Twentieth-Century China', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 772.

social, cultural, geographical situations of the audiences, maintaining its own artistic traditions while remaining unrestricted by external conditions. Moreover, the stage design of Chinese opera focuses more on the emotional interaction with spectators than creating a sense of reality. A realistic setting is not necessary for opera performances. Instead, the environment serves as the catalyst for the actor's performance, magnifying the actor's expression of emotions and communicating them to the audience in more effective ways. The integration of social space and opera space has given opera a wider range of functions, including entertainment, socialization, aesthetic exchange, and even commercialization. Therefore, the fluidity of the opera space also manifests in its own fictional inclusiveness and versatility. It is fair to say that the cinematic space in China was first constructed on the basis of the opera space where film screening was seen as a flexible performance. Among different film genres, opera film exhibits the most characteristics of opera space.

### **3.2 An Inclusive Space: Cinema and Opera in the Republican Era**

When cinema was first introduced to China in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, opera performances were still one of the mainstays of Chinese entertainment. Most of China's early film technology was imported from the west, so there has not been much discussion of film technology in the history of Chinese cinema. For most Chinese people at the time, movies were also a form of entertainment, similar in category to shadow puppets and lantern shows –initially considered

to be an optical toy with narrative. Nevertheless, China also attempted to make its own films since the silent film era.

The earliest film-making attempt in China was initiated by Ren Qingtai, the owner of a photo studio. In 1905 he noticed that all the films screened in China were western films, which lacked novelty in content and did not appeal to the Chinese audience. Therefore, he decided to make his own film to accommodate the tastes of the Chinese audience. Considering Peking opera received a wide range of audience at the time, he decided to use film as a medium to record opera performances, so that performances of renowned actors could be viewed by a wider range of audiences. The first Chinese film was adapted from a famous Peking opera fragment titled *Mount Dingjun*, starring the famous Peking opera actor Tan Xinpei at the time. After the film was completed, it was screened at the Daguanlou opera theater run by Ren. The first film experiment was not a success - due to the inadequacy of technology and equipment at the time, the completed film was not only soundless, but the actor also often disappeared from the scene. A fire later destroyed the studio where the films were stored. However, Ren's film-making experience also laid the foundation for subsequent filmmaking.<sup>29</sup>

From the first attempt of Chinese filmmaking, we can notice the close connection between film and opera in China. The introduction of film as a new visual medium in China was accompanied by the tradition of theatrical art. When film was first introduced to China, there were various naming of it; one of the most common ones was “ying xi”, which was

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<sup>29</sup> Li, Suyuan (1996), *History of Silent Film in China/ Zhongguo Wusheng Dianying Shi* (Beijing: Chinese Film Press/ Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe), 15.

directly translated as “shadow play.” “Shadow” refers to the projected image of the film and “play” refers to its narrative content. In the context of Chinese semantics, the character “play” contains a variety of meanings covering the entire spectrum of theatrical arts, which also include traditional opera. Meanwhile, the earliest films made in China were also adaptations of operas, and were shown in traditional opera theaters. Therefore, film and opera are not only closely related in China in terms of content, but also in terms of spatial construction. In other words, the space originally used for opera performances was also used to show movies. Likewise, many movie theaters were used for opera performances after the popularity of cinema took hold in the Republic era. The commonality between opera and film in terms of space and content also inspired much of the aesthetic and theoretical development of opera films afterwards.

As discussed earlier, the connection between film and opera in fact predates the production of the first Chinese film. The spatial influence of opera on film was first demonstrated in China's early film exhibitions.

In 1897, a newspaper titled, *Amusement News*, published an article titled “An Account of Watching an American Film”, which describes the author’s first movie-going experience and reflects the film-goers’ attitude about film when films first entered China. The film screening event was also at a private garden called Qi Garden in Shanghai. After finishing the film, the author commented:

Recently, there were American electric shadow play screened in the city. The electric shadow play is similar to the lantern show in form, but more miraculous than that ...

Everything in the film changes like a mirage. The film is the most bizarre invention I have ever seen. Figures in the film suddenly disappeared, then popped up in front of audiences; everything was unpredictable, as if I was day dreaming in the real life.<sup>30</sup>

In the account, the author did not address much of the narrative of the films that he watched, but rather described the film from the perspective of watching a bizarre phenomenon. Meanwhile, the author also included a plethora of emotional responses in his recollection, which reflects that the film provides a dream-like sensory experience, one that confuses reality with illusion. Additionally, the name of the newspaper in which the post-view account was published also speaks volumes about the general perception of early films in China. As the newspaper's title "amusement" indicates, the news publisher considered film as a type of entertainment committed to bring a sense of novelty to spectators at the time. According to Huang's research on the distribution of film theaters in Shanghai, films were also screened in major amusement parks in Shanghai, such as Quan Ye Chang. The advertisement for this amusement park was posted in a 1917 *Shanghai Daily* newspaper, which also reflects the function of film as an entertainment adventure at the time, "our company has an amusement park for visitors' entertainment, including film theater, magic shows, zoo, etc."<sup>31</sup>

The teahouse is another example of the spatial overlap between opera and film. There were also many films that were displayed in teahouses. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many teahouses in Beijing began showing films, including Tianle, Wenming and Qingle teahouses.

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<sup>30</sup> Anonymous (1897), 'An Account of Watching American Film', *Amusement News*, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Huang (2014), 228.

These tea gardens show mostly short films and comedies, with mostly juggling and foreign landscapes.<sup>32</sup> The teahouse and garden spaces share great similarities since they are both multifunctional space designed for communal gatherings and entertainment. Early film screenings were often used as a means of customer solicitation for teahouses' business due to their brief content, and there was little innovation in the content.

Due to the political turmoil in the early twentieth century, many young Chinese patriots returned from overseas and initiated reform in opera. The reformers combined western theater concepts with traditional Chinese theater to create a new type of theatrical form called civilized drama, while the stage was moved from traditional opera stages and teahouses to modern theaters. At the same time, a new mode of theatrical art emerged in Shanghai, called "serial drama", designed by Xu Banmei. It is a hybrid performance that combines drama and film: part of the performance is projected on the screen, and the other is performed by actors on the stage. This new type of drama projects things that are not easily performed on stage to the screen, such as mountains, rivers, ships and railroads; while most of the indoor scenes were presented on a background screen. The play is usually divided into five to six sections, alternating between film and stage performances. However, there were only two serial dramas been performed on the New Stage in Shanghai due to its inflexible design. Since the characters on

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<sup>32</sup> Cheng, Jihua (1981), *History of Chinese Cinema Development/ Zhongguo Dianying Fazhan Shi* (Beijing: Chinese Film Publisher/ Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe), 10.

the film must be consistent in appearance with the actors, if an important actor left the theater, the play had to be suspended.<sup>33</sup>

Although the serial drama had many obstacles in its operation, it is an innovative attempt that combines advantages of two media. The film overcomes the stage's space limitations and the stage performance provides audiences with a more immersive experience. Thus, the space of opera performance is not only highly versatile, but also has a certain degree of inclusiveness. Spaces such as gardens, teahouses and even modern theaters correspond to the functional characteristics of opera, as well as to the characteristics of early cinema in China, in which the emphasis is on affective spectacle rather than elaborate narrative. The spatial inclusiveness and similarities in the two media can also be seen in the close connection between cinema and theatrical art in China, which laid a solid foundation for the later invention and development of opera films.

### 3.3 Space, Sensation, and Opera Films

The essence of opera film is to present opera in the format of film. In order to capture the authenticity of the opera art, the space is functioning as a liaison in the transfer of opera performance to film as it accommodates audiences with a familiar environment when they experience a new visual medium. The opera film also takes advantage of the aesthetic and

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<sup>33</sup> Zheng, Yimei (1986), *Shanghai Jiuhua* (Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Publisher / Shanghai Wenhua Chubanshe), 123.

cultural legacy of the opera, and reproduces and transforms the theatrical space both in the design of the theater and the ones within the screen. Considering differences in the medium of film and opera, the opera film negotiates the spatial arrangement of the two. Since the opera emphasizes abstract representations of objects while the film is supposed to be a realistic medium, the opera film seeks to reconcile the contradiction between reality and imagination to bring the best experience to the audience.

Mei Lanfang's autobiography, *My Film Life*, describes in detail the relationship between his acting career in opera and film. Meanwhile, he also documented in detail the production process of several opera films he acted in, within which we can tell the adaptation of the original opera performance's space within the opera film. In 1920, when Mei Lanfang participated in the filming of *The Heavenly Maiden Scattering Flowers*, the director used a great number of panoramic and long shots in combination with the continuity of the actor's performance. Meanwhile, the film also innovatively applied panning shots in the "heavenly walking" scene to demonstrate an airy ethereal space.<sup>34</sup> The extensive application of long shot indicates the film's deliberate imitation of the live performance on stage in terms of the spatial consistency. In a typical opera performance, there is generally one major space, which is the stage itself. Various spaces are imagined and usually reflected by the actors' performances. For example, an actor walking around the stage with another actor paddling indicates the scene on a boat.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Mei, Lanfang (1984), *My Film Life/ Wo de Dianying Shenghuo* (Beijing: Chinese Film Press/ Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe), 11.

<sup>35</sup> Hsu, Tao-Ching (1984), *The Chinese Conception of the Theater* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press), 39.



The opera film performed by Mei also applied slow motion to recreate the imaginary otherworldly space where audiences' gaze also follows the actor slowly moving in the sky. The panning camera work expands the stage space, and the audience's visual experience goes beyond the limit of the screen. Meanwhile, the slow motion of camera also mimics the trajectory and speed of the clouds floating in the sky. The combination of camera movement and actors' performance offers the audience a unique experience of opera viewing on the screen.

The opera film attempts to recreate the participatory audience as in a traditional opera theater and attract opera fans to the cinema. The close relationship between the performers, connoisseurs, and regular opera fans leads to an affective community that would soon occupy the cinematic space – thanks to newspaper advertisements that created expectations for the prestigious performances and an upgraded cinema environment. More details surrounding the viewing environment of the opera will be discussed in the final section's case study of *Murder in the Oratory*.

#### **4.0 From Theatrical Theory to Film & A Theory on Cinematic Authenticity**

Traditional Chinese opera consists of over two hundred styles according to distinctive historical periods and regions, among which are Peking opera, Yue opera and Kun opera. Most traditional operas are mainly based on dance and songs that are highly stylistic; and they are mostly adapted from historical stories. In the early twentieth century, a trend of modernizing traditional opera swept through China with intellectual and political reforms. Led by theater and literary intellectuals at the time, including Fu Sinian, Ouyang Yuqian, Hu Shi, and Chen Duxiu, the traditional forms of opera were gradually reformed. As mentioned above, a new theatrical form called civilized drama was established in China, in which “serial drama” combined stage performance with film. In the meantime, film theories grounded on theater were also slowly emerging in China. Film directors including Hou Yao, Gu Kenfu and Fei Mu have also discussed the relationship between stage performance and film, whilst simultaneously highlighting the concept of authenticity in film performance.

In the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century China, the intricate relationship between theater and cinema in the national pursuit of modernity manifests itself in many ways. While theatrical reform directly influenced filmmaking in term of content and form, the divergence in intellectual debate resulted in different film theories and practices. Generally speaking, there were two camps among scholars and directors: what could be called “the modernist camp” and “the conservative camp.” Whereas the modernist camp promoted Westernization in theater and film, adopting a didactic content and realistic aesthetics in order to educate the mass, the

conservative camp resorted to theatrical convention and opera aesthetics to create a “national theater” and opera films. For the purpose of this study, I will mostly focus on the latter.

The “national theater” movement was originally started by a group of students who had returned from abroad, led by Xu Shangxuan. In 1927, Xu published an article entitled “*The National Theater Movement*” in the *Modern Review* periodical. This essay aims to criticize the extreme emulation of Western theatrical modes of the time, and to emphasize the imperatives of Chinese elements in national drama. To quote Ruan,

The ‘national theater’ is a Chinese theatrical art performed by Chinese people with Chinese elements for Chinese audience to watch ... The Zaju in Yuan dynasty, Chuanqi in Qing dynasty, Kunqu and Qinqiang can all be recognized as national theaters... The national theater shall retain the aesthetics of conventional opera just as western theater perseveres their theatrical traditions.<sup>36</sup>

This sentiment of reviving national theater was shared by many filmmakers as well. Around the same time, the boom in renovating old plays also brought traditional opera to the screen. Between 1905 and 1945, around forty opera films were produced and released in Shanghai, Beijing, and even in Japan and United states, the most famous of which include *Tale of Pipa* (1920), *Chunxiang Disturbs Class* (1920) and *Murder in the Oratory* (1935). The introduction of sound technology to China in the 1930s started a boom in opera films. The first sound film in the history of Chinese cinema was the *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony* (1931). The

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<sup>36</sup> Ruan, Shangyuan (1927), 'The National Theatrical Movement/ Guoju Yundong', *Modern Review/ Xiandai Pinglun*, 8-11.

film portrays the life of a female opera artist, and includes many opera-singing scenes. It was a huge success when the film was first released in China, as it not only presents the sound in the audiences' native language, but also highlights the characteristics of Chinese sound films with its traditional opera singing.<sup>37</sup> At the time as the film was screened, the *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony Special Issue* was released in Shanghai, which included many articles discussing the film's sound. A film commentator, Yan Duhe, published an article called *The First Sound of Domestic Sound Movies* in the special issue to discuss the cultural uniqueness of the first Chinese sound film:

Since the prevalence of sound films, there has been a feeling among Chinese moviegoers that they have lost interest in sound films because they do not understand English. As a result, Chinese films are paying more attention to the quality of sound films, incorporating Chinese music and opera into the films to revive the audience's interest.<sup>38</sup>

However, some critics still disapproved of opera elements being included in the film. An essay published on the *Film Life* in 1931 holds a negative attitude towards opera film arguing, "the traditional opera is a feudal residue; thus contradictory to the modern nature of cinema. I hope Chinese film makers can change the direction of filmmaking".<sup>39</sup> The director, Fei Mu, also noticed the aesthetic conflict between opera and film. Instead of completely

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<sup>37</sup> Li (1996), 280.

<sup>38</sup> Yan, Duhe (1931), 'The First Sound of Domestic Audio Movies ', *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony Special Issue*, 110.

<sup>39</sup> Ye, Zexian (1931), 'Discussion on "Bring Opera to the Screen"/ Guanyu "Ba Jingju Bandao Yinmushang Quma" de Taolun', *Film Life, Yingxi Shenghuo*, 12.

rejecting opera in films, he was aware of the mass audiences' affection for the traditional opera, thus managed to cinematize opera and combine the two distinctive aesthetic modes. An article he published in 1941 discussed his attitude on the cinematization of traditional opera. In the article, he first addressed the aesthetic similarities between Chinese painting and opera – the painting is not realistic, but leaves viewer authentic impressions, and integrates the viewer's subjectivity into objects in the painting. He further relates the Chinese painting's feature to opera performances and writes, “[opera viewers] gain a sense of authenticity from fabricated performances. This feeling is subtle in a way that the actor's performance and the audiences' psychological state shall blend with each other”.<sup>40</sup> He finally proposes three suggestions to cinematize the traditional opera: 1. Since Peking opera is a kind of musical, it must be approached as a musical piece; 2. The film shall absorb opera's way of expression and tactically apply it in cinematic expression; 3. When film the opera, the director shall retain a mood of creating the Chinese painting. Therefore, from Fei's perspective, it's crucial for opera filmmaking to keep the traditional aesthetics – emphasis on the authentic spirit and emotion that the art and performers intend to convey.

In addition to Fei, many film makers and critics were encouraged to follow the guideline of being authentic while presenting the film content. Gu Kenfu was the founder of *Film Magazine* which was established in 1921. He wrote in the magazine's preface, “well-performed plays touch the viewer, as if they were in the scene”, he then drew connections between plays and films, stating that:

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<sup>40</sup> Fei (1941), 'The Issue of Cinematization of Old Chinese Plays', *Film News*, 231.

[the performance] in films shall also be authentic, so that the performers and the characters share same feelings. Such feeling is infectious as the audiences will also treat themselves as figures in the film. It's as if they are experiencing everything that happens in the film. This increases the affective potential of the film by hundreds of times.<sup>41</sup>

Even though, Gu did not specifically pinpoint on the opera performance in his writing, he did emphasize the affective power of acting in the film. In order for a film to be compelling enough, the performance needs to convey a sense of authenticity that resonates with the audience. Another scriptwriter, Hou Yao, discussed the similar issue about the relationship between performance and spectatorship in his essay, he states, “a great performance makes the audience forget themselves and take the sorrow and happiness of the people in the play as their own”.<sup>42</sup>

A tripartite relationship is built among performance, film, and spectators – the film performance is committed to be authentic in order to establish an affective relationship between the screen and the audience. Such affective authenticity for opera films was a further step forward compared to other Chinese films of the time. Since the performance of opera films maintains the expressionist nature of conventional Chinese opera, its affective authenticity not only expresses from the interactive performance, but also from the film's preservation of traditional aesthetics. The affect that opera film audiences perceived arises from authenticity in two senses. The first is authentic emotion that spectators gained from the actors' performance,

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<sup>41</sup> Gu, Kenfu (1921), 'Preface', *Film Magazine*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> Hou, Yao (1986), 'Film Script Composition / Yingxi Juban Zuofa', *Contemporary Cinema / Dangdai Dianying*, (1), 94.

and the second is the authentic taste that they gained from the restoration of opera aesthetics in opera films.

## 5.0 *Murder in the Oratory*: A Case Study of Affective Authenticity

In 1937, an opera film titled *Murder in the Oratory* created a sensation upon its release. The film was screened simultaneously in ten cinemas nationwide for a period of thirty-seven days.<sup>43</sup> On the day of its release, it dominated the cover of *Shen Bao* (申报), a highly influential newspaper in the Republic period of China. From the scale of its news reporting, we know that the release of the film caught the attention of many people at the time. The film was directed by talented directors -Fei Mu and Zhou Yihua, starring the renowned Peking opera performer Zhou Xinfang and Yuan Meiyun who was one of the most popular actresses in China during this period. The hit of the film at the time hinged on a number of factors, including the choice of the screenplay, the film style, the fame of casts and the artistic treatment of the film. Thus, I argue that all of these contribute to the intense affective authenticity that characterizes this film and thus leaves an impression to audience.

The plot of the film is adapted from the traditional opera *Wu Han Kills His Wife* (*Wuhan Shaqi*, 吴汉杀妻), the original script of which has been performed in various forms, including Peking opera (京剧), Luantan tones (乱弹), Chaozhou opera (潮剧) and Yu opera (豫剧). Thus, the play was a classic well known to audiences nationwide. This drama is set in the late Western Han Dynasty, when Wang Mang usurped the throne and Han Guangwu Emperor Liu Xiu (光武帝刘秀) rose to overthrow Wang. In the film, Wang offers a reward for the capture of Liu.

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<sup>43</sup> Advertisements for the film appeared continuously in the June 5<sup>th</sup> -July 15<sup>th</sup>, 1937 issue of the newspaper, *Shanghai Daily* (*Shen Bao*, 申报), which indicated the length of the film's release in theaters at the time.



Wu is a border commander at the time, and his father was killed by Wang when he was young. After he reached his adulthood, Wang married his daughter, Lan Ying (兰英), to him. Wu was also being appointed as Wang's general. At the beginning of the film, Liu is defeated in a battle and captured by Wu. When Wu tries to turn Liu over to Wang, his mother stops him and reveals the message that Wang is his enemy who killed his father. Then the old lady Wu hopes her son to accomplish three things for the nation and the family – release Liu, give up his government position, and kill his wife. After accomplishing the first two tasks assigned by his mother, Wu couldn't bear his sorrow to kill his wife. After knowing her mother-in-law's intention, Lan Ying commits suicide for her husband as a loyal wife. Mrs. Wu also hangs herself to death to relieve her son's burden, so that he can participate in Liu's force to overturn Wang's reign.

Even though the film delineates a historical story about the family and the empire, it also metaphorically refers to the turbulent state of affairs in China at the time. In 1930s, at the crossroad of the old and the new, the destiny of the country was about to change in a series of ways. Despite the high degree of attention to the nation, it aroused strong opposition from the leftist and enlightenment-minded intellectuals after the announcement of the film's release. The film was mostly condemned for its artistic form. Some of the radical critics consider Peking opera as an old theatrical form contrary to their belief that the film is one of the symbols of progression. In terms of content, the film conveys the Confucian concepts of "loyalty, filial piety, and righteousness" and is therefore considered as a remnant of feudalism by most of the critics. An article titled " 'Murder in the Oratory' is not Appropriate to be Made into a Film" was published on the magazine *Ten Days Play* (十日戏剧), criticizing the theme in the film,

“ [The ethics] revealed in the old play has caused controversy among foreign viewers, who may think that China is a nation of irrationality.”<sup>44</sup>

While this criticism represented most of the leftists' thoughts on cinematic adaptations of traditional tales, there were still many voices upholding the film due to its artistic value. They maintained that the film did not simply replicate traditional opera performances on stage, but made many cinematic adjustments to the opera performances. Thus, the film should be regarded as an innovative take on both film and opera. A film review published on *Lianhua Daily* (*Lianhua Ribao*, 联华日报) written by Hu Tiwei commented on the film's adaptation, “the film retains all the beauty of the stage, but has a unique style in its innovation.”<sup>45</sup> Hu contended that it not only preserves original tastes of traditional opera, but also uses many realistic cinematic techniques such as continuity editing and static camera. Another film commentary also thinks that the film is an innovative move and provides Chinese cinema a new hope with its unique identity. Unlike older versions of the opera with vulgar tastes, the film exhibits artistic values with its unique presentation of opera through the camera lens despite its disputable content. It gives the opera a stronger effect on the screen than on the stage.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Qiu, Mu (1937), “‘Murder in the Oratory’ is not Appropriate to be Made into a Film” / Zhanjingtang Buyi Paicheng Dianying', *Ten days Play / Shiri Xiju*, 1 (13), 5.

<sup>45</sup> Hu, Tiwei (1937), 'After the Trial Screening of Murder in the Oratory / Zhanjingtang Shiyong Yihou', *Lianhua Huabao*, 9 (4), 8.

<sup>46</sup> Wu, Chengda (1937), 'A New Way for Chinese Films / Guochan Dianying Xintujing', *Lianhua Huabao*, 4 (9), 8.

As these critics point out, although the film version of *Murder in the Oratory* continues the traditional opera in terms of content and performance, the aesthetics of the film makes extensive use of cinematic techniques, making the emotional expressions of the characters in the film more authentic. For example, an opera stage appears in the first scene of the film. We can tell from its design that it is imitating the traditional stage – there is a tile-covered roof over the stage and two wooden pillars at the front corners of the stage. The opening credit rolling on the closed stage curtain accompanies orchestral music. Such visual and auditory experience intend to immerse audience in an environment of opera theater instead of the cinematic one. The audience sit in a dimly lit cinema seeing the curtain gradually rise on the stage of the opera musical, as if going back in the opera theater.

With the rapid drumming of the percussion instruments, the scene on the stage is revealed to the audience. A minimalist scenery appears in the middle of the stage, and as the camera zooms in, the landscape swallows the stage and occupies the entire frame of the film. As a troop of soldiers on the horseback appear on the terrain's horizon, audiences immediately realize that the scene was shot outdoors. The scene indicates the director's awareness of the film's realistic feature and intends to create a sensational scene to immerse audience into the battlefield as if they are witnessing it on the spot.

In the next sequence, the camera cuts to a medium shot, within which soldiers on horseback are galloping across the grassland. The camera zooms in further to give a detailed close-up of the legs of the running horses. The camera then cross-cuts between the close-ups of the horses' legs and the medium shots of soldiers moving on the horse back. Galloping horses

stir the dust in the rear, while the wind blows flags that the soldiers are holding. It could be shocking for the audiences of early cinema seeing horses moving so fast on the screen as if they are alive, and they could not have imagined such a realistic scene in the beginning of an opera performance. The realistic opening scene of the film not only shows off how advanced Chinese filming technology was at the time, but also highlights the artistry of opera that follows, giving the audience an immersive emotional experience both in cinema and traditional theater.

The opening sequences of the film tie the stage and the film together seamlessly. First, the film applies the realistic approach and moves the opera stage to the screen. With the rising curtain, it creates a confusing affect that mixes the cinema and the authentic theater. As the stage curtain rises, audiences would expect to see a traditional stage behind the curtain. Instead, concrete and realistic mise-en-scene of the battlefield appears in the next scene that replaces the simplistic and abstract conventional stage settings. The realistic cinematography, accompanied by the opera soundtrack, skillfully blends the characteristics of opera and film. Close-ups of objects in motion is also an innovation of opera films as it enhances the effect of the speed that the traditional theater cannot deliver. The speed and rhythm of the music accompany each other, thus creating an intense affect to immerse audiences in the battlefield. In other words, audiences have been guided into a state of affect that connects them to the cinematic realm around them and being prepared for the deeper emotional experience of the ensuing opera performance.

The outdoor scene lasts for about a minute, then the film cuts to the next scene, where Liu and one of his soldiers discuss their defeated plight. The scene was shot in studio, with a

minimalist backdrop of a traditional Chinese painting, indicating that they are in a corner of a battlefield. Meanwhile, the camera slightly zooms out and reveals the frame of the stage, including the stage roof and wooden pillars. In the next scene, the film also uses a semi-realistic approach to depict Wu's return to the garrison. Even though the scene was shot in a studio, the rendering of the environment exhibits a realistic flavor that differs the one in the opera. A long take first skims over the images of soldiers in the military camp from right to left, then fixated on the main character Wu, who has just returned from the battle. The medium shot not only includes the protagonist within the screen, but also every environmental detail such as the tents and the gravel-paved ground. All these settings, again, are innovative attempts that blur the boundary between film and opera; and provide audience with a theater viewing experience in a cinema.

The film is also filled with emotional conflicts between Wu, the mother, and Lan Ying in terms of filial piety, the ethical dilemmas between husband and wife, and loyalty to the country. In the ensuing sequence of the film, Wu is called by his mother to the family gathering hall and is told to kill his wife because she is the daughter of a usurper; the film presents Wu's dilemma between obeying his mother's orders and protecting his wife. The mother walks out of the frame after throwing the sword on the ground. Wu begins his monologue as the only figure in the picture. After singing his line, "the merciless sword descended from the sky, the husband and wife will separate from each other, I will enter the oratory with grief," the director used various ways to show the hesitation in Wu's mind in this segment. The director first uses a high-angle shot to present Wu, who stares down at the sword on the ground. Even though Wu

still wears the commander's outfit symbolizing power, he appears small and less powerful in the scene under the moral dilemma of killing his wife. The director gives the sword a closeup after the long take of Wu in a high-angle shot, which again reinforces the narrative conflict through the contrast of visual elements. The sword, symbolizing the patriarchal order from the mother to avenge his father's death and bring the empire back to order, dominates the screen. Wu's inner struggle is also exhibited through his body movements after he picks up the sword on the ground. Instead of directly facing the camera, he turns sideways and stares at the floor. He wanders around a few times, stands still and puts his hand on the hilt of the sword, and looks straight into the camera as if to make up his mind. The next shot returns to an overhead shot of Wu singing, "Go to the oratory and kill Wang Lanying" before leaving the family gathering hall. Through a subtle combination of opera lyrics, movement, and cinematography, the director conveys Wu's inner turmoil and hesitation to the audience with nuance. Wu is no longer a flat figure being depicted as heroic, instead, he also has a side of powerlessness and insignificance facing moral choices. In this scene, the director combines traditional opera performances with cinematic techniques, such as the close up of Wu's face to amplify the emotions of the characters, which are limited on the traditional opera stage. This allows the audience to emphasize emotionally with the protagonist in the moment.

Wu's confrontation with his wife in the Oratory is the most significant scene of the film, and it is this scene that brings the film to its emotional climax. Lan Ying's debut in the film is accompanied by the sound of chanting and striking wooden fish when she is alone in the oratory in the household. As the shot gradually descends from the roof and slowly fixed on Lan Ying

in the Oratory, the director uses a slow pace to set a highly peaceful and religious tone for the scene. All religious elements in the background – the censer, Buddhist banner, and a pair of candles – are symbols of Lan Ying’s Buddhist faith, signifying she is a compassionate, loving woman. In this scene, Lan Ying is gazing at the scriptures with her full attention, and chants, “How fast does time fly! How long does a man live? People want to escape from reincarnation, [yet] it is my Buddha that salvage people with compassion.”<sup>47</sup> Her chants are filled with reflections on life and death, the Buddhist karma, and seems calm but with a hint of restlessness about her fate. Meanwhile, the camera movement also conveys a disturbing message to the audience as it moves from left to right and at one point is obscured by the pillars of the hall without Lan Ying being aware of it. The camera movement mimics the voyeuristic male gaze to an extent – it leads the viewer to peek at the heroine’s beauty, meanwhile, depicting her as a defenseless critter in the jungle ready to be hunted. Within about a minute, the director has already demonstrated the female protagonist’s companionate, tender, and poignant femininity via *mise-en-scene* and camera language, to make audience empathize with the heroine.

When Lan Ying approaches the door and opens it for her husband, the two main characters are put together for the first time in the film. With Wu’s back toward the camera, we can see the obvious difference in body shape between him and the heroine – he seems like a mighty giant compared to Lan Ying who is slim and tender. After guiding Wu into the oratory, they sit in separate chairs by the incense burner to start their conversation. Wu’s hidden murderous intent contrasts dramatically with Lan Ying’s innocence and with the function of

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<sup>47</sup> The original line in Chinese is “堪叹光阴日如梭, 人生在世值几何, 为人欲把轮回躲, 慈悲渡人是我佛。”

the Buddhist oratory. When Wu is about to tell his wife about Mrs. Wu's murder command, the camera pulls back, while Wu stands up from his chair. The director gives Lan Ying a close-up shot to show the details of her facial expression filled with panic and restlessness. Then the camera cuts back to Wu, who wanders around in the room and finally stops in front of the Buddha statue. He puts one of his hands on the table as if he made his resolution to tell his wife about the murder order from his mother, then he shakes his head and exclaims to himself, "My God ... How could I kill the wife I love?" The Buddha statue is placed at the back of the scene, which also conflicts with Wu's murderous intentions. In this scene, the director once again utilizes conflict to create tension in the film and to attract the attention of the audience, whose emotions rise and fall with the movements, expressions, and lines of Wu and his wife.

The moment Wu tells his wife about his intention to kill her, Lan Ying is so terrified that she falls out of her chair, shaking and shivering. Then she walks away from her husband in disbelief, and the film starts to present two of them in separate frames as if a barrier appears between Wu and Lan Ying. As the wife innocently chants, "When my father killed your father, how could I know from the inner palace?" Wu responds, "Your father poisoned the ex-emperor. The national vendetta is even deeper than a family vendetta." Later in this scene, the wife cries to her husband and begs him not to kill her as she is a faithful wife. Wu is back on the horns of a dilemma, and at this moment the director again uses the overhead shot to present Wu's hesitation and wandering steps. At this point, he becomes vulnerable to the dilemma of picking sides between traditional Chinese morality and love. At the same time, the director uses



cinematic language to amplify the inner emotions of the two main characters, intending to make the audience empathize with them.

Although the movie spends a great deal of time building up to Lan Ying's death, her death is both abrupt and pathetic. She could not bear the thought of her husband being in a dilemma between himself and his mother, and for the sake of her father's sins, for the sake of her country and her family, she chooses to commit suicide, to make a noble sacrifice. In the film, Lan Ying snatches the sword from her husband when he is not aware of it, and ends her life in an instant. After a moment of panic, Wu finally carries his wife's head out of the oratory. As he turns around and faces the audience, the audience can see Lan Ying's head on the plate Wu Han is holding. The scene also adds a sense of horror to the audience, leaving them unable to recover from the shock of her suicide and the remorse of a beautiful life lost.

What makes this sequence aesthetically innovative is the combination of opera performance and distinctive cinematic techniques. Whereas opera emphasizes the performer's singing, gesture, and full body movement on stage, cinema can manipulate the audience's gaze to pay attention to details on the screen. The frequent use of medium shots and closeups in this scene highlights the contrast between violence and peace, between masculinity and femininity, between hesitation and resolution, and between filial piety and romantic love. In the end, what solves these great tensions is voluntary sacrifice. It is as if Lan Ying's suicide fulfills her filial piety toward her father and mother-in-law by atoning for her father's sin, fulfills her love for her husband by alleviating his emotional burden, and fulfills Wu Han's filial piety and loyalty to the legitimate ruler. Lan Ying's sudden demise justifies Wu Han's righteous cause, which

continues the all-too-familiar narrative of victimization of women for the sake of patriarchal morality. Yet the destruction of Lan Ying's beauty and love in the film, for a modern audience, still leaves an unsettling effect, making one wonder the fragile unity of Confucian morality that commands sacrifice of all individuals, especially women.

The tensions revealed in the film can be attributed to the director's conscious construct of "air." "Air" represents Fei Mu's filmmaking philosophy – the "air" he refers to, is not on a material level, but on an affective level. For Fei, the "air" acts as a medium for the audience to assimilate with the environment in the play.<sup>48</sup> The abstract concept of "air," apart from great tensions discussed above, has been represented in the film through the concrete symbol of smoke. The film uses "smoke" as an affective medium to create an emotional realm. In the context of film, the "smoke" symbolizes mystery and piety as it appears in the scene of Oratory chanting. In the sequence when Lan Ying is chanting in the oratory, the director uses a lot of closeups of the incense smoke. The smoke comes from the incense burning in the oratory where Lan Ying stays, indicating that she is a Buddhist believer and in Chinese context, a kind-hearted woman. It accentuates the beauty of the lead actress. The smoke surrounding her creates an otherworldly purity that separates her from the political intrigue and cruel bloodshed. Meanwhile, the smoke is also a symbol that accentuates the love between the husband and wife and softens the edge of the sword. When Lan Ying mentions the love between Wu and her, the smoke rises between the couple and reminds Wu of their love bond. Her suicide highlights her lofty sacrifice. In this way, she is lifted into a martyr, for both the patriarchal husband and for

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<sup>48</sup> Fei (1934), 22.

the righteous cause. The smoke is an agent to resolve the emotional conflicts and accomplish all these transformations of her image.

The smoke in this scene sets the atmosphere and plays a similar function as the invisible “air” in mediating between the actress and the audience. The diffusing nature of the smoke gradually envelopes the audience and the characters in the same environment, allowing the audience to identify with the characters in the film. The female protagonist, Wang, who commits suicide for her husband and the empire, stirs the compassion of many viewers. Additionally, since the smoke also has a connotation of “Xu (虚) /virtual” as opposed to “Shi (实) /concrete”, the director reinforces the operatic essence of the film – the opera is also a virtual medium in comparison to the concrete medium of film. That is, the director expresses the invisible air of traditional performance through the figurative smoke, which not only consciously highlights the director’s comprehension of the film as a realistic medium, but also intentionally injects the affective aesthetics into the smoke.

The director also tacitly used empty shots, and let objects speak for the film. Although this type of expression is not common in opera performances, the film bears some resemblance to opera performances in terms of abstraction. That is, the objects in a shot not only represents the object itself, but also symbolizes something else. When Lan Ying is chanting in the oratory, there is a moment the camera cuts from Lan Ying’s figure to a smoking incense burner in the oratory. Although the scene seems abrupt at first glance, it proves to be understandable when combined with the lyrics chanted by Lan Ying. As she sings, “wish my husband win the war and release the horses, and wish the people be under the protection of Buddha”. The incense

burner is a symbol of the Buddha. The juxtaposition of the incense burner and Lan Ying conveys the message that she has the same charitable and generous characteristic as Buddha. The rising incense is not only a symbol for the rising wish that Lan Ying makes in the oratory, but also generates a sense of “zen” in the film.

Besides the film’s editing, cinematography and settings skillfully blend two art forms and create an affect similar to that in the opera theater; the performance and film apparatus also contribute to the affective authenticity of the film. According to a film review written by an audience of the film:

In the film, Zhou Xinfang’s performance skills had reached the most mature state. His gaze, singing voice, succinct movements and mastery of facial expressions were all amazing. My friends and I both spontaneously applauded his performance. After a second, we were aware of our misbehavior, and ashamed of the fact that we could not get rid of the habits from the opera theater. However, you can tell from our reactions that Zhou’s performance was impressive.<sup>49</sup>

The opera film’s affective authenticity is not only demonstrated by the performance of actors in the films and the reactions of the audience, but also by the cinematic environment described in the advertisement of the film company published in *Shen Bao*. A film advertisement published on it describes the environment in the cinema where the film was shown, “exclusive all-day air conditioning, with the latest sound equipment with crisp sound”.<sup>50</sup> The new sound

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<sup>49</sup> Zui, Fang (1937), 'After Thoughts on the Murder in the Oratory / Zhanjingtang Guanhougan', *Lianhua Huabao*, 9 (4), 8.

<sup>50</sup> Anonymous (1937), 'Film Advertisement', *Shen Bao*, 4.

system that the advertisement emphasizes has revealed that the sound is an integral part of the opera film as the sound plays functional roles in its narrative and creation of sensorial environment between the film and the audience.

The opera performance in the film distinguishes the opera film aesthetic from the realistic genre in terms of the difference in expressions of realism and authenticity. Realistic cinema uses realistic settings and props to present the real world and draw emotions from its audience. Opera films, in contrast, maintain the minimalist and abstract aesthetics in addition to realistic outdoor portrayal, still capable of influencing the audience affectively and authentically. The idea of authenticity is reflected in the audience's emotional response to the performance. Even though audiences had acknowledged that the storytelling of the film is fake, they were still immersed in the authentic emotional experience because of the affective opera performance.

Despite the criticisms, *Murder in the Oratory* has been well received in China since its release. Its success is not simply due to the Chinese audience's enthusiasm for opera, but also due to the fact that the film has reconstructed the relationship between opera, Chinese traditional aesthetics, and the cinema. The Chinese opera and theatrical art have influenced the development of Chinese cinema and film theory. The opera film has absorbed the open space and symbolic aesthetics from the opera; thus, the film aesthetically deviates from western realism and focuses on the emotions that Chinese visual art is meant to express. The concept of the traditional open space of the stage in the film is reflected in its flexible application of the stage and real-life space. The film first incorporates an opera stage at the beginning of the film

so as to provide audiences with the visual illusion of a traditional opera. The real-life scene showing the battlefield also blurs the boundary between operatic and cinematic aesthetics – it adds realism to the operatic performances. Finally, the actors' mastery of opera performance and the cinematic apparatus such as the updated sound system in the film theater also contribute to the film's affective authenticity in terms of recreating an authentic taste of traditional opera performance and transmitting authentic emotion to the audience from the screen.

## 6.0 Conclusion

This study explores “affective authenticity” as an aesthetic of opera film in early Chinese cinema. In this study, I argue that early Chinese opera films are authentic in terms of the affect they deliver to the audience and the abstract style due to their strong ties to theatrical arts. The Chinese stage arts emphasize emotional interaction, audience participation and abstract artistic tastes. As the early Chinese film had a strong tie with the theatrical tradition regarding space, theoretical constructions, and aesthetics, the characteristics of “affect” in traditional theater were also inherited by aesthetics of Chinese opera films. “Authenticity” is strongly tied to “affect” in Chinese art since it is interpreted as a shared feeling between the artist and the audience. The idea has been explained by Gao Minglu in his “idea-expressionism theory” – even though Chinese artistic works are not as concrete as Western arts in terms of presenting scenery and objects, they create an “emotional realm” that is “authentic” both to artists and audiences. Meanwhile, Bao Weihong and Rey Chow also regard the film as an affective medium – the content’s influence on audiences gives its way to vibrating air in the cinematic environment. Audiences are no longer passive audiences, but actively interacts with the film in the theater. Building on these theories, I coin the term “affective authenticity” to describe early Chinese cinema. The opera film best demonstrates the idea of “affective authenticity” as it highlights the emotional expression of the film that is transmitted to audiences via multiple ways, including cinematic languages tailored to appeal to traditional opera spectatorship and the connectivity between the opera and cinematic spaces. Meanwhile,

the opera film also refreshes the movie-going experience for opera spectators through the participatory viewing experience and creating an authentic experience of approaching reality. This study further explores “affective authenticity” within the theoretical discussion in the republican era. The film, *Murder in the Oratory* provides a concrete representation of “affective authenticity.” It demonstrates how “affective authenticity” is achieved through the construction of an operatic-cinematic space, and the elusive “air” that links the viewer, the film screen, and the cinematic realm. The last chapter also explains the film’s mechanism by which it embodies authenticity through emotional transmission in addition to abstract aesthetics.



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