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Early Film Culture in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Republican China

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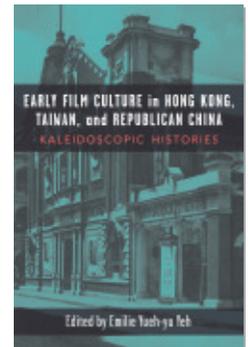
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CHAPTER 9

The Silver Star Group

A First Attempt at Theorizing *Wenyi* in the 1920s

Enoch Yee-lok Tam

Wenyi film has been a research focus of Chinese film studies since the 1980s. An abundant number of scholars have written on the topic of *wenyi* film, defining its generic nature as “literature and art film” or film adaptation of great literature, or understanding in relation to themes of love and human relationship. Many scholars have explored the role of *wenyi* films in the postwar Hong Kong and Taiwan cinemas. Yet, in terms of prewar Chinese cinema, only brief accounts on some *wenyi* directors or works can be found. This chapter thus asks the following questions: When and how was the notion of *wenyi* introduced into the field of Chinese cinematic production? How was it defined and received by film theorists of the time? Through a close reading of some early film magazines and journals in the 1920s, this chapter traces how the film journal *Silver Star* (*Yinxing*, 1926–1928) published a large amount of articles concerning the articulation of *wenyi* in films. In addition, a special issue, *Film and Wenyi* (*Dianying yu wenyi*, 1928), by the same publisher further highlights the fact that the journal strove to articulate the relationship between film and *wenyi*. Through a close reading of these texts, the chapter traces how the first attempt to theorize *wenyi* in film emerged in the 1920s and how, in turn, this attempt related to the appropriation of Romain Rolland’s heroism as new heroism and Kuriyagawa Hakuson’s symbols of anguish. But before reading these theoretical texts, I review the

current studies of *wenyi* film in order to better position this chapter in the discussion of *wenyi* and film.

CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS ON WENYI FILMS

Wang Molin's two books in the late 1970s and early 1980s indicated that *wenyi* is an established genre and a critical perspective in discussing Chinese directors and their works.¹ Wang examines directors from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—including Li Xing, Bu Wancang, Doe Ching (Tao Qin), and Chin Chien (Qin Jian)—and points out that *wenyi* films can be understood as a genre of ethical conflict and romance pervaded with tragic sentiments.² In the mid-1980s, Liang Liang wrote an article on Chinese *wenyi* film, listing films from Republican China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.³ Liang traces the origin of *wenyi* film in Republican China and extends the discussion to postwar Hong Kong, Qiong Yao's romance in Taiwan, and "pure *wenyi*" in Taiwan New Cinema. This informative article demonstrates that *wenyi* films, generally understood as a filmic adaptation of literary work, have been an established film genre for a century.

Around the same time, Cai Guorong published his seminal book *Studies on Contemporary Chinese Wenyi Film*.⁴ He confirmed that the genre mainly dealt with family relationships and ethics; the genre also embraced romantic elements, which allowed it to represent the finer aspects of human emotions. Sharing a line of thinking with Liang, Cai regards lyrical feeling as a crucial aspect of *wenyi* films from the Republican period to Taiwan New Cinema. Contrary to Liang's orientation is that Cai focuses on postwar Hong Kong and Taiwan, first, by highlighting the contribution of various film production companies, and, second, by indicating how adaptation from an original novel influences the style of the film. In the anthology published by the Tenth Hong Kong International Film Festival for its retrospective on Cantonese *wenyipian* (*wenyi* film), Law Kar adopts Cai's definition of *wenyi* film in discussing the archetypes and variations of Cantonese *wenyi* film.⁵ These four examples illustrate how *wenyi* film was defined and applied to film study in the 1980s.

In later scholarship on Chinese cinema, *wenyi* became an oft-studied research focus. Scholars expanded the discussion of *wenyi* film directors and their cinematic styles⁶ while locating the relationship between *wenyi* film and healthy realism,⁷ ethics,⁸ and politics.⁹ While some scholars have at-

tempted to highlight the issue of adaptation in *wenyi* films,¹⁰ others have reinterrogated the definition of *wenyi* and its relation to melodrama.¹¹ In these examples, most literature focuses on postwar Hong Kong and Taiwan cinemas.¹² However, the relationship between *wenyi* and film in the earlier eras of Chinese cinema remains an unanswered question.

There have been a few attempts to figure out this *wenyi* tradition. In relation to the world cinema tradition, Teo puts forward the *wenyi* genre as the tradition of Chinese filmmaking. When dealing with the origin of *wenyipian*, he cites the incorporation of *wenmingxi* (“civilized dramas”) in the Shanghai film industry in the 1920s. Teo further proposes that later in the “Orphan Island” period (1937–1941), “the term *wenyipian* referred to adaptations of Chinese and foreign novels.”¹³ Yet his brief account of the origin of *wenyipian* does not conceal the fact that “*wenyipian* . . . is an enigmatic nomenclature even to the Chinese.”¹⁴

To resolve this enigma, Yeh traces the introduction of *wenyi* to the field of cinematic production in early Chinese cinema. She confirms that “the term *wenyi* is derived from a Japanese literary concept, *bungei*”¹⁵ and was used by Xu Zhuodai as one of his genre classifications in his book *Studies on Photoplay* (*Yingxi xue*, 1924).¹⁶ On the application of the *wenyi* film genre in early Chinese film production, Yeh, in another article, provides a list of films related to *wenyi* in terms of their advertisements in *Shenbao*, a prestigious newspaper in the late Qing and Republican period. Her list shows that the term “literature and art blockbuster” (*wenyi jupian*) first appeared in 1931 and was widely circulated after 1935.¹⁷ In the conclusion of her research, she lists thirteen articles written by critics and literati discussing the relationship between film-as-art and the notion of *wenyi* in the 1920s.¹⁸ However, the list omits many primary sources, such as the film journal *Silver Star*, which this chapter investigates, that contribute to the discussion of the relationship between film and *wenyi* or among film, literature, and other arts.

Besides tracing the origin of *wenyi* film, the scholars mentioned above also stressed the significance of *wenyi* directors and *wenyi* film in the Republican period. Cai briefly outlines the debate over romantic and realistic style in *wenyi* works such as Zhang Shichuan’s *Fate in Tears and Laughter* (*Tixiao yinyuan*, 1932), Fei Mu’s *Spring in a Small Town* (*Xiaocheng zhi chun*, 1948), Zheng Zhengqiu’s *Twin Sisters* (*Zimei hua*, 1933), and Bu Wancang’s *The Peach Girl* (*Taohua qixue ji*, 1931).¹⁹ Wang also cites Bu Wancang’s other films and points to the fact that *Love and Duty* (*Lianai yu yiwu*, 1931) and *Conscienceless* (*Rendao*, 1932) were well-known *wenyi* films in the 1930s.²⁰ Li-

ang highlights the relationship between “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” literature and film and underlines the influence of Zhang Henshui’s novels on *wenyi* filmmaking.²¹ According to Liang, *Fate in Tears and Laughter* was the only literary work that had been adapted into film twice before 1938. Zhang Zhen traces the practice of *wenyi* filmmaking back to the 1920s, citing Dan Duyu’s *Swear and Oath* (*Haishi*, 1921) and Zheng Zhengqiu and Zhang Shichuan’s *An Orphan Rescues His Grandpa* (*Gu’er jiuzu ji*, 1923) as the most recognized origins of the *wenyi* tradition, and analyzing “the exaltation of a lyrical modernist subjectivity and art cinema (or *wenyi* style)”²² in Hou Yao’s *A Poet from the Sea* (*Haijiao shiren*, 1927).

From these literatures, one can observe that *wenyi* filmmaking was practiced in the early 1920s and named a film genre by Xu Zhuodai in 1924, although the term was never in extensive circulation before the 1930s. In the next two decades, *wenyi* became an established film genre and was widely practiced by filmmakers. However, questions about the early introduction of the notion of *wenyi* remain unanswered, especially with respect to the theorization of *wenyi* in films. More precisely: How was the notion, in the 1920s, theoretically and discursively introduced into the field of cinematic production? How was it defined in its introduction? Why did theorists then appropriate the notion from the field of literary production to cinematic production? Lastly: How did its introduction respond to the larger political and social context at the time?

I single out the film journal *Silver Star* as an exemplary case for a study of the early theorization of *wenyi* in films. *Silver Star* was published by Lu Mengshu, a prestigious film critic, and aimed to promote *wenyi* films as an art. He clearly stated in the editorial of the first issue of *Silver Star* that the objective of the magazine was “to let common people know that ‘film is an art’ and eliminate the undesired phenomenon of understanding ‘film as only a tool’ [for entertainment].”²³ Nor was the idea of film as an art form invented by Lu alone. Similar statements can be found in earlier film journals such as *Film Magazine* (*Yingxi zazhi*, 1921–1922), and the idea was spread among film critic circles throughout the decade. What singles out *Silver Star* in the discussion of the relationship between film and *wenyi* is that a special issue called *Film and Wenyi*, also edited by Lu Mengshu, was published. As will be demonstrated, Lu and other contributors to the film journal put tremendous effort into articulating the relationship between film and *wenyi*, as well as theorizing the notion of *wenyi* in cinema. Although there were internal differences among individual contributors, the journal was rather

homogenous in its ideology. In this sense, Michel Hockx's argument about a literary journal is beneficial here. He states that a literary journal "can be considered in three alternative ways: as a collectively authored text, as the product of a single editor, or as an authorless collection of 'voices.'"²⁴ Hockx further suggests that for a journal seen as a collectively authored text or an authorless collection of voices, its entire content, including texts and visual materials, should be subject to analysis. In the case of *Silver Star*, these three alternative ways of studying a journal can be applied. For the purpose of discussion, this group of contributors is designated the *Silver Star group* in the rest of the chapter—a group that demonstrated a collective will in promoting film as an art with respect to the notion of *wenyi*.

Through a close reading of the materials produced by the Silver Star group, this chapter aims to (1) examine the theorization of *wenyi* in terms of its relation to literature and art through the adaptation of Kuriyagawa Hakuson's symbols of anguish, a process that elevates film into a serious form of art; (2) pinpoint the function of *wenyi* film in moving and touching common people in order to highlight the educational power of film; and (3) display how the appropriation of new heroism in *wenyi* film leads to the emancipation of the underclass and, moreover, to revolution. The relationship between *wenyi* literature, film, and art will be demonstrated in the following section.

WENYI: LITERATURE, FILM, AND ART

According to Yeh, the term *wenyi* in Chinese is derived from a concept in Japanese literature, *bungei*, and is "a synonym for Western literature and an art form that is explicitly foreign, outside of Chinese conventions."²⁵ In the *Wenyi Dictionary*, edited by Sun Lianggong and published in 1928, the entry for *wenyi* states:

Wenyi: Generally, it is a noun for literature and art. Its meaning is narrower than that of art while broader than that of literature. Sometime it designates literature (namely pure literature); and sometime it is used to denote the totality of art.²⁶

While confirming the explanation given by Yeh, this definition of *wenyi* also demonstrates the inherent ambivalence of the term. Sun's definition oscil-

lates between literature and art, as it sometimes refers to literature, sometimes to art, and sometimes to both simultaneously. Nevertheless, the dictionary definition shows that the term remains closely related to art and literature. Interestingly, the Silver Star group also dealt with this triangular relationship among film, literature, and art.

While discussing the idea of film as an art, the young litterateur Zhang Rougu (1905–1960) of the Silver Star group claimed that “film is an integrated art, combining *wenyi* and science. *Wenyi* can be regarded as its base.”²⁷ This view of film as an integrated art based on *wenyi* was common among the group. Adopting the definition in the *Bungei Dictionary*, which was edited and published in Japan, the group saw film as the eighth art, placing it alongside literature, music, painting, drama, architecture, sculpture, and dancing.²⁸ Yu Dafu (1896–1945) later asserted that “film is an art that possesses actualizing power.”²⁹

The idea of film as an integrated art combining art, literature, and science was not new to the cinematic landscape of the time. For example, in the “Inaugurating Preface” of *Film Magazine*, Gu Kenfu (189?–1932) suggested that “the nature of motion picture is the combination of technology, literature, and science”³⁰ and pointed to the relationship between motion pictures and modern drama. When talking about the mission of *Mingxing Special* (*Mingxing tekan*), Zhou Jianyun (1893–1967) also underlined the fact that a “motion picture is an integrated art; it reflects the reality of humankind. Those who promote it should carry the knowledge of literature, science, optics, aesthetics, philosophy, history, psychology, and sociology.”³¹ These examples show that the common understanding of film as an integrated art had already been established at the time *Silver Star* was in circulation. The perspectival shift that the Silver Star group brought in was to replace art and literature with the notion of *wenyi*. Such a replacement was not merely rhetorical. By substituting *wenyi* for art and literature, Zhang Rougu and other members in the Silver Star group, as will be shown later, brought a new perspective to film.

The concept of film as an integrated art of *wenyi* further implied that, after poetry, novels, and drama, film was the fourth subgenre of literature (the fourth literature).³² Members in the group therefore appealed to directors and scriptwriters to acquaint themselves with literature for the purpose of producing better pictures.³³ To assert that film was a subgenre of literature was to highlight its “literariness,” which was mainly revealed in film scriptwriting. Chen Zhiqing (?–1931) shared Hou Yao’s (1903–1942) view that a

scriptwriter is the soul of cinema. He therefore proclaimed that “the scriptwriter is the one who actually produces a motion picture, not the director”³⁴ and that “the director is only responsible for actualizing the continuity that the scriptwriter has written.”³⁵ The privileging of the scriptwriter and the categorization of film as a subgenre of literature in the early theorization of *wenyi* in films were a result of the close affiliation of motion pictures (*yingxi*) with other forms of drama (modern drama [*wenmingxi* or *xiju*] and Chinese opera [*xiqu*]). From a historical perspective, Hu Jubin and others show that in the early years the venues for the exhibition of film coincided with those for *xiqu*.³⁶ He further points out that early film production practices borrowed from the production of spoken drama and opera films.³⁷ The early film historian Zheng Junli (1911–1969) also indicated that the scriptwriters of spoken drama brought new scriptwriting techniques to the field of cinematic production.³⁸

Yet, what counted as, or contributed to, the literary quality or “literariness” of film? Lu Mengshu, Chen Zhiqing, and others kept referring to the term “symbols of anguish” (*Kumon no shocho, Kumen de xiangzeng*), coined by the Japanese literary critic Kuriyagawa Hakuson, to develop their own theory of scriptwriting. The book *Symbols of Anguish* was published posthumously in 1923 in Japan, and a year later Lu Xun (1881–1936) translated it from Japanese to Chinese. In his monograph, Kuriyagawa suggested that anguish (*kumon, kumen*) was the source of literary creativity. Through Lu Xun’s translation, the Silver Star group was heavily influenced by this proposition in their scriptwriting. Lu Mengshu defines *wenyi* work as “the reflection of the time, symbols of anguish. In general, it is the outcry (*nahan*) of the oppressed people.”³⁹ Here, Lu, on one hand, defined *wenyi* in terms of the symbols of anguish, and, on the other hand, incorporated Lu Xun’s notion of outcry (*nahan*), which in turn was heavily influenced by Kuriyagawa’s symbols of anguish.⁴⁰ On the same page, Lu Mengshu cited Kuriyagawa in *Symbols of Anguish* to illustrate the dialectic between two archetypal forces, namely the force of oppression and the force of vitality, an idea that can be traced back to Sigmund Freud’s theory of the id and Henry Bergson’s concept of the *élan vital*. Lu notes that vitality

never falls into impasse or standstill, never compromise or surrender. It seeks only the vitality of freedom and liberation. Whether consciously or unconsciously, it burns us from within, deep in our hearts, like raging flames.⁴¹

Kuriyagawa postulates that creativity in literature and art springs from living in, as well as fighting against, anguish:

On the one hand, we experience this anguish; on the other hand, we participate in severe struggle. On the road to our life, we groan, shout, resent, and weep, and at the same time we often immerse ourselves in the happiness and praise of triumph. The cry from within forms what I call *wenyi*.⁴²

Following Kuriyagawa's formulation, Lu Mengshu asserted that "*wenyi* is an expression of life."⁴³ Again Lu cites Kuriyagawa by way of Lu Xun's translation:

Wenyi is purely an expression of life; it is the only world in which people can leave completely the oppression and compression of the outside world, can stand on the absolute freedom of the mind, and can express their own individuality.⁴⁴

In this sense, artistic creativity and human individuality are "mobilized by the conflict between the uninhibited, freedom-seeking 'life-force' and external social constraints."⁴⁵ Kuriyagawa's celebration of individuality is the reason why he was embraced by the May Fourth writers, the same writers who also celebrated individual liberation from feudal and traditional China. Here a certain continuity between the May Fourth Movement and the Silver Star group can be established, not only because *Silver Star* invited Yu Dafu to contribute to the journal, but also because of a shared idea of *wenyi* as symbols of anguish.⁴⁶

Besides defining the nature of *wenyi*, the group also attempted to define the function of *wenyi* film. Zhang Rougu proclaimed that the function of *wenyi* film is "to revitalize the dead *wenyi* works in living motion pictures and at the same time let people understand the moving and touching power of the narration in *wenyi*."⁴⁷ For Zhang, *wenyi* film is a genre that adapts from *wenyi* works, and is capable for moving and touching people. While Zhang did not state who the target audience of *wenyi* films was, Lu Mengshu, the chief editor of *Silver Star*, continued from Zhang's line of thought and stated clearly that *wenyi* films are produced for every single person, including the illiterate. In the concluding chapter of his anthology *Film and Wenyi*, Lu said:

The only way is to inflame our fire of life, ardently and fiercely making new heroic *wenyi* works into films, so that illiterate people can enjoy art and culture. Consequently this can revitalize an aged and antiquated China, creating a new and energetic nation.⁴⁸

Here, in addition to pointing out that *wenyi* films were for all, Lu enthusiastically revealed his belief that *wenyi* films could help reinvigorate the nation. At the time, this was a common belief about the function of art, ever since Liang Chi-chao (1873–1929) published his famous article “On the Relationship between Fiction and the Government of the People” (1902). Liang indicated from the very beginning of the article that “to renovate the people of a nation, one must first renovate its fiction.” Liang saw literary writing as a means to alter the morale of his compatriots. With a similar understanding of cultural production in the age of reform, Lu strongly believed that film had the potential to renew a nation. After all, it was a “democratic” art that even illiterate people could enjoy. Hence, elevating the status of film to art via the *wenyi* discourse was never merely a *l’art pour l’art* project imagined by the critics and artists. Rather, it was intimately tied to the project of nation-building.

The Silver Star group formulated the relationship between film and *wenyi* from the perspective of literature and art and defined its function in relation to nation-building. The group regarded film as a literary genre while privileging scriptwriters over directors. Borrowing from Kuriyagawa’s conception of *wenyi*, the group sees the symbols of anguish as a driving force for creating *wenyi* films, just like their literary counterpart. From this, Sun Shiyi and Lu Menghsu concluded that a “motion picture is an expression of life, a criticism of life, a reflection of the time, and symbols of anguish.”⁴⁹ Not only was film a literary genre, it could bring anachronistic *wenyi* works to life for every person, including the illiterate. In its theorization of *wenyi* in films, the Silver Star group pinpointed the function of *wenyi* film in moving and touching the common people. Thus, the ensuing inquiry would be how *wenyi* films worked on the common people.

GOING TO THE PEOPLE: WENYI FILM AND LITERATURE

Compared to literature, members of the Silver Star group saw films as a closer, more popular and economic medium for the common people. Xin

Min asserted that the main difference between film and literature lay in their respective popularity:

Readers of *literature* should have a certain level of literacy. . . . However, film does not work in that way. In every theater, there are men and women, the elderly and the young, and people with all kinds of occupations. All are included in spite of the difference in their level of cultivation.⁵⁰

Chun Bing also agreed that film was the most economic and popular form of art, because every person in a society would be able to see, read, and understand films.⁵¹ In this vein, film became an excellent tool for educating the masses. Cinema as an educational instrument for common people was not a new idea in the 1920s. Victor Fan argues that even in the famous “hard film versus soft film” debate “these two theoretical positions in fact share a common belief: that cinema is an educational instrument for political ends.”⁵² Therefore, it was not surprising that the members of the group saw film as a tool for mass education. Li Baijin extrapolated what film education could bring to the people, the nation, and its time:

Regardless of the purpose and attitude you have for watching a film, it can affect your mind, pushing your mind to critique, to research—this can influence your life and actions. Without being aware of the changes, you are transformed. . . . This can lead society to honesty and nobility, to enhance the spirit of race, to fortify the foundation of a nation.⁵³

Again, Li revealed a strong tendency to link film to nationalism and socialism, especially since film was a democratic tool to address common people from all walks of life. In the theorization of *wenyi*, the mass was a prominent term that many contributors of *Silver Star* could not avoid. For instance, Tian Han (1898–1968) mentioned in *Silver Star* his unfinished film project *Into the People* (*Dao minjian qu*) and the social movement that happened in Russia with the same name: “Those who have done research on Russian history, especially modern Russia *wenyi* (literature and arts), should be aware of the ‘going to the people’ movement among the Russia youths in the 1870s.”⁵⁴

This may be regarded as one of the clues to Tian’s leftist turn in the 1930s. However, in the late 1920s, as a member of the Silver Star group, Tian’s rhetoric in his long article “Silver Dream” was as romantic as that of

Lu Mengshu's, since the former underlined "'love for sex' and 'love for nature' as the important themes for contemporary literature as well as modern film art."⁵⁵ His literary examples included William Wordsworth and Charles Baudelaire. He also provided examples in films like Kurihara Kisaburō's adaptation of Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's novel *Jasei no Midara* (1921) and Charles Bryant's adaptation of Oscar Wilde's play *Salome* (1922) to illustrate his point. What Tian witnessed in the "going to the people" movement was the passion and fantasy of the Russian youths and their belief in the peasants' bearing a kind of "sublimated honesty and simplicity."

This romanticism was indeed at the core of the Silver Star group's understanding of *wenyi*, an impulse that will be discussed in the next section. Yet Tian's fascination with the peasants was not shared by other members in the Silver Star group, especially when the readers of the film journal were living in the modern city of Shanghai. Therefore, Sun Shiyi (1904–1966), one of the editors of *Shenzhou tekan* (*Shenzhou Special*, 1925–1927) and the scriptwriter for *New Woman* (*Xin nüxing*, dir. Cai Chusheng, 1935), and others preferred to use the term "underclass" rather than "people." Sun articulated the relation between film and the people and demarcated the history of drama in the West into four periods: mythological drama, aristocratic drama, bourgeois drama, and democratic drama. He proclaimed that the history of drama had already evolved into the stage of democratic drama (drama for all people).⁵⁶ At this stage, the content of drama should be extracted from, as well as be about, the underclass, as it was the majority among all social classes. Chen Zhiqing took a similar stance toward common people. He claimed that the upper class was the minority in society and that "the life of upper-class people is utterly deprived of humanity [and] is incomparable to the sincerity of the underclass."⁵⁷ Therefore, he advised scriptwriters to extract materials from the life of the public: "Be attentive to the lives of the modern ordinary people; be attentive to their needs, since the audience is tightly tied to motion pictures, a relation that is closer than that between education and the masses."⁵⁸ Lu Mengshu agreed with Sun and Chen that artistic dramatization should focus on ordinary people.⁵⁹ Film "has already taken the responsibility of instructing life because it describes real life more thoroughly."⁶⁰ To Lu, film transformed dead *wenyi* (i.e., drama and literature) into living (animated dramatic events) art.

In the article "Film and Wenyi," Yu Dafu further linked the popularity of film to the ideal of socialism. According to Yu, film was more economic than literature because it was less time-consuming and as a result would attract

more common people. He stressed this point and extended the discussion of the popularity of film to the ideal of socialism:

We all know that film is cheap, economic, simple, and easy to read. These advantages of film are self-explanatory in its correspondence to the ideal of socialism of our time. With its enormous power in propaganda, we all understand how good it can be for social education and the education of common people.⁶¹

He further remarked that “to popularize is not to vulgarize, to simplify is not to monotonize. . . . In sum, these should be done on the spiritual level, not losing the temperament of the taste of arts.”⁶² Yu understood the value of the popularity of films for the purpose of serving ordinary people and emancipating them from oppression.

Ying Dou went even further to assert that film-as-art should be revolutionized and publicized: “Art should stand with the troops of underclass people, leading them, instructing them to take part in the upward struggle and battle.”⁶³ Ying’s military rhetoric expressed the urgency of extrapolating film art into revolution and emancipation of the masses.

The Silver Star group advised scriptwriters of *wenyi* films to be aware of the propagandistic and educational power of films, which could move people and instruct them how to think, feel, and live. As film was the most democratic form of art, its content should be derived from the majority of people, that is, the underclass. Furthermore, the group proposed that, instead of simply aiming to emancipate the individual from oppression by bestowing individuality upon the audience, *wenyi* films also possessed the potential to lead the masses to participate in nationalistic and socialistic revolutions. However, portraying the lives of the underclass alone could not lead to emancipation and revolution. In order to see how this works, we must turn to the concept of new heroism that was proposed by the group.

New Heroism: Wenyi Facing Revolution

The Silver Star group, especially Lu Mengshu and Chen Zhiqing, advocated the notion of new heroism (*xinyingxiong zhuyi*), allegedly derived from Romain Rolland’s thinking.⁶⁴ From Rolland’s *Jean-Christophe* and *Life of Beethoven* Lu Mengshu derived his idea of new heroic film. For Lu, China at that time was severely under the influence of egoism (*lijì zhuyi*), which

exploited the proletarians as much as it could. Egoistic and individualistic people indulged themselves in materialism and became, in Lu's words, "non-humans." By paraphrasing Arthur Schopenhauer's "will to live," Lu claimed that suffering people should "fight bravely. Even though they are trapped and severely injured, they should fight bravely."⁶⁵ A new hero fights against inhuman oppressors and makes reality a better living circumstance for common people. However, a new hero is not someone who possesses qualities superior to the common person:

A new hero is not a person with superpower. Women and children are qualified to be new heroes provided that they are enthusiastic, with sacrificing spirit, to selflessly fight for the whole nation, to sacrifice, to fight against oppression, and to improve the abominable living situation.⁶⁶

For Lu Mengshu, these constituted the qualities of a new hero. He understood film as an art for representing human lives, and for instructing and educating. New heroic film in his eyes is

like a huge mirror that reflects the characters and their background completely and colorfully, to frighten the people, to provoke them, to inflame the fire in their hearts, to encourage them to be better persons, and to ardently fight for their lives.⁶⁷

One can easily discern how the notion of new heroism may be linked to the symbols of anguish, in which Kuriyagawa highlights Bergson's "life-force." By embracing their "life-force," common people could potentially become new heroes.

Lu admitted that his idea of new heroic film was indeed influenced by Chen Zhiqing.⁶⁸ In an article on writing a good script, Chen Zhiqing stated that "for modern people, especially Chinese people, all they need is the spirit of new heroism. . . . He is a hero that is willing to sacrifice, to suffer, to fight, to rebel, and to improve the abominable living situation."⁶⁹ Like Lu, Chen also thought that film as an art form reflected the living conditions of humans. Furthermore, he extended the idea of reflection and regarded film as a means to manifest "national spirit" or "national character." He recognized the persistent and courageous spirit that he found in German films. He criticized Chinese producers for their lack of urgency in cultivating a national spirit in their films. As a result, the films produced could never acquire a

high quality, never become art or *wenyi* films. The major reason was that films obtained plot materials from the lives of the upper class, which, to Chen, was shallow, hollow and nonrepresentative.

Here one can see how new heroism harked back to the advocacy of “going to the people” or underclass. The notion of going to people or underclass is in fact imbued with romanticism. In the anthology *Film and Wenyi*, Du Shihuan discusses what he calls “neo-romanticist film.” He briefly traces the emergence of neoromanticism via the linear progression from classicism, romanticism, and naturalism to neoromanticism. For Du, neoromanticism is a combination of naturalism and romanticism: “It takes ‘the attitude of natural scientific observation’ in naturalism and ‘the style of using mystical symbolism to express reality’ in romanticism for its attitude and style respectively.”⁷⁰ He concludes that “neo-romanticism does not describe life in an aloof manner. Rather, it guides life with impassioned tears; it guides people away from their dark and mundane life, and bears forth a world of poetic beauty.”⁷¹ Du’s suggestion that neoromanticist film echoed the positive side of neoromanticism suggested by Yu Dafu in the context of literature. “Yu Ta-fu [Yu Dafu] divided neo-romanticism into two categories: the positive kind of new heroic and new idealistic literature (represented by Rolland, Barbusse, and Anatole France); and the negative type of symbolist poets who followed the decadent nihilism and moral anarchism of Baudelaire and Verlaine.”⁷² Though one may discover the negative type in the writing of Tian Han, the general take on neo-romanticism in the Silver Star group follows Du’s articulation of guiding people to the beautiful, new world through the act of new heroism.

Illuminated by the spirits of new heroism and symbols of anguish, and with their eagerness to embrace production from the West, Lu and others replaced the traditional Chinese spirit with a rigorous spirit and emotional outburst. For the group, the traditional Chinese spirit was static and passive, while the Western spirit was dynamic and rigorous. Huang Zhen’s article is a typical example to show how the Silver Star group construed the dichotomy between the West and China. “Westerners (especially the Greeks) are a dynamic, living, young and enthusiastic ethnicity that is not afraid of hardship.”⁷³ With this spirit in mind, it could be argued that *wenyi* works in the West “are all living and aggressive, so the people over there are also aggressive. They are so confident that they are able to conquer the heaven and God.”⁷⁴ In contrast, Eastern *wenyi*, and in particular its Chinese manifestation, was dying and passive, and was destined to fade out in the course of

world history: "The passive *wenyi* is fatal; it diminished the Jew, depreciated Persia, and also weakened China."⁷⁵ In the end of the article, Huang called for embracing the living art and art with a rigorous spirit (of the West); he also suggested abandoning the decaying, dying, and passive art of old China.

Following this line, Lu condemned the passive spirit of China, making its people into slaves, making them submissive and inert to any change from the outside world. Hence, to Lu the mission of *wenyi* was to save people from slavery, remaking them into living people and renewing the whole nation:

After all, film is an art. Its core is to criticize life, to depict life, to set life as its background. On the silver screen of cinema, it ought to cry out with anger over the oppressed people, and express their rebellion, resistance, and sacrificing spirit and through this to light the fire of life in people, to reform the passive and inert national spirit.⁷⁶

At the turn of the twentieth century, with Liang Chi-chao's proposal mentioned above, it was nothing new for people to see literature and art as tools for transforming the nation, or as art forms that participate in revolution. By defining *wenyi* films as an expression of internal anguish and by redefining Chinese people as new heroes, the group linked *wenyi* films to revolution. Here revolution should be understood as an abrupt change from the old to the new, from the traditional to modernity, from generic mass productions to refined, well-scripted *wenyi* productions for the sake of common people, and for enlightening them to assist their transition from nonhumanity to new heroism.

CONCLUSION

After the cultural translation of *wenyi* from Japan to China in the early twentieth century, the notion gradually gained serious attention in the 1910s in the field of literary production. Numerous literary journals and magazines with the term *wenyi* in their title indicated how seamlessly the term was incorporated into the discursive practices of literature. Desiring to elevate the status of film to art, a group of people began in the 1920s to redefine film by using the notion of *wenyi*. *Silver Star*, and its related book publications, was the crystallization of the thought of this group of people. The Silver Star group pondered the question of the relationship among *wenyi*, art, literature,

common people, and revolution. To them, not every film was a work of art, but *wenyi* film was definitely a form of art. Their understanding of *wenyi* was heavily influenced by Kuriyagawa Hakuson by way of Lu Xun. *Wenyi* was an art of symbols of anguish, which was understood as a form of expression of the inner outburst arising from the external oppression of life. This outburst became a strong means of reflecting the lives of people, the spirit of the time as well as the spirit of the nation. The group considered this reflection to be the ultimate mission of *wenyi* films. Its objective was to reconfigure underclass people into new heroes and prepare them to participate in the revolution and renovation of the whole nation—making the weak strong, the old new, the passive active, the inert aggressive.

Given the tendency for film scholars to understand *wenyi* as family melodramas and romances, it is necessary to locate a more illuminating theorization of *wenyi* in relation to the representation of underclass people (socialist realism) and revolution (new heroism). By rehistoricizing *wenyi* in this way, one can uncover a trajectory of *wenyi* film across different movements and debates in Republican China, such as the New Life Movement (*xin sheng-huo yundong*), the hard/soft debate in which film thinkers pondered which spectators were best educated via the cinema as an educational tool, “The Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art” in which Mao Zedong argued that the arts (including film) were a pedagogic tool to reflect the life of the working class and to serve the advancement of socialism, and so on. In this regard, *wenyi* studies are a means to conceive a new approach to Chinese film historiography. This chapter outlines the first attempt at theorization of *wenyi* by the Silver Star group and provides a point of departure for richer *wenyi* studies to emerge in the future.

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Notes

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in *Zhongguo dianying yu xiju*. See Wang Molin, *Daoyan yu zuopin* [Directors and Their Works] (Taipei: Lianya chubanshe, 1978); Wang Molin, *Zhongguo dianying yu xiju* [Chinese Film and Drama] (Taipei: Lianya chubanshe, 1981).

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3. Liang Liang, “Zhongguo wenyi dianying yu dangdia xiaoshuo, shang” [Chinese Wenyi Film and Contemporary Novel, Part 1], *Wenhsun* 26 (1986): 257–262; Liang Liang, “Zhongguo wenyi dianying yu dangdia xiaoshuo, xia” [Chinese Wenyi Film and the Contemporary Novel, Part 2], *Wenhsun* 27 (1986): 266–277.

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17. Yeh, “From Foreign Word to Genre Concept,” 187.

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67. Lu, "Xin yingxiong zhuyi de yingju," 10.
68. See Lu, "Xin yingxiong zhuyi."

69. Chen, "Zhongguo yingju zhong jige zhongyao de wenti, zhong," 8.
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