

Singing in Electric Shadows

Singing in Electric Shadows: A Survey of Chinese Musicals

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The art of telling stories and expressing emotions through songs and dances in China dates back at least to three millennia ago when the last king of the Shang dynasty (1766-1050 BC), according to Chinese historical documents, indulged in an excessive lifestyle in which music, dance, and wine drinking played a crucial role. Despite this long tradition, the birth of the so-called "musical film" in China, a new performing art that has its roots in Broadway musicals and takes shape with the release of Warner Brothers' *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, can only be arguably traced back to 1935, when director Yuan Muzhi (1909-1978) experimented the genre with his film *Metropolitan Sights* (*Dushi fengguang*). Furthermore, the Chinese musical, if there is such a term, differs greatly from the Hollywood musical, at least in its early stage. First of all, if excluding films recording Peking operas and various kinds of local operas (a handy example would be *The Dingjun Mountain* [*Dingjun shan*, 1905], attributed as the first film China has ever made), referred to as "Xiqu pian" (films based on Chinese operas) in Chinese, it is quite hard to identify an early Chinese film that fits the definition of the Hollywood musical with the characteristics of "all-talking, all-singing, and all-dancing." Early Chinese "musicals" are marked by interpolated songs, but with little dancing sequences. Secondly, despite the fact that Chinese cinema saw its first "golden age" in the 1930s, Chinese filmmakers in general didn't have a clear sense of film genres. With the exception of "martial arts" films, which were inspired by the literary tradition of China, most Chinese films in the 1930s were made under the influence of realism, as film was considered a medium for social justice and progress. As a result, it is by no means an easy task to come up with a historical survey of Chinese musicals. To justify the current survey, the authors would like to make the following classifications: first, "Xiqu pian" or the filmed stage operas and plays do not fall under our category of the Chinese musical; second, even without dancing sequences, some films, especially those in which songs played a significant role in both storytelling and emotional expression, will be considered as "Chinese musicals" or at least quasi-Chinese musicals; third, partly due to the above considerations, opera films, particularly the "model operas" (*Yangbanxi*) during the Cultural Revolution, will be excluded from the current survey. *The Rise of the Chinese Musical: The Context*

Dramatically changed from a fishing village to a global city comparable to Paris and New York during the late 1920s and 1930s, Shanghai was by its nature cinematic in the sense that it boldly invited peeping, looking, and gazing. It is no wonder that filmmaking and moviegoing quickly took their roots in this eastern metropolis after cinema was introduced to China. As a specific genre, musical film also encountered a favorable environment in Shanghai where a transformed urban lifestyle demanded light entertainment and upbeat tunes. The opening of Shanghai's first cabaret, the Great Eastern Ballroom, in 1927 ushered in an era in which dances, songs, and music became an indispensable part of Shanghai's nightlife. Every night, as neon lights brightened the cityscape, thousands of dancing hostesses shuffled their high-heeled feet at hundreds of cabarets, and bodies swayed with the rhythm of popular songs and Jazz. The cabaret culture culminated in the 1930s when dancing hostess as a profession grew to be one of the fourteen major occupations for the "working women" of Shanghai.

It was exactly because of the above favorable environment that Hollywood musicals found their enthusiastic audiences in China. Coincidentally, dramatic changes in lifestyle took place in Shanghai right around the time when the Talkie Revolution was sweeping across Hollywood and the worldwide filmmaking scene. By the late 1920s, with the tremendous success of *The Jazz Singer* and *The Singing Fool* (1928) and studios like Warner Brothers, Fox, and MGM experimenting with different sound systems, it became evident that sound film was what the audience demanded. In Shanghai, despite the fact that silent films had the advantage of using a wordless language of image and gesture, thus easier to be appreciated in a different culture, early Hollywood sound films, particularly musical films, created a sensation. Hollywood rep-offices in Shanghai seized the opportunity and imported a great number of musicals or quasi-musicals to the local market. MGM's *Broadway Melody* (1929), WB's *42nd Street* (1933), RKO's *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), and other Hollywood musical hits played in Shanghai to an enthusiastic audience. Helped by the near monopoly of Shanghai's distribution channels, Hollywood firmly established itself as a dominant player in Shanghai's urban culture. In the year of 1933, for example, China made 84 feature films, but this achievement was dwarfed by the fact that, in the same year, a total of 431 foreign films were imported to China, out of which 353 were Hollywood products.

Hollywood musicals and sound films added a sense of urgency to Chinese filmmakers. As early as in the late 1920s and early 1930s, Chinese filmmakers and critics responded to the Hollywood dominance by calling for the production of Chinese sound films and musicals. Making Chinese films talk, they argued, would first require the film community to train a pool of talents who could sing and dance. In 1930, under the sponsorship of Li Jinhui (1891-1967), a prolific composer whose name was associated with many popular songs between the 1920s and the 1940s, the *Bright Moon* (*Mingyue*) Singing and Dancing Troupe was formed in Shanghai. It turned out that many talented film stars in the 1930s and 40s, including Wang Renmei (1915-1987), Li Lili (1914-2005), and the famed "Golden Throat" Zhou Xuan (1920-1957), were first trained in the troupe. They later became the active force in Chinese musicals.

The rise of Chinese musicals is also closely related to the Chinese experiment in sound technology. China's first projection of sound film was held at Shanghai's Pantheon Theater in December 1926, but the transition from silent to sound was initiated by 1931, when the cooperation between the Star Motion Picture Company (Minxing, established in 1922) and the Pathe Gramophone Records gave birth to the first Chinese sound-on-disc film *Singsong Girl Red Peony* (Genu hongmudan, 1931). Technically, Chinese sound films at its early stage had to solely rely on foreign (Hollywood) equipment, and the experience of learning how to synchronize sound and image was not always pleasant. For instance, Hong Shen (1894-1955), a screenplay writer and stage director, went to the United States in the early 1930s and brought back the sound equipment and more than a dozen technical people for the Star Company, but the result turned out to be sloppy and the equipment was both expensive and outmoded. At about the same time, three returned students from the United States, Situ Yimin, Gong Yuke, and Ma Dejian, started an ambitious plan to make the most effective sound-on-film recording system of China. In 1933, the three film technicians succeeded in improving the method of recording sound on film and patented a new invention they called the "Three Friends" (Sanyou), which turned out to be the very system that was used to make such 1930s' classics as *Song of the Fishermen* (Yuguangqu, 1934), *The Highway* (Da Lu, 1934), *Plunder of Peach and Plum* (Taoli jie, 1934), *New Woman* (Xing nuxing, 1935), *Children of Troubled Times* (Fengyun ernu, 1935), and the first Chinese "musical," *Metropolitan Sights* (1936). They later started their own business by selling the "Three Friends" system, and then founded the Denton (Diantong) Motion Picture Company in 1934.

Chinese Film Learns to Sing: 1930-1936

Like early Hollywood sound films that showed more interest in the musical possibilities than in dialogue and other sound effects, Chinese cinema during the transitional period between silent and sound film was also intrigued by the musical potential of sound technology. Most films produced during this period, even when the film remained largely silent with no dialogues or sound effects, interpolated a few songs, some of which turned out to be more popular than films themselves. It is exactly because of this that a survey of Chinese musicals cannot leave these films out.

One year after director Sun Yu (1900-1990) experimented with the first film song "Searching for the Missing Brother" (Xunxiang ci) interpolated in *Wild Flower* (Yecao xianhua, 1930), China saw the advent of the first sound-on-disc film *Singsong Girl Red Peony* and the first sound-on-film production *The Nightclub Colors* (Gechang chunse, 1931). Although by no means musicals, these two films showed a marked interest in singing and dancing even when the use of sound was still clumsy in Chinese filmmaking. The audience was amazed by the voices of Hu Die ("Butterfly Hu," 1907-1989) and Xuan Jinglin (1907-1992), particularly mesmerized by their singing and dancing abilities.

The power of film songs and music didn't go unnoticed when Chinese cinema experienced its left turn in the early 1930s. Almost all films made under the influence of leftist ideology, directly or indirectly, included one or more songs that worked either as a driving force of the narrative or as a vehicle to heighten emotions. Today, ordinary Chinese may have forgotten or even never seen films like *Song of the Fishermen*, *Plunder of Peach and Plum*, *The Highway*, and *Children of Troubled Times*, but the theme songs of the films, such as "Fisherman's Song," "Graduation Song," "Song of the Highway," and "March of the Volunteers," which later became the Chinese national anthem, survive the test of time and are being sung in a variety of formal and informal occasions. Some of China's most well-known composers and lyric writers, including the legendary Nie Er (1912-1935), Tian Han (1898-1968), Ren Guang (1900-1941), and An E (1905-1976), reached the top of their careers during this time of transition. Their experiment with new musical forms (often a combination of Chinese folk music and Western music) and sound technology opened the way for the musical genre in China.

The year of 1936 saw the birth of the first Chinese musical: *Metropolitan Sights*. Directed by the first-time filmmaker Yuan Muzhi (1909-1978), who was mostly known as an acting star prior to the film, *Metropolitan Sights* is one of the most innovative early sound films of China. Viewers of Hollywood musicals may find it clumsy and unqualified as a "musical," but using folk music and songs as a framing device and occasional insertion of dancing sequences makes it stand out as an exceptional case that consciously explores the potential of singing and dancing in film. To make the film sing, director Yuan assembled a group of young musicians, many of whom just returned from overseas, to compose music and design musical effects well before the production was even started. Huang Zi (1904-1938), Zhao Yuanren (1892-1982), Lu Ji (1909-2002), and He Luting (1903-1999), all of whom actively involved in the creation of "new" Chinese music in the 1930s, were among the assembled team. The result is a light comedy in which music and songs not only function as a device that wraps the narrative in the middle, but also dramatizes the dialogue and comic interactions between the characters. The rhyming dialogue "wa li wa li wa," for instance, appears several times in the film to express the feeling of impatience of the characters. As the film approaches the end, the four country folks, hand in hand, dance around a wire pole, sometimes in opposite directions, indicating their hesitation and bewilderment as to whether they should get on the metropolis-bound train.

Facets of Chinese Musical: 1937-1949, 1949-1980

Sound replaced silent completely in Chinese cinema in 1937. That year saw the release of three noticeable features, *Street Angel* (Malu tianshi), *Song at Midnight* (Yeban gesheng), and *A New Year's Coin* (Yasuiqian). Both *Street*

Angel and Song at Midnight are not musical in its strict sense. But the former introduces probably the most popular musical star of China, Zhou Xuan, whose "golden throat" sang more than 100 film songs, and the latter is a bold experiment that marries the horror genre and the musical. Street Angel once again shows Yuan Muzhi's remarkable musical sensibility in that the film not only prioritizes music and songs in narrative development, which is further enhanced through the main characters' professions (one a singsong girl, the other a street drummer), but also introduces two of the most popular songs in modern China: "Four-Season Song" (Siji ge) and "The Homeless Singsong Girl" (Tianya genu). The drummer marching on the street of Shanghai with the musical band becomes one of the most talked-about sequences in history of Chinese cinema.

Given the fact that Hollywood's child star Shirley Temple had a great number of fans in 1930s' China, it is not surprising that the audience fell in love instantly with the Chinese version of Shirley Temple, Hu Rongrong (b. 1929), when she tap-dances her way into the film A New Year's Coin. The film's storyline centers on the travel of a one-dollar coin given to the little girl as New Year's "lucky money." After the little girl spends the money on fireworks, the coin travels through a variety of social segments of Shanghai, from urban slums to "high-class" quarters, and strings together a kaleidoscopic Shanghai rich in comic moments and the everyday mundane. Despite the fact that the film is more or less dialogue-based, it qualifies as a musical because it features extensive songs and dances.

The Japanese Army invaded the Chinese City of Shanghai in 1937 and turned the city's foreign settlements into an "Orphan Island" (gudao). As a result, some film studios moved either to Hong Kong or to Chongqing, temporary capital of the Nationalist Government. But many studios remained in Shanghai, and the isolated "island" also saw the emergence of quite a few new studios. Shanghai's filmmaking scene was never the same after the Japanese occupied the surrounding areas of the International Settlement and French Concession, however. The Japanese presence was always a threat to the filmmakers who aimed to make socially conscious films. As a result, most filmmakers turned away from contemporary and other politically sensitive subjects to apolitical themes, particularly to "costume films" (guzhuang pian; according to one account, more than 300 such films were produced during this period) that were based on or adapted from traditional Chinese literary works. Ironically, it was during this period that Chinese sensibility of film genres got fully developed, and the period saw the co-existence of a variety of genres, including martial-arts film, detective film, romance, horror film, comedy, fantasy, and musicals. Unfortunately, due to the fact that these films were labeled either as "escapist" or "traitorous" after the Communist took power in 1949, most of them were destroyed. Today, we can only get a glimpse of the film scene of that time either through written documents or through a few survived copies and songs. From the survived songs, many of which were specifically composed for films or later adopted by filmmakers, we know that in the later 1930s and 1940s Chinese popular music and songs reached the apex with the emergence of such composers as Chen Gexin (1914-1961), Li Jinguang (1907-1993), and Liu Xuean (1905-1985), whose famed songs "Rose Rose I Love You" (Meigui meigui wo ai ni), "Shanghai Nights" (Ye shanghai), "Tuberose" (Yelaixiang), "The Crazy World" (Fengkuang shijie), "Shangri-la" (Xianggellila), and "When Will the Gentleman Come Back Again" (Heri jun zai lai) enjoy tremendous popularity today in both China and overseas Chinese communities. As for the survived films, a case at hand is Tales of the West Chamber (Xixiangji, 1940, d. Zhang Shichuan), a quasi-musical adapted from the famed Yuan drama with the same title. Compared to earlier films that are based on traditional Chinese plays and operas, Tales of the West Chamber is not simply a filmed version of the stage performance, but a creative adaptation of the Yuan drama that features a group of film stars, including Zhou Xuan, and a bevy of popular songs. The carefully constructed set gives the film a realistic touch. Today, we can only guess that many "costume films" produced during the period, most of them probably musicals or quasi-musicals, are of the similar kind.

The Communist takeover of mainland China in 1949 interrupted the natural flow of Chinese filmmaking, and Shanghai as Chinese cinema's undisputed center of production was gradually weakened by studios established elsewhere, particularly in Beijing and Northeast China. Considering the fact that the policy regarding culture and filmmaking dramatically shifted to conform to the Party line, it is quite astonishing to see in the later 1950s and early 1960s the appearance of several musical films that feature love and other "soft" themes. By any account, Five Golden Flowers (Wuduo jinhua, 1959, d. Wang Jiayi, composed by Lei Zhenbang), Third Sister Liu (Liu sanjie, 1960, d. Su Li, composed by Lei Zhenbang), Visitor on Ice Mountain (Binshan shang de laike, 1963, d. Zhao Xinhui, composed by Lei Zhenbang), and Ashma (Ashima, 1964, d. Liu Qiong, composed by Luo Zongxian and Ge Yan) are of remarkable musicals that represent a great shift of focus from Western-style metropolis to the border regions of China, where most "minority" people live. It is certainly a legitimate argument to say that this "minority turn" spells out a Chinese version of "orientalism," since most of them tend to depict minorities as exotic, colorful, and primitive people who are natural born singers or dancers. But looking from another perspective, we may also argue that, through the depiction of a lifestyle that is much more colorful, lively, and unrestrained than that of the Han people, these musicals, either intended or unintended, offer the audience a multi-faceted China in which the tensions between "central" and "marginal," "minority" and "majority," and "Chinese" and "non-Chinese" are no longer masqueraded.

Chinese Musicals Go Hollywood: 1980s-Present

Generally speaking, Chinese musicals prior to the 1980s differed from Hollywood musicals in several ways. While

Chinese musicals in the 1930s and 40s featured popular songs and music but were marked by a remarkable absence of dances, the post-1949 musicals took another turn into the new territory of the folk tradition of Chinese “minorities.” If one can still find some traces of Hollywood influence on the musicals produced in the later 1930s and 40s, then the period between 1949 and 1980 saw the complete wipeout of Hollywood presence in China. Several generations of the Chinese knew nothing about *Singing in the Rain*, *A Star is Born*, *My Fair Lady*, *Westside Story*, *Cabaret*, and *New York New York*, let alone Hollywood musical stars like Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra, and the legendary Elvis Presley. With the exception of the “Model Operas,” which can be hardly considered as “musicals,” there were almost no screen musicals made during the Cultural Revolution.

China’s economic reform and opening-up policy since the 1980s has opened the way for the increasing presence of Hollywood in China, either through legal or via illegal channels. As a result, Hollywood productions begin to re-emerge as important references or sources of inspiration for Chinese filmmakers. In musical film, after several productions that continued to highlight the importance of songs and music, including *Fishing Girl Singer* (Haishang sheng mingyue, 1983, d. Deng Yimin), the year of 1987 saw the release of *Rock Kids* (d. Tian Zhuangzhuang), which suspiciously resembles Hollywood musical *Breakin* (1984). Despite the allegation that by the 1980s the consensus in Hollywood was that film musicals were generally “dead” and “buried,” director Tian’s creative use of the genre ignites a sense of rebellion among the young audiences. *Rocking* against the background of the Tiananmen Square is in itself a subversive act that poses a threat to the solemn-ness of the revolutionary symbols of China.

Hollywood’s influence on Chinese musicals is most apparent in the newly released musical film *Perhaps Love* (Ruguo ai, 2005), a China/Hong Kong co-production that features an international cast and crew, including Hong Kong pop star Jacky Cheung, South Korean actor Ji Jin-hee, Taiwanese/Japanese actor Takeshi Kaneshiro, Chinese actress Zhou Xun, and cinematographers Peter Pau and Christopher Doyle. Despite the absence of “fairy-tale endings” of Hollywood musicals, the *Moulin Rouge*-style camerawork, storyline, choreography, and dancing and singing sequences reveal that the film is a Hollywood-accented hybrid that is made possible only in today’s increasingly globalized context. It remains to be seen, however, whether *Perhaps Love* represents the direction where Chinese musicals will go in the future. (The original article was published in Roger Garcia ed. *Asia Sings! A Survey of Asian Musical Films*. Udine: Centro Espressioni Cinematografiche, 2006)