

# Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: The Mode of Production in Chinese Cinema Prior to 1937

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the modes of production in Chinese cinema prior to 1937 in comparison with its Hollywood counterpart. Drawing on unpublished producers' diaries and other primary materials, and using the film producing system of Lianhua (a.k.a. the United Photo Play Service) as a case study, this article suggests that the Chinese film industry followed a path of development similar to that of Hollywood in terms of its mode of production while maintaining its own distinct characteristics. One significant trait, the strong position of the director in the central producer system, contributed to the vulnerability and the lack of enduring success of the Chinese film industry in the 1930s.

**Keywords:** mode of production; Chinese film history; Lianhua; Chinese film industry; Hollywood

This article explores the evolution of China's production practices before 1937 and focuses on its mode of production through a comparison with that of Hollywood. It is not an exaggeration to say that in the first half of the twentieth century, Hollywood stood as the most significant source of inspiration for the nascent Chinese film industry (Fu 2014, 3). Scholars have found abundant evidence of how Chinese film practitioners learned from Hollywood in such areas as camera movement, montage, and film production and exhibition (Lee 1999, 104). The mode of production in Chinese studios was no exception. This article will show that in the early twentieth century, China's mode of production, on one hand, progressed in stages similar to those of Hollywood, from the cameraman system to the central producer system. On the other hand, however, Chinese production maintained its own characteristics, some of which would negatively impact the film industry. One particular characteristic—the strong position of the directors in the central producer system—significantly contributed to the vulnerability and the lack of enduring success of the Chinese film industry in the 1930s. A key primary source that reveals these characteristics and their impact is the unpublished diary of Lu Jie, which provides an almost-daily insider's record of the Chinese film industry from the 1920s to the 1940s. Most importantly, it offers invaluable first-hand material on Lianhua's daily operation as Lu served as a producer/executive there.<sup>1</sup>

This article starts with a description of the concept of the mode of production and a brief introduction of the evolution of China's specific mode of

production, from the cameraman system to the director system, the director-unit system, and finally to the central producer system. Drawing also on unpublished primary materials, including producers' diaries and studio records, I examine the management structure of Lianhua as a case study on the central producer system in the Chinese film industry. I address two major characteristics of Lianhua: its unstable corporate structure and the weak position of the producers, in contrast to that of the directors, who retained powerful positions in Lianhua's mode of production. The article concludes with an analysis of the lessons of China's production practices in the 1920s and 1930s for the present-day Chinese filmmaking business.

### **The Mode of Production: Perception, Practice, and Its Evolution in Chinese Cinema**

Janet Staiger's study on the mode of production offers a model of how to analyse a filmmaking system. The mode of production, as a concept that originated with Karl Marx, refers to "the wider social character of production," and is used as a synonym for "the relations in which productive forces are developed" (Rigby 1998, 24). The mode of production is composed of three elements that are involved in these relations, namely, "the labour force, the means of production, and the financing of production" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 89). Marxism regards developing productive forces, a determining feature of historical development, as the impetus for the transition of the mode of production from primitive communism to ancient civilisation, feudalism, capitalism, and lastly to communism. Efficiency stands as one major gauge for the growth of productive forces, and a detailed division of labour is introduced as a type of work arrangement to pursue it. Hollywood's mode of production is classified as mass production, a specific method of the capitalist system. In Braverman's words, "No society before capitalism systematically subdivided the work of each productive specialty into limited operations." (1973, 71). In a detailed division of labour, "the process of making a product is broken down into discrete segments, and each worker is assigned to repeat a constituent element of that process" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 91). As in the general sector, the detailed division of labour in Hollywood's mode of production "allowed faster and more predictable product output" (93). *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* splits the detailed division mode into five specific systems and describes how Hollywood experienced four modes of production, from its beginning to the late 1920s, "in a sequential order," consisting of "the cameraman system, the director system, the director-unit system and the central producer system" (93).

<sup>1</sup> The original version of Lu Jie's diary was donated to the China Film Archive but it is not available to readers (it has possibly been lost). In 1962, the China Film Archive edited and issued a mimeographed version of Lu Jie's diary, which was not made public. Despite its incomplete nature (it only spans 1920 to 1949), the years 1930 to 1937 were relatively well recorded in this abridged version. For this article I have used a digital copy of this mimeographed version kindly provided by Professor Shi Chuan of the Shanghai Theatre Academy.

The evolution of China's methods for making films is akin to that of Hollywood, as the process can be characterised as moving from the cameraman system, to the director system, to the director-unit system, and finally to the central producer system. The Chinese film industry, in a broad sense or from a transnational perspective, emerged from foreign cameraman's film activities in the early twentieth century. Amerigo Enrico Lauro (1879-1937), an Italian cinematographer and an agent for Cines Co., was a pioneer producer of cinema in China dating back to 1902 (Anon. 1917). Among his productions, Lauro filmed some activities of Sun Yat-sen in Shanghai, taking pictures of the "cutting of the queues [that had been imposed on the Chinese by the Manchus] when everyone in Shanghai underwent the operation" (Anon. 1935a). As with other filmmakers who travelled China to make films at that time, Lauro produced films himself; he selected the subject, operated the camera, and developed and edited the film project. To improve production, in 1912 Lauro erected a studio that included a wooden stage and a machine room at 1001 Whangpoo (Huangpu) Road in Shanghai (Anon. 1912). The cameraman system was inherited by Chinese production companies such as the Commercial Press, which in 1920 set up a film department and invited Liao Enshou to serve as cinematographer. The productions of the Commercial Press focused on scenes from Peking operas performed by Mei Lanfang, on natural scenes in China's cities from Shanghai to Beijing, and on newsreels. Although a director named Chen Chusheng was assigned to production, most work, including filming, developing, and printing, was done by Liao himself. This situation did not change significantly after the Commercial Press shifted to fictional narratives. Like its American counterpart, the cameraman system phase was short in China because it relied mostly on the ability of a cameraman who had to know "the entire work process, and conception and execution of the product" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 116). In the case of China, such talents were rare in the early 1910s. This can be attributed to the fact that film as a whole was still new there, in spite of the work of some foreign cinematographers. Few people watched films, let alone knew how to produce them.

The emergence of the director system is the result of the division of labour. Under the director system, a director is responsible for staging the action and the cameraman for filming it. Sino-foreign collaboration (usually a Chinese national was responsible for directing, while foreigners served as cinematographers) was particularly popular in the initial stages of the director system. Such a division of labour occurred when the subject of the films shifted from natural scenes to cultural topics, such as indigenous customs and dramas. On one hand, foreign cameramen in China may have understood how to produce a film, but probably they did not have sufficient knowledge of China's culture. Conversely, Chinese gradually became interested in making films, but often lacked the necessary know-how and equipment. Therefore, a division of labour seemed necessary. A case in point is the filmmaking system of the Asiatic Film Company, which commenced in 1913. This company was organised by American merchants (Arthur J. Israel and Thomas H. Suffert) in Shanghai with the purpose of producing films for Chinese audiences. Two Chinese who had abundant stage acting experience,

Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu, were employed as directors. Zheng was responsible for arranging actors and guiding their performance. As a matter of fact, the actors, and even the carpenter and wardrobe personnel, all came from a theatrical troupe headed by Zhang and Zheng (Qian and Zheng 1956, 76-78). American cameraman William Lynch was contracted by Israel and Suffert to take charge of cinematography, and probably of developing and printing films as well. In his memoirs, Zhang Shichuan claims that he himself supervised the cameraman's camera movements. Such supervision is doubtful given the fact that Zhang's film knowledge was next to nothing and Lynch was probably the only person in the company who knew how to operate a camera.<sup>2</sup> Under a similar method of collaboration, Zhang Shichuan cooperated with Lauro, the Italian cameraman, to make another picture, *The Curse of Opium* (*Heiji yuanhun*, dir. Zhang Shichuan) in 1916.

The director system continued to be the dominant method of production even after China started to set up its own production ventures. In 1922, Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu, the two directors in the Asiatic Film Company, set up Mingxing (a.k.a. Star Motion Picture Corporation) in Shanghai. Mingxing still employed the director system. Zhang Shichuan supervised the first short films and nine features it produced up to 1925, most of which were written by Zheng Zhengqiu. A considerable difference between Mingxing and the Asiatic Film Company was the position of directors. In the Asiatic, the directors and the cameramen were employed by the investors, Israel and Suffert. In Mingxing, Zhang Shichuan retained exclusive control over the entire production. As the sole director, owner, and executive of Mingxing, Zhang selected the cast, made decisions about cinematography, and edited films. Zhang Weitao, as the cinematographer, merely became a worker under the supervision of Zhang Shichuan. It is necessary to point out that, except for the role of director and cameraman, a detailed division of labour was fairly clear in Mingxing's production practice. The published plan for organising Mingxing claimed that one of its major merits was that it had talents, including film scriptwriters who had ten years' experience in studying literature and art (probably referring to Zheng Zhengqiu), film developers from the United States, film directors with extensive drama experience (referring to Zhang Shichuan), and set design professionals with abundant experience in oil painting (Anon. 1922).

In the wake of the rapid progress of the film business, Chinese film studios moved into a period of director-unit system production in the late 1920s. Through releasing the box-office hit *The Orphan Rescues Grandfather* (*Gu'er jiuzu ji*, dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1923), Mingxing had not only emerged from bankruptcy, but also moved into a period of prosperity and increased activity. After releasing *Orphan*, Mingxing's filmmaking crew, including Zhang Shichuan (director), Zheng Zhengqiu (scriptwriter), and Dong Keyi (cameraman), produced another eight features. With the expansion of its business, Mingxing organised a second film

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed analysis of the role played by William Lynch and the operation of what was called the Asiatic Film Company, see Fu 2015, 8-17.

crew and released *Why Divorce* (*Xinren de jiating*, dir. Ren Jinping) in 1925, which signified the shift to a director-unit system in the company. The crew consisted of co-founder Ren Jinping, assistant director Chen Shouyin, and cameraman Bu Wancang. After Ren Jinping left Mingxing, Zhang Shichuan signed Hong Shen, a returned student from the United States who majored in drama studies, as director. The hierarchy of the directors was apparent in Mingxing's director-unit system. As the director/producer and the executive of Mingxing, Zhang retained more power than Hong Shen. At its peak in the 1920s, Mingxing maintained four production teams "under the direction of Zhang Shichuan, Zheng Zhengqiu, Hong Shen and Bu Wancang respectively" (Huang Xuelei 2009, 41). After leaving Mingxing, Ren Jinping set up Xinren Company and employed the director-unit system as well. A news report from *Shen Bao* indicated that five directorial groups were working simultaneously in Xinren Company in 1927 (Anon. 1927).

A considerable feature of the director-unit system is a departmentalised organisation. Departmentalisation in the film industry developed following the "standard assembly system in mass production" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 124). Different departments are organised to achieve "harmonious co-operation" and secure "the highest average of efficiency" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 124). The date or name of the first studio employing departmentalisation in China's system cannot be precisely determined, but as early as 1925, Moonlight (*Yueguang*) Company, a small studio created by Cai Lianxi, was reported to have set up a story consultant department in his studio (Anon. 1925). An instance of departmentalisation is provided by Guoguang Company, a film company that originated from the Commercial Press. In 1926, Guoguang Company published its corporate structure: four departments under a Board of Directors. A studio department (*juwu*), headed by Yang Xiaozhong, undertook film scripting and directing. Two film scriptwriters and two film directors worked under Yang. A film production department was in charge of writing the scenario and shooting and developing film. The general business department (*zongwu*) was led by Chen Chunsheng, whose role was probably the provision of electrical, mechanical, and publicity services. The sales department, headed by Zhou Yongnian, was in charge of distributing films (Huang Dequan 2012, 119). The division of these four departments clearly constituted an assembly line and aimed to increase efficiency.

China's filmmakers experimented with independent production under the director-unit system in the late 1920s. Due to the financial losses of the studio and the lack of capital, in 1929 the executive of Great China Liliu (*Dazhonghua baihe*) enacted a method of independent production, or *baoxizhi* (which literally means a system in which the director/producer is responsible for his own product, including the financing and producing of films). Under this system, the staff and equipment of Great China Liliu were divided into two groups, which were placed under the charge of Zhu Shouju and Wang Yuanlong respectively (China Film Archive 1962, entry for December 30, 1928 in Lu Jie's diary). These two groups were responsible for producing films separately. They used the studio facilities of Great China Liliu and distributed their products under that name. Each production group maintained

personnel autonomy. For instance, Zhu Shouju employed Yang Xiaozhong in Zhu's group in April 1929 (China Film Archive 1962, April 15, 1929). It seems that at the beginning, Great China Liliu continued to invest in the film production of each group, but later it became each group's responsibility to find its own financing. Employing this independent production method enhanced the speed of production, but sacrificed quality in a significant way. As Lu Jie, the head of the production department in Great China Liliu, pointed out, "each group could complete a film within twenty days, but the final product was short and the story was plain, therefore, the reputation of Great China Liliu significantly declined with the audience (China Film Archive 1962, June 30, 1929). The independent production method was abandoned after Great China Liliu suspended its business and was amalgamated into Lianhua in 1930. Lianhua employed a different mode of production, termed the central producer system, which will be analysed in the following section.

### **The Central Producer System in Lianhua**

A similar route of evolution does not mean that China's mode of production was merely a duplication of its Hollywood model. This and the following section will show the particular traits of China's mode of production by exploring China's central producer system in the 1930s. As a case study, I examine how the film production method functioned in Lianhua. There are two major reasons why Lianhua employed the central producer system: help in coordinating personnel relations and relieving the pressure caused by the shortage of capital. Nevertheless, no matter how it restructured, Lianhua did not change the weak position of the producer in its film-making system.

Lianhua is one of the most important film ventures in Chinese film history. It was established in 1930 by Luo Mingyou through incorporating several mid-size studios and soon became one of the "Big Three" in the Chinese film industry (along with Mingxing and Tianyi). Luo Mingyou became involved in the film business in 1919 by opening a film theatre in Beijing. Later, his business expanded into a film venture named North China Amusements Ltd, which controlled a dozen cinemas at its peak. Attracted by the thriving film business, Luo started to become involved in film production. Signing Sun Yu as a director, by way of experiment he produced *Reminiscence of Peking* (*Gudu chunmeng*, 1931). The success of the film at the box office strengthened Luo's ambition to move into film production. In August 1930, Luo set up Lianhua by taking over Li Minwei's China Sun Motion Picture Co. Ltd and Wu Xingzai's Great China Liliu Film Company.<sup>3</sup> China Sun became Lianhua's first studio, and Great China Liliu was its second. After incorporating others studios in Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore, Lianhua became the largest film production venture in China at that time. Apart from film production, Lianhua was a vertically integrated firm that included film distribution, exhibition, and

<sup>3</sup> China Sun was amalgamated into Lianhua for a price of 40,000 yuan, while Great China Liliu was acquired for 45,000 yuan. Wu Xingzai, one owner of Great China Liliu, invested an extra 55,000 yuan in cash into Lianhua. See Luo 1931: 46.

film journal publishing. Lianhua's headquarters was located in Hong Kong, with a management branch in Shanghai.

The general structure of Lianhua can be seen as that of a central producer system, under which, the producer, instead of the director, takes over "the management of the pre- and post-shooting work for *all* the films in the studio" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 136; emphasis in original). The producer "superseded" the director and therefore, in terms of organisational structure, this system can be seen as a type of pyramid (136). In the case of Lianhua, Luo Mingyou was the general manager and was therefore only answerable to the Board of Directors. He took care of all the general business of Lianhua. Under Luo Mingyou, there were four offices located in Hong Kong, Shanghai, North China (Beijing), and Singapore. The general management office was located in Hong Kong, in addition to a studio. Shanghai was the major base for Lianhua's production business with three studios. Each studio had a producer in charge of its day-to-day operations in the making of films, such as fund raising, the discussing of scripts and so forth. The producer in the first studio was Li Minwei, the producer in the second studio was Lu Jie, and the third was Zhu Shilin (Zhu's third studio was incorporated into the first two studios in 1934). These three studios were under the direction of the Shanghai management office.

In Lianhua's producer system, one could see a detailed division of labour and departmentalisation. Each studio had its own directors and professional departments, including a general affairs department, art design department, production department, cinematography department, and printing department. A more detailed division of labour was also visible within these departments. For instance, the art design department included an art design unit (responsible for drawing and decorating) and a scene set unit (including a carpenter, painter, and blacksmith). In addition, each studio signed its own cast, and these actors/actresses served the studio exclusively. In contrast to Hollywood, there were few substantial differences in genres between films produced by each of Lianhua's studios, although some might have their own distinct production styles.

As a general manager, Luo Mingyou was responsible for adjusting the structure of Lianhua's production units. From 1930 to 1936, Lianhua had at least four major and six minor changes in its corporate structure. The two major concerns for structuring Lianhua were the coordination of personnel and the resolution of financing problems. Below, I will explore several restructurings of Lianhua that were intended to solve these two kinds of problems. However, despite the efforts of restructuring, neither had a satisfactory resolution in the end.

The major production forces of Lianhua were organised by amalgamating Great China Liliun and China Sun. In his initial plan, Luo suggests that the organisation of Lianhua could at first implement the "branch system" (*fen changzhi*), which maintained the original production units including personnel, studios, and equipment. The production branches could be concentrated gradually into one general production factory which would become a "film city" (Gong 1961, 12-13). As a matter of fact, the separation of studios was a consideration in the coordination of the personnel relationships between members of each studio,



in particular between the first and second studio.<sup>4</sup> Partly due to their different personalities and partly due to competition with each other, the leaders of the two studios did not get along well together. A case in point concerns the “borrowing” of actors from each other. Cai Chusheng, a director of the second studio, once intended to invite Chen Yanyan, an actress affiliated with Li Minwei’s studio, as a cast member of *Volcano, Love, and Blood* (*Huoshan qingxue*, dir. Cai Chusheng, 1932). Lu Jie recalled that Li requested “an unacceptable condition” for “borrowing” Chen Yanyan (China Film Archive 1963, April 21, 1932). In the meantime, separate studios meant higher overhead, as each one had its own equipment and personnel. In order to reduce overhead, Luo Mingyou finally incorporated these two studios into one in April 1935. Under the new structure, Lu Jie (the producer of the second studio) was in charge of general affairs while Li Minwei (the producer of the first studio) was in charge of film technology, including film printing. However, the personnel relationship problems could still not be solved. Three months later, the production business had to be returned to the original structure: a separation of the two units, which were headed by Lu Jie and Li Minwei respectively (China Film Archive 1962, June 29, 1935; Li 2003, June 29, 1935). The problem of personnel relationships could not be solved until the ownership of Lianhua was shifted to a new company in 1936. Unable to resolve the economic crisis of Lianhua, Luo Mingyou decided to resign as general manager. These personnel difficulties were finally solved with the departure of Li Minwei and Luo Mingyou.

The lack of working funds was another reason for restructuring Lianhua. Apart from the original studios and capital, Luo Mingyou had invested little into Lianhua’s film production business. In 1931, Luo Mingyou intended to increase investment by calling for capital but failed to raise the needed money. Lianhua therefore faced a serious lack of the working funds needed to maintain its studio operations. In 1932, after having rejected a proposal to sell Lianhua to Lu Gen (a.k.a. Lo Kan), one film exhibition magnate at that time, Luo Mingyou transferred Lianhua’s second studio to Wu Xingzai, a member of the board of directors. Wu restructured the second studio and renamed it Lian’an after investing 50,000 yuan (China Film Archive 1962, April 16, 1932). After releasing four productions, Luo Mingyou restored the operating rights of the second studio by investing in Lian’an in early 1933. However, Lianhua still suffered from a lack of working funds. In 1933 and 1936, Luo Mingyou and Zhu Shilin twice promoted the idea of employing independent production systems, with the intention of solving these financial problems. Under the system of independent production, it was the producers and directors who had the responsibility for raising funds for film production, instead of Lianhua’s management branch. Lianhua was merely in charge of providing studios and distributing the product. However, the suggestion of an independent production system was rejected due to strong objections from producers and

<sup>4</sup> It seems that the problem of relations between personnel was not confined to the Lianhua studios: a *Movietone* (*Diansheng*) report points out some conflicts between Luo Mingyou and Wu Bangfan, the head of the sales department. A major reason was that the staff in the sales department, whose salary was paid by Lianhua, were also involved in distributing films produced by other corporations, but they did not share those profits with Lianhua. See Anon. 1936.



directors (China Film Archive 1962, June 29, 1933). The shortage of capital resulted in the final restructuring of Lianhua in 1936 and the transfer of ownership of Lianhua to Wu Xingzai.

Another significant trait of Lianhua's corporate structure is that the position of the producer was highly restricted. Lu Jie, as a producer in the second studio, acted as the liaison between Luo Mingyou and the directors. Lu was well known in film circles due to his involvement as an editor of *Movie Magazine* (*Yingxi zazhi*), the first professional film publication in China. In 1924, Lu, together with other merchants, organised the Great China Film Company, with Lu acting as scriptwriter. In 1925, Lu became the head of the production department and a film director after Great China merged with the Liliu Film Company. Lu Jie took charge of the second studio after Great China Liliu Company was amalgamated into Lianhua in 1930, serving as the executive producer, answerable only to Luo Mingyou, the studio head. Lu Jie supervised directors including Sun Yu, Cai Chusheng, Shi Dongshan, and Tan Youliu. As the executive producer, Lu made budgets for every production, supervised the production process, coordinated personnel relationships, and signed contracts with studio staff in the second studio of Lianhua. Under Lianhua's system, however, Lu Jie did not have financial and personnel autonomy since financial rights were vested in the management branch, a department directly controlled by Luo Mingyou. As a producer, Lu was responsible for drawing up production budgets with directors. The budget plans were submitted to the management branch, but due to the lack of capital, it was common for the management branch not to provide money to the production unit. Therefore, much of Lu Jie's energy was wasted in applying for funds from the management branch. For instance, from 1931 to 1936, Lu Jie's diary is full of complaints concerning these problems: at least once every month. In June 1931, Lu spent four days applying for money from the management branch without any success. Similarly, Lu could sign contracts with film staff, but the approval (or disapproval) of the management branch and Luo Mingyou superseded Lu's authority.

The relative lack of finance and control over personnel limited Lu's control over the production process. Lianhua employed story and script committees to make decisions on scripts, although Lu did participate in the committees. In addition, it seems that Lianhua had no effective punitive regulations to control the pace of production. Supervising the speed of production was one of Lu's jobs, but in fact it was quite common for directors not to finish production on time. However, Lu seemed to have few solutions to control production pace except for "trying to persuade directors," partly due to the lack of punitive measures. For instance, Lu wrote in his diary on 26 January 1934: "The production of *Wind* (*Feng*, dir. Wu Cun, 1934) has been suspended several times due to the personal affairs or sick leave of the director Wu Cun. This afternoon, I visited Wu and tried to persuade him to complete the production as soon as possible" (China Film Archive 1962, January 26, 1934).<sup>5</sup> Even the directors of Lianhua, such as Sun Yu, admitted that it

<sup>5</sup> To be fair, the slow speed of production of *Wind* was not entirely attributable to the director. Lu Jie mentioned that the lack of punctuality of Tan Ying, the leading actress of the film, was also a major reason (China Film Archive 1962, 26 October 1934).

was they who were responsible for the slow speed of production, rather than the producers (China Film Archive 1962, April 17, 1934).

### **The Powerful Position of Directors in Lianhua's Producer System**

In this section, I explore the role of directors in Lianhua's producer system. The weak position of the producer resulted in enhanced power of the director in Lianhua's mode of production. Although Lianhua employed a central producer system, directors, rather than producers, stood at the top of the hierarchy. The directors in Lianhua not only had "complete control" over every stage of film production (including pre- and post-shooting), but also served as unit heads (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 136). Four characteristics of the powerful position of directors are suggested in this section.

Firstly, an intriguing trait of the mode of production of Lianhua, and arguably of all Chinese film studios, is that the division of labour between scriptwriter and director was not obvious in the 1930s. In her survey on the evolution of Chinese films, Zhang Zhen points out that Chinese films only had "a lean outline" and "a shooting script was unheard of" in the 1910s (Zhang 2005, 153). According to Zhang, with the onset of the long story film, however, a synopsis was no longer adequate for a cinema that relied on a sustained plot and dramatic conflict. Therefore, from the 1920s onward, a number of fiction writers such as Bao Tianxiao, Zhu Shouju, and Zhou Shoujuan were employed to write film scripts. In some cases, film studios would solicit scripts from outside, and use selected scripts for production. However, in the majority of cases, the writing of film scripts was still left to the director. Out of a total of sixty-three films produced by Lianhua from 1930 to 1936, there are forty films with scripts written by directors. In addition, it is necessary to point out that the term "scriptwriters" here denotes the people who wrote the original film story. The scriptwriters were not responsible for writing shooting scripts. In the case of China, it was the responsibility of directors to turn film scripts into shooting scripts, even though the director was not the scriptwriter (Ouyang 1928, 1). Like its Hollywood counterpart, the shooting script was designed to be a "blueprint for the workers" in China's central producer system, and the published shooting scripts, such as that of *Song of China* (*Tianlun*, dir. Fei Mu, 1935), show that "each shot was numbered consecutively" and "the description of the *mise-en-scène* and action was very detailed" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985, 138). However, the shooting scripts offered little control over the director, since the director could easily change the scripts during the shooting process.

Secondly, because they retained the rights to write shooting scripts, directors could easily exercise their influence on cast selection. In some cases, the director had already made his decision regarding the cast during the writing of the film script. In his memoirs, Sun Yu, the scriptwriter and director of *Big Road* (*Dalu*, dir. Sun Yu, 1934), claimed that he selected the main cast of the film (Sun 1980, 179). In another case, Sun selected Wang Renmei as the protagonist of his production *Wild Rose* (*Ye meigui*, dir. Sun Yu, 1932), because the film script was deliberately written for that actress. Sometimes, the producer or president of Lianhua might be involved in the casting, but the director's decision was usually

respected. A case in point is Shi Dongshan's film *Strive* (*Fendou*, 1932). It seems that Shi Dongshan insisted on using Chen Yanyan as a protagonist. Lu Jie, the producer of the film, had to help Shi "borrow" Chen from the first studio, though he had reservations about the casting arrangement, as mentioned above (China Film Archive 1962, June 20, 1932; June 23, 1932).

Thirdly, directors sometimes retained the final decision on issues such as selecting shooting locations and stage sets, although some technical work was done by department experts. It seems that the budget plan which had been drawn up by the producer was not strictly executed due to the ambiguity of the scripts. When Cai Chusheng prepared the shooting location of *The Lost Lamb* (*Mitu de gaoyang*, 1936) in Suzhou, he himself decided the number of extras and props to be used (Cai 1936, 13). When conflicts occurred during film production, directors, particularly influential ones, could sometimes win in negotiations with the producers, or even with the studio president. During the production of *Return to Nature* (*Dao ziran qu*, 1936), the director Sun Yu insisted on adding a luxurious scene set in the Presidential Palace. Lu Jie wrote in his diary on July 4, 1936: "The stage set that is needed is quite grand, which will not only be too expensive, but also take a long time to put together" (China Film Archive 1962, July 4, 1936). Twenty-five days later, Luo Mingyou joined Lu Jie to negotiate with Sun over abandoning the scene, but Sun still insisted on his idea. It seems that both Luo Mingyou and Lu Jie yielded. On September 1, Lu wrote that Sun had begun to shoot the Presidential Palace scene. To be sure, directors with less fame may not have enjoyed such leeway as Sun did; however, his case still provides a glimpse of the powerful position of the director in Lianhua.

Fourthly, the directors of Lianhua and in China in general had responsibility for editing. A close look at the crew listed in 1930s Chinese films reveals that no editors were credited, although in the corporate structure of Lianhua a position of film editor did exist in the printing department. As an article from the period points out, "[the work of] the film editor is significant and should develop into a separate job in the film-making process. An inappropriate editor might destroy the integrity and sentiment of a film. In the case of China, however, the editing job is just done by directors" (Weiming 1936). Lu Jie's diary records several times that he had cautioned directors about the slow pace of film editing (China Film Archive 1962, February 2, 1933).<sup>6</sup>

One consequence of the powerful position of the director in Lianhua's mode of production is its extremely slow speed. Because directors retained major control over production and because much of the energy of directors was spent on writing the shooting script and editing the film, the pace for releasing a film was fairly slow. Such delays were attributed to the selfishness of the directors. An article in Lianhua's own publication pointed out that

<sup>6</sup> On that day Lu wrote in his diary, "[I] talked to Cai (Chusheng) and reminded him that it had been half a year since *Morning in the Metropolis* (*Duhui de zaochen*, 1933) started. I hoped that he could complete the film editing as soon as possible" (China Film Archive 1962, February 2, 1933).

Directors are the head of a production unit in the Chinese film industry. In a situation in which China's mode of production is not well organised, directors retain a great deal of responsibility. Greater responsibility has resulted in greater selfishness. For the sake of his own reputation, the director spends extra time on choosing a film script, selecting the film cast, and doing retakes again and again. It may benefit the quality of film, but throws cold water on the passion for the development of the Chinese film industry. (Zhao 1936, 2)

The slow speed of Lianhua is evidenced by the number of films it released. Although Lianhua maintained several studios, there was no significant difference in production speed between Lianhua and other film companies with one sole studio. A director in Lianhua could only release one or two films a year. In his five years' service in Lianhua, Cai Chusheng only made six films. The worst case is Wu Cun. Based on his contract with Lianhua, Wu was required to shoot three films in one year. However, he only finished one film. In 1934, Lianhua released eighteen films. Other than Zhu Shilin, Jiang Qifeng, and Zheng Jiduo, who each released two films, the other film directors only produced one film in a year. The situation in 1935 was even worse: only nine films were released. Other than Yang Xiaozhong, no directors released more than two films. Some directors, such as Cai Chusheng, could not even complete one production in an entire year.

The time spent in production might improve the stylistic finesse of the film, but it could jeopardise the economic situation of the studio. In Chinese film history, the films produced by Lianhua, such as *Big Road*, *Little Toys* (*Xiao wanyi*, 1933), and *Song of the Fishermen* (*Yuguangqu*, 1934) are seen as "classics" and made a great contribution to the "golden age of Chinese films" in the 1930s. However, their production did not bring a golden age to Lianhua in terms of financial success. The slow speed and the small number of products increased Lianhua's costs in a significant way and extended the cost-recovery period. Lianhua's own publication *Lianhua Pictorial* (*Lianhua huabao*) admitted, "Even if the sale of the product is profitable, such profit may be highly diminished by more overhead, not to mention that some products failed to make a profit" (Zhao 1936, 2). *Song of the Fishermen* was probably the most successful Chinese film of the 1930s, bringing Lianhua a gross return of 200,000 yuan. However, the net profit of the film was quite low due to its high expense and year-long production schedule. To make things worse, a slow speed of production was not a guarantee for good box office receipts. For instance, *Wind*, Wu Cun's first film at Lianhua, took eight months (from August 1933 to April 1934) to complete, but the result proved to be a failure both in terms of artistic quality and box office receipts.

Lianhua's managers clearly recognised the problem of high overheads caused by the powerful position of directors and made efforts to reduce them. A 1935 market survey indicated that the overhead expenses of Lianhua were over 15,000 yuan per month, which topped the figure for China's film studios (Shanghai Municipal Archive, Q275-1-1949). For the sake of solving this problem, Lianhua executives employed several methods. Increasing the number of productions was the first. In 1932, Luo Mingyou set a target for Lu Jie and his second studio of releasing twelve films each year. However, the plan was aborted due to the strong

resistance of Lu Jie, who argued that it would sacrifice quality. In 1935, during the strike of Lianhua's staff, one proposal initiated by Wu Bangfan, head of the Shanghai management branch, was to increase the number of products (Anon. 1935b, 4). Wu argued that if Lianhua could increase the number of products to twenty-seven each year (in 1935 Lianhua only released ten films), the crisis would be resolved (Anon. 1935b, 4). The second method for reducing overhead was to merge Lianhua's studios into one. In a 1934 document titled *A Summary Statement Regarding Raising Capital for Lianhua*, Luo Mingyou claimed that "by means of merging two studios into one, there will be a savings in overhead of 6,000 yuan if Lianhua could produce three products every month rather than one" (Shanghai Municipal Archive, Q275-1-1949). Unfortunately, neither increasing the number of products nor merging the studios reduced overhead significantly.

### **Conclusion**

Like its American counterpart, China's mode of production also experienced an evolution from the cameraman system to the central producer system. In addition, China developed its own characteristics in this domain. In China's production system, film directors retained a great deal of control over film production compared with their colleagues in Hollywood. However, financially speaking, this was not a positive characteristic.

The vulnerability and the lack of enduring success of the film industry was one major consequence of China's mode of production in the 1920s and 1930s. The powerful position of directors, as Kristin Thompson argues, generally results in the "industry's continued dependence on small production companies" (Thompson 1993, 391) and, I would like to add, upon the personal performance of the directors. The case of China supports this argument. In the first half of the twentieth century, when unexpected bad luck struck directors, it could significantly shake the foundations of a studio. Take Mingxing for instance: after the death of Zheng Zhengqiu, the director of *Two Sisters* (*Zimeihua*, 1933), in 1935 the company was unable to return to prosperity. Generally speaking, China reached its peak in the film industry in the first half of the twentieth century in 1933 and 1934. In those two years, box-office hits like *Two Sisters*, *Song of the Fishermen*, and *Big Road* were all released. But China's film industry entered a chilly winter in the years that followed. Other than macroeconomic factors, such as China suffering from the world economic crisis and the threat of the war between China and Japan, the decline of the Chinese film industry could also be attributed to its mode of production.

## GLOSSARY

Bao Tianxiao	包天笑	Mei Lanfang	梅兰芳
<i>baoxizhi</i>	包戏制	Mingxing	明星
Bu Wancang	卜万苍	<i>Mitu de gaoyang</i>	迷途的羔羊
Cai Chusheng	蔡楚生	Ren Jinping	任矜萍
Cai Lianxi	蔡连溪	<i>Shen Bao</i>	申报
Chen Chunsheng	陈春生	Shi Dongshan	史东山
Chen Chusheng	陈楚生	Sun Yu	孙瑜
Chen Shouyin	陈寿荫	Tan Ying	谈瑛
Chen Yanyan	陈燕燕	Tan Youliu	谭友六
Dalu	大路	<i>Tianlun</i>	天伦
<i>Dao ziran qu</i>	到自然去	Tianyi	天一
Dazhonghua baihe	大中华百合	Wang Renmei	王人美
<i>Diansheng</i>	电声	Wang Yuanlong	王元龙
Dong Keyi	董克毅	Wu Bangfan	吴邦藩
<i>Duhui de zaochen</i>	都会的早晨	Wu Cun	吴村
Fei Mu	费穆	Wu Xingzai	吴兴载
<i>fenchangzhi</i>	分厂制	<i>Xiaowanyi</i>	小玩意
<i>Fendou</i>	奋斗	Xinren	新人
Feng	风	<i>Xinren de jiating</i>	新人的家庭
<i>Gudu chunmeng</i>	故都春梦	Yang Xiaozhong	杨小仲
<i>Gu'er jiuzu ji</i>	孤儿救祖记	<i>Ye meigui</i>	野玫瑰
Guoguang	国光	<i>Yingxi zazhi</i>	影戏杂志
<i>Heiji yuanhun</i>	黑籍冤魂	<i>Yueguang</i>	月光
Hong Shen	洪深	<i>Yuguangqu</i>	渔光曲
<i>Huoshan qingxue</i>	火山情血	Zhang Shichuan	张石川
Jiang Qifeng	姜起凤	Zhang Weitao	张伟涛
<i>juwu</i>	剧务	Zheng Jiduo	郑基铎
Lian'an	联安	Zheng Zhengqiu	郑正秋
Lianhua	联华	Zhou Shoujuan	周瘦鹃
<i>Lianhua huabao</i>	联华画报	Zhou Yongnian	周永年
Liao Enshou	廖恩寿	Zhu Shilin	朱石麟
Li Minwei	黎民伟	Zhu Shouju	朱瘦菊
Lu Gen	卢根	<i>Zimeihua</i>	姊妹花
Lu Jie	陆洁	<i>zongwu</i>	总务
Luo Mingyou	罗明佑		



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