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Mapping Shanghai's Society of Spectacle: From Wu Yonggang's *Goddess* to Mao Dun's *Midnight*

(Under the Direction of Kam-ming Wong)

The purpose of the present study is to map out the role of urban images in constructing Shanghai's spectacular society of commodification and modernity, and more important, to find out how this cultural imagery of "modernity" shaped and defined urban perceptions and experiences in the 1930s through a comparative study of two of the most representative works about the spectacular metropolis at the time, Wu Yonggang's *Goddess* (1934, Lianhua Film Company) and Mao Dun's *Midnight* (1933). A detailed analysis of the urban images and spectacles as presented in *Goddess* and *Midnight*, and of the confrontations of selected characters and these images and spectacles, not only provides insight into the psychological and behavioral changes of Shanghai urbanites as effected by the external world, but also sheds light on the further impacts of urban imagery on filmic and literary imaginations, because both works were products within the spectacular society after all.

INDEX WORDS: Shanghai culture, Society of spectacle, Urban imagery, Commodification, Modernity

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by

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INTRODUCTION

> The sun had just sunk below the horizon and a gentle breeze caressed one's face. . . . Under a sunset-mottled sky, the towering framework of Garden Bridge was mantled in a gathering mist. Whenever a tram passed over the bridge, the overhead cable suspended below the top of the steel frame threw off bright, greenish sparks. Looking east, one could see the warehouses of foreign firms on the waterfront of Pootung like huge monsters crouching in the gloom, their lights twinkling like countless tiny eyes. To the west, one saw with a shock of wonder on the roof of a building a gigantic NEON sign in flaming red and phosphorescent green: LIGHT, HEAT, POWER!

So begins Mao Dun's famous novel *Midnight* (Ziye, 1933), with an arresting depiction of the Shanghai cityscape on a late spring evening in 1930—the spectacle of "LIGHT, HEAT and POWER." By 1930 Shanghai had become a bustling cosmopolitan metropolis, the fifth largest city in the world and China's largest harbor and treaty port, a city that was already an international legend ("the Paris of the East"), and a world of splendid modernity whereas the rest of China was still largely tradition-bound countryside. As Leo Lee insightfully points out in his recent studies, in the Chinese popular imagination Shanghai and "modern" are synonymous (3-5).

In the past decade, much has been written about the "good old days" of Shanghai—especially the city's political, social and economic history—whereas the emergence of American scholarly interest in the city's urban culture is more a recent phenomenon. The main purpose of the present study is to map out the role of urban images in constructing Shanghai's spectacular society of commodification and modernity, and more important, to find out how this cultural imagery of "modernity"

shaped and defined urban perceptions and experiences in the 1930s through a comparative study of two of the most representative works about the spectacular metropolis at the time, Wu Yonggang's *Goddess* (Shennu, 1934, Lianhua Film Company) and Mao Dun's *Midnight* (1933). The choice of these two works lies in the following reasons. First of all, both the film and the novel deal with existing social problems in contemporary Shanghai society, such as urban prostitution, speculation fever, foreign economic aggression and social turmoil. Secondly, despite their differences as two different social discourses—the new medium of film and written literature, both *Goddess* and *Midnight* are marked by the dominance of vision and the prevalence of visual imagery in their filmic/literary configurations of the city—although admittedly, *Midnight*'s panoramic narrative offers a much more comprehensive critique of Shanghai's urban life than does *Goddess*. Moreover, a detailed analysis of the urban images/spectacles as presented in *Goddess* and *Midnight,* as well as the confrontations of selected characters and these images/spectacles, not only provides insight into the psychological and behavioral changes of Shanghai urbanites as effected by the external world, but also sheds light on the further impacts of urban images/spectacles on filmic and literary imagination, because both Wu Yonggang and Mao Dun themselves were Shanghai residents after all. A brief outline of the thesis is provided as follows.

Chapter I will map out the background of Shanghai's urban culture in the 1930s. It focuses on the *material* emblems of Shanghai modernity, the visual images that conjured up the glossy "surface" of the society of spectacle, from the soaring skyscrapers and other urban structures, to all kinds of modern conveniences and entertainment, to the highly-publicized "modern" women. Specific attention will be given to the role of print culture in constructing the imagery of urban modernity, as the Westernized buildings and lifestyles were generally beyond the reach of the average Chinese. The success of *Liangyou huabao* (1926-1945), one of the best-selling journals at the time which boasted ample photographs showcasing the various attractions of the city, attested to the

mesmerizing power of visual images on individual urbanites in the society of spectacle, a power which was further reinforced by the rising film industry in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite the existing social problems in the city, it is the modern fantasies embodied in these visual images that took hold of the popular imagination.

Chapter II will discuss how the modern fantasy affects urban perceptions and experiences within Shanghai's society of spectacle through the study of Wu Yonggang's *Goddess,* one of the best-known silent films made in the 1930s. The film tells the story of a Shanghai streetwalker (played by the glamorous star Ruan Lingyu 1910-1935). Despised by the local community, she yet has a heart of gold and devotes herself to the education of her son who is an infant in the first half of the film, a school-age boy in the second. One eye-catching shot in *Goddess* is the night scene of Nanking Road and the Bund: Western-style buildings tower over the constant flow of pedestrians, trolleys and automobiles, while countless neon signs and traffic lights flash on and off to announce the technologies of modernity—the spectacle of "LIGHT, HEAT and POWER," through which the spectacular society of Shanghai is announced on the movie screen. What calls our attention here is the intricate relation between the repetitive displays of this particular spectacle and the perceptions and experiences of the "viewers" in the film (characters who have a vision of the spectacle). Do the characters virtually see the spectacle with their own eyes? Or, is the vision of the spectacle more an "imaginary" view than a genuine one? By starting from Marx's notion of capitalist commodification and Guy Debord's theory of "the society of the spectacle," this chapter will first explore the causes that underlie the inversion of illusion and reality in the society of spectacle. It then goes further to examine the social implications of such inversion in Shanghai society by analyzing the life-experiences of the three major characters in the film: Ruansao, Big Zhang and the schoolmaster.

Given the social messages that it delivers on the silver screen, the film *Goddess* succeeds in its critique of the spectacular society to the extent that it calls attention to

numerous social problems and moral issues in contemporary Shanghai. As a product of the very commodity society which it critiques, the film yet fails to "distance" itself from that society sufficiently to be able to offer an illuminating analysis and an objective critique, as can be best seen from the contradictions at work both on and off screen—most notably, the unrealistic "packaging" of the star Ruan Lingyu. For us the audience ("viewers" of the film rather than "viewers" in the film), as we experience the allure of the spectacular society of Shanghai on the movie screen, our awareness of these contradictions in the film makes us further aware of the perils of the society of spectacle.

Chapter III will further study the configurations of Shanghai through an analysis of Mao Dun's *Midnight*, one of the greatest works of realistic fiction in modern China. The central theme of the novel is the futile struggle of a group of Chinese capitalists to establish viable industries in competition with foreign economic powers, and their ferocious involvement in stock investment and financial speculations. Given the visual, indeed spectacular imagery that permeates the novel, Shanghai of *Midnight* is configured through a series of spectacles, from the initial panoramic view of the cityscape, to the "dance of female breasts," to the hustle and bustle of the stock market, through which the urban world of money and woman is displayed to the reader (on a much more grandiose scale, as compared with *Goddess*). As David Wang comments on Wu Sunfu and Zhao Botao, the two Shanghai tycoons in the novel, they "celebrate the abstract nature of money by creating false demand and selling short. . . . In terms of their creativity in conjuring up various prospects of money, and their total embrace of the symbolic system of a monetary economy, Wu Sunfu and Zhao Botao demonstrate their desire and ability to remake reality according to their own vision" (62). The theme of speculation defines not only economic but other aspects of human activities in *Midnight*, such as emotional life, and even military and political events. As the spectacular society of Shanghai turns the material life of everyone into a universe of speculation, it further produces alienation and isolation among its inhabitants. And Wu Sunfu's disillusionment in the final fiasco

and his decision to leave the city echo in a way those of Ruansao at the end of the film *Goddess.*

Conclusion. To sum up the impacts of Shanghai's modern imagery on urban experiences as discussed in previous chapters, the prevalence of urban images/spectacles in the city not only proves instrumental in the formation of social practices, public perceptions and private fantasies, but also reinforces the overwhelming sense of phantasmagoria that permeates the entire metropolis, for the city of Shanghai takes on an essentially illusive form, configured through one spectacle and then another. Under siege by these ever-alluring and ever-illusive spectacles, Shanghai urbanites in general suffer from a sense of uncertainty and instability in their urban experiences, as can be seen from the analysis of selected characters in *Goddess* and *Midnight.*

Revealingly, while both the film and the novel do succeed in their own ways in making the audience/reader aware of the existing social problems in Shanghai's society of spectacle, the fact that they were produced within Shanghai determines that they are bound to be affected in one way or another by the very society which they critique. Moreover, in choosing to deal with thematic and visual aspects of a commodity culture, both *Goddess* and *Midnight,* whether consciously or unconsciously, also participate to some extent in the construction of the cultural imagery of metropolitan Shanghai.

CHAPTER I

MODERN LOOKING AND LOOKING MODERN: MAPPING SHANGHAI'S SOCIETY OF SPECTACLE

Despite the fact that Shanghai had been a city in the Chinese context and a busy port for domestic and foreign trade for several hundred years, it is the arrival of the British consul in November 1843 that marked Shanghai's beginning as an international metropolis. Politically, for a century (from 1843 to 1943) Shanghai was a treaty port of divided territories. The Chinese sections in the southern part of the city and in the far north were cut off from each other by the foreign concessions—the International Settlement (British and American) and the adjacent French Concession, which did not come to an end until during the Second World War. With the hundreds of thousands of Chinese already in residence in the city, the existence of the foreign settlements and the presence of a large foreign population of various ethnic groups undoubtedly marked Shanghai a peculiar meeting place of East and West.

The peoples might have met in Shanghai, but they did not become one. Betty Wei notes: "Foreigners were known as Shanghailanders; the Chinese remained Shanghainese. They created this metropolis by working together and in competition, whichever they found more beneficial to themselves. Otherwise, they stayed apart, preferring the company of men and women of their own linguistic and cultural traditions" (*Shanghai: Crucible of Modern China* 104). The essential separation of Chinese and foreigners in their social lives not only manifested itself in reality, but also could be seen from the noticeable absence of Westerners in Shanghai films and literary works of the twenties and thirties, such as *Goddess* and *Midnight*.[1]

However, despite the lack of direct social intercourse between the Chinese and foreign residents, the livelihood of most Chinese in Shanghai was dependent on the port's

international status. As Betty Wei suggests, few Shanghai Chinese would lay claim to achievements of traditional scholarship; they were, directly or indirectly, associated with the plethora of trading and manufacturing activities of the metropolis (124). While the Chinese and foreign residents mingled at work when it was mutually beneficial, the two worlds were physically bound together by bridges, tram and trolley routes, and other public streets and roads built by the Western powers that extended beyond the concession boundaries. These boundaries were marked by stone tablets, which were hardly noticeable in the labyrinth of streets and buildings that signaled the Western hegemonic presence: bank and office buildings, hotels, churches, clubs, cinemas, coffeehouses, restaurants, deluxe apartments, and a racecourse (Lee, 6). All these concrete manifestations of Western material civilization (albeit a humiliating reminder of the foreign economic and military presence) not only provided the city of Shanghai with a spectacular "modern looking" (in popular imagination at the time "Western" and "modern" were equivalents), but also proved instrumental in the formation of social practices, public perceptions and private fantasies as the desire for "looking modern" started to prevail in the city. According to Tang Zhenchang, a leading scholar on Shanghai history, the material aspects of Western modernity proved easier to accept than the "spiritual" aspects, and the response of Shanghai natives to these material forms of Western modernity followed a typical pattern of shock, wonder, admiration and imitation (12). The following of this chapter is thus a detailed study of specific urban images/spectacles that conjured up the "glossy" surface of the society of spectacle, as well as their social significances in Shanghai.

The Bund, Nanking Road and Beyond

"For the new arrival Shanghai surpassed its reputation. The city stands on the Whangpoo (Huangpu), a tributary of the Yangtze. Passenger liners would moor off the Bund, Shanghai's most eminent street and the hub of the city. . . . Above your head the foreign buildings of the Bund thrust into the sky. . . . Even blindfolded, you would have

recognized Shanghai by the sheer, almost hysterical energy of the place" (3), wrote Harriet Sergeant about her early experiences in the city. The Bund in the background is none other than the Bund of the International Settlement (facing the Huangpu at the entrance to the harbor), the seat of colonial power and finance, where some of its most prominent buildings were located, such as the British Consulate, the Palace Hotel, the Shanghai Club (featuring "the longest bar in the world"), Sassoon House (with its Cathay Hotel), the twenty-four—story Park Hotel, the Customs House (with a replica of London's "Big Ben"), and the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, the second largest bank building in the world at the time (Lee, 8).

Dotted with British neoclassical buildings and the more modern Art Deco high-rise skyscrapers (which examplified the new American industrial power), the skyline on the Bund undoubtedly became one of the most amazing spectacles of modernity to Chinese eyes. As Leo Lee points out, these skyscrapers not only towered over the residential buildings in the old section of the city (mostly two- or three-story structures), but also offered a sharp contrast to the general principles of Chinese architecture, in which height was never a crucial factor, especially in the case of domestic structure (12). In his analysis of the associations of the Art Deco style and urban modernity, Lee has also noted the exotic allure of the Art Deco style to the Shanghai Chinese: "When translated into Shanghai's Western culture, the lavish ornamentalism of the Art Deco style became, in a sense, a new mediation between the neoclassicism of British imperial power, with its manifest stylistic ties to the (Roman) past, and ebullient new spirit of American capitalism. In addition to—or increasingly in place of—colonial power, it signified money and wealth" (11). Therefore, it is little wonder that the prominent Western skyline on the Bund, to which the Chinese responded initially with fear and wonder, gradually lent itself to the construction of public perceptions and private fantasies for the Shanghai urbanites. Despite the socioeconomic inequality embodied by these Western skyscrapers (as they were generally beyond the reach of the average

Chinese), and the neurotic thinking that Shanghai might one day sink beneath the horizon under the weight of these big, tall foreign buildings, still, for most of the Chinese who had come to the city to seek fortune, or to seek a new chance in urban life, the Western high-rises, with their alluring modern looking, signified not only money and wealth, but also innumerable attractions and opportunities that the modern metropolis would offer to hundreds of thousands of urban adventurers.[2]

Nanking Road, running at right angles from the Bund past the former racecourse, was the main thoroughfare of the International Settlement, the most prosperous of Shanghai's commercial areas, where stores were most favorably compared with those on Oxford Street and Fifth Avenue (Clifford, 61). With the multistory department stores towering over the constant flow of pedestrians, trolleys and automobiles, and countless neon signs and traffic lights flashing on and off day and night, Nanking Road epitomized the spectacle of "LIGHT, HEAT and POWER" as depicted in Mao Dun's *Midnight* (in fact, Shanghai was often evoked with similar spectacular descriptions/scenes of Nanking Road in literature and film at the time). As Sergeant recalls the energy and glamour of the street in her book:

> You could buy anything on Nanking Road, from jeweled opium pipes to hot chocolate sundaes, from coolies to Texan chorus girls. . . . Up and down the road small, open-fronted Chinese shops slipped between the foreign department stores of Whiteaway Laidlaw, Weeks, Kelly and Walsh. . . . Halfway down Nanking Road, the Chinese-owned department stores of Wing On, Sincere and Sun Sun towered like cliffs on either side of the street. Here customers could ride the elevators, buy duck tongues, skate, look at exhibitions of calligraphy, play billiards. . . . The street resounded with car horns, bicycle bells, pedlars calling out their wares, people yelling at each other in half a dozen languages to get out of the way. (207-8)

While Old Mr. Wu, Wu Sunfu's father in *Midnight* (who had not stepped out of his country house for twenty-five years), almost lost his breath at his first sight of Nanking Road—"a kaleidoscope of red, yellow, green, black, shiny, square, cylindrical, leaping, dancing shapes" (16), Shanghainese (Chinese who live in Shanghai) embraced the street with wonder, admiration and pride, and still call it today the Great Malu. Unlike the deluxe Western hotels at the Bund which catered mainly to Westerners and few extremely wealthy Chinese, the department stores at Nanking Road provided great attractions to the vast majority (the ordinary Shanghai residents), from their spectacular size and appearance and variegated merchandise, to all the latest conveniences and promotion strategies, to diverse entertainments at different floors of the stores. "For out-of-towners visiting Shanghai, shopping for modern luxury items at the department stores on Nanking Road had become a necessary and desirable ritual" (Lee, 16). As for the natives, they enjoyed knowing the fact that people came from all over China/the world to shop along the street and ride the escalators in its air-conditioned stores. With its close links to consumption (both literal and visual), Nanking Road epitomized Shanghai's society of commodification in the 1930s.

Modern consumption was also linked with leisure and entertainment: as cinemas, coffeehouses, theaters, dance halls, and parks sprang up in the foreign concessions, they provided the native residents with an alternative to traditional Chinese leisurely pursuits (like tea-houses and opera houses). Although the Chinese and foreign residents of Shanghai generally spent their leisure hours separately, these Western places of entertainment proved extremely popular among the Shanghai urbanites, and they in turn served frequently as background settings for films and literary works at the time, as in the case of Wu Yonggang's *Goddess* and Mao Dun's *Midnight*.

Modeling Modernity

As spectacles of commodification and modernity (with their various visual stimuli) manifested themselves throughout the cityscape of Shanghai, the desire for

"looking modern" started to permeate various aspects of urban life, as can be seen from the rising popularity of Western hairstyles, Western clothes, Western languages and Western lifestyles among Shanghai natives. Revealingly, as if to meet this emergent demand for "modernity" in the public, the print culture in general plunged into the construction of modern imagery through various forces—photography, pictorials, comics (*manhua*), newspapers, and journals. Wen-hsin Yeh observes in his study of *Shenghuo zhoukan* , a weekly periodical which reached a large audience among the so-called Shanghai's "petty urbanites" (*xiao shimin*): "As urban middle-class employees surveyed the landscape, they saw—as *Shenghuo* had vividly shown in its columns of commentaries and reports. . . the city not only as a place of employment and opportunities, but also as a mindfully constructed space of tree-lined boulevards, public parks and gardens, seafaring vessels, and sky-reaching office buildings, the creation of modern technology and artistic imagination. Sojourn in the city was a life of hard work and healthy recreation; of rich cultural experience in the theaters, movie houses, and music halls; of outdoor activities and Western-style sports in the park" (214).

The incomparable success of *Liangyou huabao*, a popular pictorial journal published by Liangyou Book and Print Company (the first publishing company that specialized in photography), yet further attested to the overwhelming effects of visual images on individual urbanites. As a "good companion" to its readers (a literal translation of the pictorial's name), which presumably consisted of more women than men, *Lianyou* sensed and exploited the emergent urban taste for the "modern" life through its ubiquitous ads (which were largely picture-oriented): sundry food products (Quaker Oats, Momilk), laundry detergent (Fab), medicine and health products (Dr. William's Pink Pills and Colgate Dental Cream), electric cooking pots and gas burners, cigarettes, telephones, makeup, fashion, Western-styled modern furniture, and many more.[3]

If the magazine in the 1920s was still somewhat tradition-bound (judging from the photos, drawings, design, clothes and pictures in the ads), by the early 1930s, "an entire

imaginary of urban modernity was being constructed in the pages of *Liangyou huabao*," observes Leo Lee (75). The urge for "looking modern" made more and more photos appear in *Liangyou*'s publications showcasing the exhilarating modernity of the city. A 1934 issue presents a photographic collage with headings in both Chinese and English—"Intoxicated Shanghai," or "Duhui de ciji" (Metropolitan Excitements)—with photos of a jazz band, a new twenty-two-story skyscraper, scenes of horse and dog racing, a movie poster for *King Kong*, and two parallel scenes showing a row of women baring their legs in athletics and cabaret dancing. At the center is a young Chinese woman wearing a fashionable *qipao* with high slits who is seated in an alluring pose. Interestingly, as if to caution its readers that the modern imagery constructed in its photographic collage was nothing but fantasy, the Chinese commentary that accompanies these alluring pictures adopts an obviously moral tone: it decries such "metropolitan excitements that displace the fervor for normal endeavors" and blames the evil effects on "capitalist civilization." Ironically, despite *Liangyou*'s assumed moral tone, what appear in its subsequent issues in the same year (1934) are still the same alluring images: the high-rise skyscrapers, the glaring neon signs and billboards, the flowing traffic, the well-equipped modern theaters and dance halls, and all that—"Such is Shanghai," one of the headings reads, as if to affirm that after all, the urban images as presented in these photos were not "fantasy" but based on reality.[4] What emerges from this apparent contradiction in *Liangyou* is a sense of illusion, an illusion yet which many Shanghai readers fell for because those attractive pictures were like mirrors in which they saw their secrets and desires and believed them to be real. As Wolfgang Haug comments on the mirror image of desire as deceptive illusion in commodity society: "The illusion ingratiates itself, promising satisfaction: it reads desires in one's eyes, and brings them to the surface of the commodity" (52). Although in the case of *Liangyou*, it is hard to tell exactly whether the magazine advertised the modern imagery of the city to satisfy the emergent urban demand, or it

created the demand for "modernity" in the public, or both, the role of *Liangyou huabao* in constructing modernity in Shanghai's society of spectacle cannot be mistaken.

The same can be said of another, even more popular visual medium: cinema, which figured prominently as both a new commodity and a new item in the modern lifestyle of leisure and entertainment. As a treaty port par excellence, Shanghai was also China's "Hollywood," the hub of its commercial movie industry. Sergeant remarks on the popularity of cinema in Republican Shanghai: "Any rickshaw-puller or factory-worker could have told you about Shanghai films. . . . By the thirties it (film) had become a Shanghai institution reaching into every aspect of the city's life while the films themselves reveal the look and the preoccupations of the metropolis" (248). The validity of this statement can be seen in the fact that Shanghai is repetitively announced by its urban images (most notably, the Western skyline, the neon signs and billboards, the modern vehicles, theaters and clubs) in films at the time, such as *Goddess* (Shennu, 1934), *New Woman* (Xin nuxing, 1934), *Crossroads* (Shizi jietou, 1937), *Street Angel* (Malu tianshi, 1937), and many others. Because of their special significance, the implications of these visual stimuli on the silver screen will be examined separately, in a case study of Wu Yonggang's *Goddess* in Chapter II.

"Modern Woman" as Spectacle

As theaters, clubs, coffeehouses and dance halls sprang up in Shanghai, more and more Chinese women stepped out of the "inner apartments" and appeared in various public spaces as actresses, waitresses, cabaret hostesses, singing and dancing hostesses—their presence in the city and their "modern" images in newspapers, magazines, calendar posters and on the screen, not only served for the consumption of a commodity culture, but also constituted a peculiar spectacle of modernity in the metropolis.

At the beginning of Mao Dun's *Midnight*, Old Mr. Wu arrives unwillingly at the "sinners' paradise" of Shanghai from a small town nearby (which is being threatened by the Communists), at the insistence of his wealthy industrialist son. As the old gentleman

begins his brief adventure in the metropolis, unpleasant sexual images keep assaulting his innocent vision—quivering breasts, bare arms, naked legs and thighs, red lips and sensual smiles, which finally frighten Old Mr. Wu to death.

The free-floating female sexuality depicted in *Midnight* is worth noting. As every careful reader notices, the "dance of breasts" is virtually repeated throughout the novel—on the street, in automobiles, in private mansions, in hotel rooms, and even in the stock market. In this light, Rey Chow's feminist comments on the obsessive descriptions of female breasts in *Hong* (Rainbow, 1930), an earlier novel by Mao Dun, are worth quoting here: "Female breasts were a 'new' figure at the time; their visibility in public signifies 'progress' and their inclusion in rational prose signifies a legitimation, hence, demystification, of an embarrassing kind of detail. . . . In another sense, however, the breasts establish a gap in the narrative language. . . the gap between 'woman' as reflexive 'mind' and 'woman' as sexual 'body'" (*Woman and Chinese Modernity* 106-7). In the context of *Midnight*, however, Mao Dun apparently prefers to imagine woman as sexual body rather than reflexive mind (men use money as capital, women use themselves as capital, as in the case of Liu Yuying and Xu Manli)—an object of desire as irresistible as money for male adventurers and speculators in the city.

This purposeful flaunting of female body as commodity and material object of male gaze and desire reflects the general trend towards commodification in Shanghai's urban life. Although the tradition of featuring a woman on the front cover was established in the late Qing courtesan journals, the high visibility and publicity of female sexuality was yet a modern element in a society where Confucian morality prevailed for over two thousand years. Spurred by the growth of the magazine, radio, recording, and film industries, a variety of high-profile professions for women rose, including song-and-dance stars, movie stars, singing hostesses, and dancing hostesses. While the alluring images of these "modern" women (both literal and technologized) constituted a specific spectacle of modernity in Shanghai, they reinforced a general voyeuristic pleasure among

the male inhabitants of the city. As Wolfgang Haug comments on the aesthetic abstraction of sexual commodification in the age of mechanical production: “The mere picture or sound, or a combination of both, can be recorded and reproduced on a mass basis, on a technically unlimited scale” (55). And the demand created alongside the satisfaction of “viewing” in turn reinforced the very process of commodification.

Having studied the modern images that conjured up the glittering “surface” of the society of spectacle, we now may very well wonder: What are the social implications of these visual stimuli in the commodity society of Shanghai? In what way does this modern imagery shape and define the desire for “looking modern” at the popular level? And how do public perceptions and private fantasies in turn shape the construction of the cultural imagery of modernity? Through a detailed study of Wu Yonggang’s *Goddess* and Mao Dun’s *Midnight*, Chapter II and Chapter III will address these questions respectively, from the perspectives of film and written literature.

CHAPTER II

GODDESS: READING THE ILLUSIVE METROPOLIS OF SHANGHAI

In 1934, Wu Yonggang (1907-1982) chose to tackle the issue of prostitution in his first feature, *Goddess*. Written, designed and directed by Wu for the Lianhua Film Company (one of the most prominent film companies in Shanghai at the time),[5] the film earned the young director immediate critical acclaim and was later regarded as a classic of the silent Chinese cinema, comparable to the best contemporary films from the West. As various critics have noted, *Goddess* must be one of the first to be so explicit about prostitution and not to identify prostitution with moral turpitude.[6] By affirming the virtue of the suffering Shanghai streetwalker and condemning the brutal exploiters and the hypocrites who betray the true spirit of education, *Goddess* touches upon numerous social problems and moral issues in Shanghai society, and makes publicly known "an otherwise invisible mother figure, who struggles in the lowest social stratum to fulfill her expected role in cultural reproduction" (Yingjin Zhang, "Prostitution and Urban Imagination" 168).

Apart from its unprecedented critique of urban prostitution, *Goddess* is also noted for using a more sophisticated filmic language than its predecessors, which, in Rey Chow's words, "welds together the historical content of social oppression and the innovative formal elements that are specific to the film medium" (*Primitive Passions* 25). Chow also notes that, unlike numerous other silent films, many scenes of *Goddess* go without verbal explanation: "Words, whenever they are used, are used very sparingly, so that the audience must learn to see the film through the visual composites that we conventionally call images"(like the cityscape, the prostitute's rented room and her simple belongings, the human face with various emotions, body gestures and clothes), which "make up the rich significations of time, place, gender and class identity, and

human social interactions" (25). It is exactly through these filmic images (rather than the verbal text) that the spectacular society of Shanghai is presented on the movie screen.

As a typical diegetic device in Chinese films at the time, Shanghai in *Goddess* is evoked by the night scene of Nanking Road and the Bund: the Western skyline towers over the constant flow of pedestrians, trolleys and automobiles, while countless neon signs and traffic lights flash on and off to announce the technologies of modernity—the spectacle of 'LIGHT, HEAT and POWER.' Yet, what is worth noting here is not the mere spectacle itself, but the way in which the displayed spectacle has functioned—both for viewers *in* the film and viewers *of* the film. As every careful spectator of the film notices, such a privileged aerial view of Shanghai's cityscape is obviously not one that the individual urbanites in *Goddess* can easily afford, nor are the Westernized lifestyles visualized in the scene (for example, driving the foreign automobiles and frequenting restaurants and night clubs) related to any of the characters' life experiences in the film. Nevertheless, the shots of the scene are repeatedly cut in, as if the characters can view the spectacle with their own eyes, not the camera's lens, at any time, no matter whether they are on the streets, at home or in other corners of the city. More interestingly, though viewers in the film may vary, what they "see" is almost the same: the scene is constantly shot the same way, with the same angle and same length, which makes it appear more a composite image (with its image-objects like the Western skyline, the neon signs and the automobiles) looming large in people's minds than a genuine view of the cityscape. In other words, Shanghai's spectacle of "LIGHT, HEAT and POWER," as shown in *Goddess*, manifests (though in a subtle way) the inversion of illusion and reality.

What leads to such inversion? What are its social consequences in Shanghai of *Goddess*? In other words, how is this inversion related to the urban experience of individual viewers of the spectacle in the film? And furthermore, while calling attention to the illusive nature of the society of spectacle, how is the inversion of illusion and reality—with all its visual manifestations in *Goddess* (besides the spectacle mentioned

above)—perceived by viewers of the film? By starting from Marx's notion of capitalist inversion and abstraction, and later focusing on life experiences of the major characters in *Goddess* as well as perceptions of the audience of the film, this chapter will address these questions.

The Commodification of Reality and the Society of Spectacle

As Steven Best notes, Karl Marx was the first to "trace the emergence and historical development of the commodity form, showing how it was the structuring principle of capitalist society" (41). Marx was also the first to announce the primacy of exchange value over use value in commodity production. According to Marx, before capitalist society, commodity production existed, but only marginally in relation to other activities (its goal then was mainly the satisfaction of needs), and exchange was often conducted through one's need for the other's use-value. It was not until the emergence of the capitalist mode of production that commodity production first started to proliferate. As the scale of production and the frequency of exchange increase, the goal of commodity production soon shifts from the mere creation of use-value to the realization of exchange value—exchange in the form of commodities, which then become, in Best's words, "mediating figures in the valorization of money" (43). Marx further pointed out that an object becomes a commodity only when, over and above its use-value, it assumes an exchange value in trade, based on a single standard, namely, money. Take film for example. As a product of a commodity culture, film has not merely a use-value (to-be-watched-ness), but more important, an exchange value in market, which is based on money and realized in the sale of tickets and contracts.

While objects start to be priced for their exchange value, it is the same case with human beings. Forced to sell his or her labor power to survive, wrote Marx: "the worker sinks to the level of commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities" (70), reduced from the status of qualitative individual to mere exchange value in the form of labor power. "The increase in the quantity of objects is accompanied by an extension

in the realm of the alien powers to which man is subjected" (93). What follows then is the inversion of subject/object relations: the domination of the subject by the object.

Closely related to this inversion is the process of "social abstraction" that "inserts both subjects and objects into an economic calculus, strips away their qualitative differences, and reduces them to a numerical expression, to a quantitative sign" (Best, 44). With the spread of money, commodification, and quantifying logic, a general process of abstraction starts to extend beyond the factories and penetrates all social activities and interpersonal relations, which thus has a profound distorting effect on the whole of social life. With money, Marx pointed out, one can possess various human qualities, or buy qualities—even if in a temporary and illusory way: the extent of the power of money is the extent of its possessor's power, with no regard to his or her individuality. In a "topsy-turvy" society where human beings are things and things (money) take on human power, money determines the nature of reality itself and builds its empire on commodity fantasies and illusions: "Just as money transforms an unreality—the absence of a power or quality—into a reality, so it transforms a reality—the presence of a power or quality—into an unreality" (Best, 45). Real powers pale in comparison with the illusory powers one can buy; real needs go unheeded whereas people pursue the dominant pseudo-need, the need for money. Hence the beginnings of an abstract commodity phantasmagoria.

The city of Shanghai presented in Wu Yonggang's *Goddess* is a good example of such an object world, where commodification has developed to such an extent that the previous distinctions between illusion and reality, subject and object, get blurred. Known as the "capital of the tycoon" and the "paradise of adventurers," Shanghai is marked by the experience of flow, exuberance and phantasmagoria as conveyed by the shots of the night scene along Nanking Road in *Goddess* and many other films at the time. What emerges from the repetitive displays of these image-objects (such as the modern skylines, the flashing neon signs and the luxurious automobiles) and the characters' "imaginary" aerial view of the spectacle is a sense of the inverted subject/object relations and the

domination of subjects by objects—objects whose immediate reality is their symbolic function as images which can reflect social activities and relations among people. In other words, the characters are captivated by this particular spectacle of Nanking Road as it supposedly embodies the quintessence of the city: money, wealth, exhilarating modernity and boundless energy. Therefore, instead of presenting money as direct representations of general equivalence, the fascinating and illusory force of money is mediated through the production of images, which allows a more generalized equivalence. With the ever-growing production of images, the commodity society is thus transformed into the society of spectacle, within which, "the image becomes the highest form of reification" (Best, 49).

Within the spectacular society, where image determines and overtakes reality, where the unreal (imaginary) can be perceived as real, the distinction between illusion and reality is thus blurred, and illusion (due to its enchanting nature) may even appear more real than reality itself. Hence the inversion of reality and illusion.

Spectators in Goddess: Ruansao, Big Zhang and the Schoolmaster

What emerges from the inversion of reality and illusion, in Guy Debord's view, is the affirmation of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely, social life, as mere appearance (14). The universalization of the commodity form is to be seen as "the reduction of reality to appearance, its subsumption to commodity form, its subsequent commodification" (Best, 50). Early in *Goddess*, the film makes absolutely no bones about the way the protagonist Ruansao makes her living. She sells her body. For Ruansao, her body becomes a commodity because it has not merely a use-value, but, more important, an exchange value. Each time before she goes out to walk the streets, Ruansao spends some time prettying herself up in the mirror, like the indispensable packaging for products that are ready for sale—she obviously shows no interest in things of this kind, but she has no other choice. With the overwhelming emphasis on *appearance* in the spectacular society, everything is measured by its ability to show or be shown. In order to

realize a higher exchange value of her body, Ruansao can do nothing but cater to the demands of the society.

An even deeper understanding of the commodity fantasy implied in Ruansao's "trade" could be achieved in the shots of Ruansao's solicitation on the street, as all of them are inevitably preceded by the imaginary view of the spectacular scene along Nanking Road (whether Ruansao really views the scene or not is highly questionable).The perceived connection between illusion and reality is presented in a subtle way. Ruansao seems to share the dreams and fantasies that other Shanghai urbanites have of the city—given the innumerable opportunities in market and her "hard work" (notably, she is not ashamed of her profession at all in the film), she does believe (before her final disillusionment) that she will be able to fulfill the dream of providing her son with a good education. Yet the fact is that though portrayed as a modern and independent woman in the city, all Ruansao can do is to walk along the street, waiting passively for someone to pick her up. Her apparent economic independence seems counterfeit because, after all, she has to depend on her male customers to sustain her living.

Where the image determines and overtakes reality, life is no longer lived directly and actively. Mesmerized by the spectacle, "subjects do not constitute their own lives and society but contemplate the glossy surfaces of the commodity world" (Best, 49). As a result, they move farther and farther from their immediate emotional reality and needs. Debord argues: "The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. . . . The individual's own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him" (23). The thug Big Zhang portrayed in *Goddess* is a case in point. Like Ruansao, Zhang occupies a rather "low" position in the social hierarchy, which means that all the excitements and temptations that metropolitan Shanghai can offer seem to be nothing but

"unreality." In fact, as it shows in the film, except for the occasional shots of the spectacular Nanking Road, the rest of the urban settings (the alley compounds, the gambling den, and the narrow streets) is rather dull and boring. However, Zhang's obsession with the modern fantasies of the city cannot be mistaken. Zhang takes up gambling as his means of making a living, the chance characteristic of which conveys perfectly his mentalities as an individual urbanite: 'TO GET RICH QUICK'. Though he could not afford to go to more classy places like the horse or dog races (popular gambling places in Shanghai at the time), his belief in financial speculation is all the same fervent. Moreover, he longs for possession of women as well (money and woman are considered the two main themes of the modern metropolis). There is one particular shot in the film which expresses in a quite symbolic way how Zhang, as an urban male, is obsessed by such fantasies. Having just won in a round, Zhang walks to the window to have a smoke, his face lighting up with contentment. He looks out of the window. The same shot of the night scene of Nanking Road is cut in, with its modern skyline, the flowing traffic and the flashing neon signs. Zhang "looks" at the scene attentively, mesmerized. Then we find Ruansao's image popping up at the upper right corner of the frame, smiling and attractive –upon which, the contented look on Big Zhang's face gives way to a queer smile. What follows then is a shot-reverse-shot of Zhang's face and the spectacle. The more he "looks" into the spectacle, the more mesmerized he becomes. Then another sequence cuts in, showing how, the next day, Big Zhang locates Ruansao and moves into her house, boasting as her pimp.

The messages implied in these particular shots are worth noticing. As a mere "spectator," Big Zhang is alienated from the spectacle he contemplates. Given the location of his gambling den, where low-brow people like him often hang around, it is highly unlikely that he can ever have such a privileged aerial view of Shanghai's cityscape with his own eyes. Moreover, considering his "low" position in the social hierarchy, it is even less likely that he will have the luxury to indulge in the fancy life-

styles visualized in the scene. What emerges from this 'imaginary' aerial view of the spectacle is a sense of his submission to the contemplated spectacle of “LIGHT, HEAT and POWER”—the quintessence of metropolitan Shanghai. Things that are directly lived have been distilled into images and signs; his needs and desires are not his own but those represented to him by the spectacle: the innumerable possibilities for money and pleasure. Considering his ill treatment of Ruansao, Zhang is a victimizer; on the other hand, he is also a victim, consumed by the fantasies and illusions established by the spectacular society. Not surprisingly, Zhang is shown as forever a loser: not only does he fail to win possession of money in the game of chance, but he also fails to manipulate control of woman. And his final death by Ruansao serves a perfect mockery of his illusory existence in the city.

Another victim captivated in the illusive world of *Goddess* is none other than the schoolmaster. A kind and sympathetic man, the schoolmaster is the only character in the film that would stand up and speak for Ruansao and her son. Always impeccable in his Western suit and tie, the schoolmaster (who represents social conscience) seems to be the positive side of modernity, which is often associated with progress and advancement—as compared to the negative side of modernity—the notion of decadence and wanton depravity. Yet, still, it would be too hasty to conclude that the schoolmaster is free from the mesmerizing power of the spectacle. Although the camera never directly relates him to the spectacle of “modernity” depicted in the film, we can tell by his Western suit and tie that he is virtually part of the city’s modern imaginary, and that, as an educated and Westernized urbanite, he enjoys a much ‘higher’ position in the social hierarchy than people like Ruansao and Big Zhang (who can only afford an imaginary view of the spectacle).

Throughout the film, the schoolmaster never gives up his Western suit and tie (even after his resignation), though he fails to talk his Chinese-style-dressed colleagues into accepting his modern ideas about true education. The answer is easy: the image

produced by the clothes matters. In this sense, it is not the Western suit and tie but the image configured by them that the schoolmaster would not give up—this is not to accuse him of complicity with the guilty spectacle—on the contrary, it further bespeaks the power of the spectacle. Regardless of whether the schoolmaster is aware of it or not, his place *within* the spectacle determines that he must come to terms with the images that it produces or reproduces (in photographs, pictorials, newspapers, magazines, posters, literary works and films), for those images epitomize the prevailing mode of urban social life and inevitably shape his vision and cognition of urban life in one way or another.

We can get an even deeper understanding of the impact of image when we turn to another detail presented at the end of the film, when the schoolmaster goes to visit Ruansao in prison: apart from his impeccable suit and tie, the gentleman equips himself with a walking-stick—a popular accompanying instrument for the Western-styled urban strollers in Shanghai (Du Xintuo, a dandy-like figure in *Midnight*, is also noted for carrying his walking stick for dating). Due to the rich associations of a walking stick with a lady which originated from the writings of "New Perceptionists" in 1920s Shanghai, the schoolmaster, with his walking stick in hand, appears as if to go out for a date.

The supposition is confirmed by the camera. After a brief yet emotional exchange with Ruansao in prison, the schoolmaster, who has long felt drawn to her by awe at her moral character, feels a strong desire to touch her. Framed in a close-up, the man's hand reaches through the bars, tenderly touching the woman's shoulder—whatever the interpretation of his desire, the unusual length of the shot seems to indicate that there is, at least at certain level, an erotic bond between them (throughout the film, except for the schoolmaster we never see a man, even Big Zhang, touch her with such affection).

Again, the inversion of illusion/reality emerges. The schoolmaster is going to the prison to visit Ruansao, yet he acts as if he is going out for a date, bringing with him his walking-stick (around 1930's it was briefly fashionable for urbanites—at least within certain classes—to take a walk down the busy streets in Shanghai). The sight of "city-

strolling" may once have constituted an alien spectacle to which Shanghai people's eyes have to adapt first. Yet once the eyes have mastered the task, the individual is again condemned to passive acceptance of dominant images of needs. As Debord comments, 'The spectacle erases the dividing line between self and world, in that the self, under siege by the presence/absence of the world, is eventually overwhelmed" (153).

Within the spectacular society depicted in *Goddess,* individuals consume a world fabricated by others rather than producing one of their own. The ending of *Goddess* does not feel like a "happy ending," offering no solution to the "enslavement" of the individuals. The vision the film leaves us with is, in the end, that of a virtuous woman cast off by an unjust world.

Having experienced a series of disillusionments in her urban life, Ruansao eventually decides to leave the city and flee with her son. However, even this final hope of escape is crushed when she finds out that Big Zhang has stolen all her savings without her ever noticing it. In a rage, Ruansao rushes out of her house, heading for Big Zhang's gambling den. Instead of taking a rickshaw (as she normally does when she goes out at night for her "work"), Ruansao walks on her feet to look for Big Zhang, which marks her final stage of disillusionment with urban life. Framed in medium shot, she walks on and on (facing the receding camera), with a look of grim resolution on her face. In sharp contrast to the firmness of her expression and the steadiness of her walk, we find in the background, the floating imageries of the metropolitan Shanghai. The western skylines, the neon signs, the trolleys, the automobiles—all the image-objects seem to float and dissolve, superimposed one upon another—no longer the spectacle of "LIGHT, HEAT and POWER." For the disillusioned Ruansao, all the fantasies and illusions that she has held for the city (no matter whether she has had the chance to experience them or not), are now gone.

In a brief struggle with Big Zhang, Ruansao strikes him in the head with a bottle, which leads to his death. Ruansao is thus put into jail. Deprived of all the urban fantasies

as well as her last chance of escape, Ransao is now thrown into hopeless imprisonment: even her only vision of happiness, the fulfillment of her son, now proves to be more illusion than reality. Framed in a medium close-up, she sits at one corner of the dark cell, inconsolably dejected. Slowly stroking her hair, she turns her face as if to look at something off-screen to the right. Then all of a sudden her face which has been long expressionless miraculously lights up. Following her eyes, we find the image of her little boy popping up in the right background of the frame, with "a heartbreaking smile of innocence and hope," as William Rothman puts it, "a vision real enough and unreal enough to move us, as it moves his mother, to tears" (70).

Then the vision fades out, and Ruansao turns around, facing the camera. With a deep sigh, she closes her eyes and slightly lowers her head, as if she tries to keep the vision of her son alive. And then we see her raise her head again with another sigh, yet eyes closed still—till our vision of her, too, fades out and the final title appears.

Spectators of Goddess: Further Insights

The film ends without offering any practical way so as to make Ruansao's vision of her son's fulfillment real—although the schoolmaster promises to raise her son as his own, the mother pleads: "When (my son) grows up, please tell him that his mother died long ago, so that he will never know he had a mother like me." All the film does is to suggest that by closing her eyes, by "shutting out the cruel, unjust world," the woman can keep her vision alive and thus be happy. As for us the audience (our vision of the woman, too, fades out), if we want to keep our vision alive, the film, seems to suggest that we, too, could do nothing but close our eyes—apparently an act of illusion itself. Moreover, with Ruansao locked behind bars (pacing like a "caged" animal), the final shots of *Goddess* seem to undermine the didactic purpose it originally intended: "By assuming his new role of surrogate father, the principal (schoolmaster) secures patrilineal continuity on a symbolic level, relegating the despised mother once and for all to the realm of oblivion" (Zhang, 168).

In fact, for spectators of *Goddess*, the illusion of reality at work (beyond the screen story) manifests itself not merely at the end of the film. Take the sexual illusion in the packaging of the star Ruan Lingyu for example. Although many critics have noted the lack of an explicit display of female sexuality in the film, yet, still, *Goddess* reveals in numerous subtle ways that the star (who is always dressed in a tight-fitting *qipao*) has a desirable and experienced body. Given her role as a prostitute, it is not surprising that she should be dressed up like this so as to attract prospective customers on the street. Yet, one may wonder, why should she still wear such showy stuff at times when she is at home doing household chores (for example, there is a particular shot showing Ruansao washing clothes at home in a *qipao* with high-slits), an act which seems to deviate from real practices in life at the time?

Laura Mulvey's comments on the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of female figure in film are relevant to the answer here—"the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (751). In other words, just as Ruansao gets dressed up to show herself to her customers, the star Ruan Lingyu, at the same time, dresses up to show herself to the audience. As the camera lingers "lovingly" and "excessively" on Ruan, Rey Chow observes: "Before the camera eye, the different parts of her body, such as a smile, a leg, an arm, a coiffure, or a beautiful dress, serve as the loci of society's displaced desire" (24). This observation is akin to that of the film historian Jay Leyda: "Only on Chinese calendars of modern beauties can one find counterparts of the ladies who were 'developed' to attract film audiences of the treaty ports in the 1930s" (86). Revealingly, a commentator in 1935 also wrote: "Most of the people who go to movies are not going for the movie per se, but to enjoy the images of female stars" (Xiao, 193).

In order to enhance the exchange value of the commodity (the film), attract more audience and thus maximize their surplus earnings (again the hegemony of money is at

work), the filmmakers packaged the star Ruan Lingyu in a more eye-catching way, turning 'unreality' (counterfeit practice like doing household chores in a *qipao*) into 'reality' on the screen, an act which seems to contradict once again the messages that the film originally intended to convey: "On screen she (Ruan) appeared a modern goddess to her audience, adored and envied for epitomizing the successful and independent woman. Off screen, society considered her a member of the amusement population and little better than a prostitute" (Sergeant, 289). Ruan Lingyu had to wear a tight-fitting *qipao* throughout the film, although it was not real practice in life—and her Shanghai audience knew it. So what? As long as the image of the role thus established is good to *look at*, for the gaze of spectators and that of the male characters in the film, everyone is content.

What emerges from these problematic readings of the film *Goddess* is then the question: how can the visual medium film objectively critique the society while being part of the society of spectacle, or to be more specific, to what degree were the filmmakers of *Goddess* "trapped" in the spectacular society of Shanghai? Although referring to French films, Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Norboni's observations may shed some light here: every film is a particular product, manufactured within a given system of economic relations. On the other hand, as a result of being a material product of the system, it is also an ideological product of the system. No filmmaker can, by his own individual efforts, change the economic relations governing the manufacture and distribution of his films; and every film is determined by the ideology which produces it, or within which it is produced (684).

In the light of these views, the fact that *Goddess* is produced with the spectacular society of Shanghai means that it is more or less part of the city's economic system and ideological system. On the one hand, as a product of a commodity culture of consumption, the film is a commodity, the exchange value of which is realized by the sale of tickets and contracts, and governed by the economy of the market, therefore, the film calls for certain "packaging" to enhance its marketability (like adopting the popular

melodramatic representation, and the star). On the other hand, while affirming the virtue of the suffering prostitute and condemning the brutal exploiters and the hypocrites in the city (so intended by the director Wu Yonggang), the film does not absolutely disregard (whether consciously or unconsciously) the serious public concerns with the moral and medical implication of urban prostitution in the 1930s. As Yingjin Zhang comments on the double significance of the ending of *Goddess*: "At the symbolic level, it restores paternal law and reaffirms the sense of urban security; at the narrative level, it gives a seamless closure to a tragic tale of the kind and self-sacrificing prostitute" (171).

Therefore, one should note that while the film *Goddess* succeeds in calling attention to numerous social problems and moral issues in its critique of Shanghai society, it fails to distance itself from that society sufficiently to offer a perceptive analysis and an objective critique because the film itself is more or less part of the city's economic system and ideological system after all. As we the audience experience the allure of the spectacular society of Shanghai on the movie screen, our awareness of the societal impacts on the film *Goddess* makes us further aware of the overwhelming power of the society of spectacle.

The Suicide of Ruan Lingyu: A Final Note on the "Goddess"

While reproducing urban images on the silver screen, the visual medium film not only becomes part of Shanghai's society of spectacle, but also participates in the construction of the spectacular society—and one of its most remarkable creations is of course the female movie stars, the "spectacular representations of modern women," who in the service of the spectacle become the models to be identified with. However, once placed in the stardom's spotlight, these female stars also become the "prisoners" of the images/spectacle they establish on screen. Ruan Lingyu's suicide is a salient example of this loss of autonomy for female stars in the spectacular society of Shanghai.

One of the most accomplished stars in the 1930s, Ruan Lingyu successfully brought to life many tragic female figures on screen, including the virtuous prostitute in

Goddess. Though she had never received any professional training before she entered the film world, the tragic star was often applauded for her superb acting skills, and especially, the "genuineness" of her acting. In a 1934 photo spread of stars, a caption reads: "Ruan Lingyu, forever holding a wounded smile. We hope that in the shadow of your wounded smile, even though you powerfully take on genuineness in your acting, the fruits of that achievement are yours, are yours, do you hear? Lingyu, of all the appearances in the Chinese film world, yours is the most soulful!"[7] This caption emphasizes Ruan's acting achievements and the "genuineness" of her acting; however, as Michael Chang points out: "Ruan is praised for her acting skills, but only when that skill results in her bearing her genuine and authentic soul" (153). This emphasis on "genuineness" and "authenticity" reflects the "true character" (*bense*) standard of acting for movie actresses (but not actors) in the 1930s, which was grounded "in the socially constructed ideal of women as 'good girls' who were 'natural' (*ziran*), 'innocent' (*tianzhen*), and 'genuine' (*zhen*)" (153). Accordingly, while actors were not strictly held to being "genuine," "natural," and "innocent" on screen (in fact, some actors' on-screen and off-screen personalities were explicitly separated), actresses were expected to "transcend simple 'poses' of virtuousness in movies and practice it both on and off screen" (154). Because the "true character" and "good girl" standards made no distinction of her talents on screen and her moral character off screen, Ruan's livelihood as an actress and her public image as a "natural" and "genuine" woman were inextricably linked (most of Ruan's characters on screen were sick, sad, depressed and doomed)—by the time when she, as well as the mass media and the general public, realized that her life in reality did not coincide with the ideal of her as "forever holding a wounded smile," the twenty-five-year-old tragic star chose death for fear of being stigmatized as an immoral woman.

Around midnight on March 7, 1935, after coming home from a dinner party at Lianhua studios, Ruan took an overdose of sleeping tablets and ended her young life,

modeling her death after that of the protagonist Ruan had just played in her new release *New Women*, a film based on the recent suicide of another film actress, Ai Xia, in February 1934. It was the obsessive public interest in her private life that drove Ruan to death. For months before her suicide the mosquito press published every detail of the break-up of her affair with Zhang Daming (who had gambled away large amounts of their money and hit her), and her move to the wealthy tea merchant Tang Jishan who, like Zhang, physically abused her and had no intention of marrying her. Before her death Ruan wrote two suicide notes—one for Tang Jishan and one to be published in Shanghai newspapers: "Gossip is a fearful thing."

Two months after her death Lu Xun wrote an essay with the same title. He noted the ease with which, "brilliant writers dashed off big headlines: 'More Concupiscent than Wu Zedian,'" and the damage they caused to women in the public eye. Weak in the face of the strong, the press

> seems strong enough to those weaker than itself; so although sometimes it has to suffer in silence, at others it still shows its might. And those like Ruan Lingyu make good copy for a display of power, because although a celebrity she was helpless. Readers enjoyed these items because it allowed them to think, "Though I am not so beautiful as Ruan Lingyu, I have higher standards." Or, "Though I am not so able as Ruan Lingyu, I come from a more respectable family.". . . It is certainly worth spending a few coppers to discover your own superiority. (Sergeant, 290-91)

Although superiority might not be what every reader desired, Lu Xun's comments point out the "substance" of Ruan's life: as she was placed in stardom's spot-light in service of the spectacular society, she also became a "prisoner" of the spectacle she represented, eternally trapped for public consumption (both on and off screen), until she found her escape in death. The fact that Ruan became more human in the eyes of some, but only

after taking her own life, was merely another twist of irony. Shanghai's brightest female movie star as she was, Ruan's life and her career success proved as flimsy as one of the neon signs on Nanking Road within the illusive metropolis—and the final touch to her once spectacular image was none other than her well-attended public funeral which received coverage in major newspapers around the world (even the *New York Times* reported the phenomenon).

CHAPTER III

REMAPPING THE SPECTACULAR SOCIETY IN *MIDNGIHT*

Published in 1933, Mao Dun's *Midnight* has long been considered one of the greatest works of fiction in modern China. Subtitled *A Romance of China in 1930*, the novel selects the city of Shanghai as its setting, encompassing "as many as seventy characters from capitalist businessmen to communist activists, from intellectuals to socialites" (Wang, 59). In a talk in 1939 to a group of students in Xinjiang (part of which appeared as the Preface to a Chinese edition in 1955), Mao Dun related that he had started planning the novel in Shanghai in 1930 and wrote it between 1931 and 1932. His original plan had been to treat "both town and country at the same time." However, due to poor health, Mao Dun gave up half of what he originally planned and focused instead on aspects of city life, which constitute the current version of *Midnight*.[8]

Yet, "even in its less ambitious form," as Yingjin Zhang puts it, the novel "commands a nearly complete panorama of all the most important social processes in contemporary China," covering crucial social issues such as "the deterioration of the rural economy, disasters caused by warlordism, moral corruption in the city, the attractions and risks of financial speculation, the impotence and hypocrisy of the 'new intellectuals,' the ennui of bourgeois ladies, and the conflict between love and revolution" (*City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* 134). While adopting fiction to probe the real, Mao Dun establishes the sense of immediate reality, not merely through fresh news, topical events, local color and typical figures, but also through literary representations of urban images/spectacles specific to metropolitan Shanghai, as can be seen from the visual, indeed spectacular imagery that permeates the novel—the panoramic view of the cityscape, the hustle and bustle of Nanking Road, the "dance of female breasts," the love and romance at pleasure gardens like Rio Rita's (the latest White Russian nightclub), and

the frenzy of the stock market. In other words, whether consciously or unconsciously, Mao Dun distills the "essence" of the spectacular society of Shanghai into specific urban spectacles and "reproduces" them through literary means in *Midnight*. However, it would be misleading to think of the literary representation of these urban spectacles as mere simplistic description, or to think of the urban spectacles as mere backdrop for social events and human activities, because the urban spectacles are part of the narrative as they are part of Shanghai society. By portraying the confrontations of individual urbanites and these spectacles, and more important, by focusing on the psychological and behavioral changes of these people affected by the external world, *Midnight* demonstrates not only the contemporaneity of its content but also the impact of the "times" on individuals (on a much more grandiose scale than does the film *Goddess*). The following will provide a detailed analysis of some selected urban spectacles in *Midnight* and their social implications in Shanghai society.

The Spectacular World of Money and Woman

As in the film *Goddess*, the city of Shanghai in *Midnight* is evoked by its visual, indeed spectacular imagery of commodification and modernity, yet on a much more concrete level and a much broader scale. If the majority of the urban scenery in *Goddess* is still somewhat dull and boring, the city of *Midnight* is dominated by an overwhelming sense of flow, exuberance and phantasmogoria, with its kaleidoscopic urban spectacles.

The first chapter opens with a panoramic scene of a typical section of Shanghai-Suzhou River, the Bund along the Huangpu River, and the towering framework of Garden Bridge: "Looking east, one could see the warehouses on the waterfront of Pootung like huge monsters crouching in the gloom, their lights twinkling like countless tiny eyes. To the west, one saw with a shock of wonder on the roof of a building a gigantic sign in flaming red and phosphorescent green: LIGHT, HEAT, POWER."

Yet what calls our attention here is that instead of focusing on the spectacle of modernity alone, Mao Dun sets it side by side with another "naturalistic" imagery—of

the setting sun, the gentle breeze, the ancient Suzhou (Soochow) River, and some soft music from the park across the river—images that are more familiar to the Chinese eyes, as opposed to the "flaming red and phosphorescent green" neon signs atop the foreign settlement which carry the English words (in original): LIGHT, HEAT and POWER. The apparent incongruity emphasizes the disturbing effects of Shanghai's modern imagery on the Chinese, a theme which permeates (though in various forms) the whole text—starting with the reactions of Old Mr. Wu upon his arrival in the city.

With his ancient book of divine retribution at his side, the old man unwillingly starts his brief adventure in Shanghai as his son's cavalcade of new Citroens sets off for the French Concession by way of Nanking Road. Unpleasant scenes keep assaulting his "innocent" vision. The lighted windows of the apartment stores rush down on Old Mr. Wu at one moment then vanish the next, "gleaming like the eyes of the devils." The street lamps on either side of the road come and go at the same alarming speed. The oncoming cars, their horns blaring, rise up at him like a line of black serpents, each with a pair of blinding lights for eyes. A blur of shiny, leaping colored shapes and hooting, jarring sounds make his head spin and his heart leap (15-16). While Old Mr. Wu is almost driven over the edge of nervous breakdown by these monstrous urban scenes, even more horrible are the images of female bodies around him—quivering breasts, bare arms, naked legs and thighs, red lips and sensual smiles, which finally shock the old man to death as he arrives at the luxurious mansion of his son.

> All the red and green lights, all the geometrical shapes of the furniture and all the men and women were dancing and spinning together, bathed in the golden light. Mrs. Wu Sunfu in pink, a girl in apple-green, and another in light yellow were frantically leaping and whirling around him. Their light silk dresses barely concealed their curves, their full, pink-tipped breasts. . . . The room was filled with countless swelling bosoms, bosoms that bobbed and quivered and danced around him. (21)

With a shrill cry of "Devils," the old gentleman collapses under the assault of these modern sexual images and soon passes out. For a country "mummy" like Old Mr. Wu, the disorienting effects of the urban spectacles (especially the sexual images of female bodies) are so strong that he is simply killed by his vision: nothing in his experience (or in his treasured book) has ever prepared him for what he now sees in Shanghai.

Different critics have provided different interpretations of Old Mr. Wu's death. To Yingjin Zhang, the death of the old man signifies the "triumph of modernity over tradition in Shanghai" (137), whereas Harriet Sergeant sees it as a split between traditional China and modern Shanghai: "To him [Old Mr. Wu] Shanghai was not China nor his relatives Chinese" (209). According to David Wang, the "burlesque overture of the death of Mr. Wu from seeing too many naked women," is Mao Dun's caricature of the old man and the moral values which he embraces, because Old Mr. Wu's excessive fear of female sexuality may bespeak the excess of his repressed desire" (86-87). Despite these different views, one thing to be sure is that, as Mao Dun sees the city through the eyes of the old gentleman, Shanghai emerges distinctly as a mysterious, seductive and dangerous woman—in a similar way as the city is projected in the film *Goddess*, when Shanghai is fantasized in a montage as an alluring prostitute (Ruansao) smiling directly at the audience against a background of skyscrapers and flashing neon lights.

This gendering of the city as a seductive woman, as Yingjin Zhang puts it, "proves to be a discursive means through which money is figured as an equally—if not more—seductive force in the modern metropolis" (137). The intimate association between woman and Shanghai's economic life is further established as the "social butterfly" Xu Manli makes her appearance at Old Mr. Wu's funeral. Miss Xu is the well-known mistress of Zhao Botao, a powerful compradore-capitalist who "grabs anything that's going in the way of government stock" and "anything going in the way of women, too" (46). With her smooth white skin, her fresh red lips and her sensual smiles, the socialite mingles easily with different groups of people and wriggles her hips into the

otherwise dull scene of financial talks of men. She even performs a spectacular striptease on a billiard table to four selected "pillars of society" in the billiard room of the Wu mansion, while outside the room, Old Mr. Wu's funeral is proceeding:

> The society girl Hsu (Xu) Man-li, her feet bare, was dancing gracefully on a billiard-table. Her arms outstretched and one leg held high in the air, so that her whole weight was supported on the point of the other foot, she pirouetted rapidly on the smooth, soft baize, the hem of her dress flaring out like a parasol and revealing her soft white thighs and her round hips sheathed in pink silk underwear. Chu Yin-chiu, Sun Chi-jen, Wang Ho-fu and Chen Chun-yi were sitting on high stools by the billiard-table, clapping their hands and laughing hilariously, while Chou Chung-wei brandished a billiard cue as if he were conducting an orchestra. (67)

What emerges from this erotic spectacle of " the death dance of the rich" (as noted by a poet at Wu's mansion) is no longer Old Mr. Wu's shock or fear, but the voyeuristic pleasures of the male urban adventurers who are then troubled by their bleak prospects for surviving the worsening economic situation. A similar spectacle is presented again later in the novel, when with Wu Sunfu and other three businessmen on a night cruise on the Huangpu River, Xu Manli is asked to stand on one leg atop a table so that she can bring luck to the one who catches her in his arms once she loses her balance in the wind. Unfortunately, as the steamboat, now renamed Manli, runs at full speed on the river, it sinks a sampan that stands in its way. Revealingly, though more hardened and more experienced than Old Mr. Wu, the male urbanites involved here are overwhelmed too, by the spectacles in the very process of observation. The various pleasures obtained from the privileged status of viewing the spectacles, the process of watching, and the accompaniment of other "pillars" of Shanghai society, make the male spectators easy victims of their own ignorance of the illusiveness of the spectacles, while their female counterpart consistently demonstrates her skill by adjusting to the changes of the external

world and by moving smoothly from one spectacle to the next. As it turns out, within mere two months, among these very spectators, one gets his factory swallowed by others while one is forced to close his business—some even are betrayed by their own broker, as in the case of Wu Sunfu and Han Mengxiang, when Han sells Wu's inside information to Zhao Botao, a fatal blow which leads to Wu's final fiasco.

As Xu Manli flirts her way among her admirers, displaying her charm and her inexhaustible energy, so the city of Shanghai attracts people from different factions, trades, professions and classes—bankers, merchants, politicians, landlords, opportunists, revolutionaries, intellectuals, poets and socialites—"all engaged in the fast circulation of money, financial tips, political intrigue, news, gossip, sex, and power" (Wang, 87). The stock market, a place where virtually everybody can come and try his/her fortune, at once becomes a "melting-pot" and a "battlefield," thus setting up another peculiar spectacle of the metropolis (a spectacle hitherto unseen in modern Chinese fiction):

> The floor of the Stock Exchange was even more crowded and noisy than a busy market-place. The air was suffocating and reeked of sweat. . . . Up on the platform the announcer and the telephonists were all red in the face as they gesticulated and shouted, but it was impossible to hear a word they were saying. Seventy or eighty brokers, together with their hundred-odd assistants and innumerable speculators, produced between them such a deafening pandemonium of shouting and bidding that no ordinary ear could have made anything of it. (295)

The overwhelming effects of this spectacle (with the fluctuation of stock prices) can be best seen from the reactions of the "madding speculators/spectators" (who are at the same time part of the spectacle): "Red-faced, their bloodshot eyes staring, they sat there jabbering and arguing, while the veins stood out like cords on their temples." For the losers, "their heads bent in silence. . . their lack-luster eyes stared hopelessly into a wretched future as they contemplated selling their property, or absconding, leaving their debts unpaid" (296). Ironically, all these frenzied activities at the stock market seem

nothing but a joke to one woman, Liu Yuying (another mistress of Zhao Botao), who overhears Zhao discussing his plans to manipulate the market and thus come to sell her "secret retail." For capitalist tycoons like Zhao Botao and Wu Sunfu, the spectacle of the "madding crowd" at the stock market is nothing more than a mere puppet show.

As the city of Shanghai is configured through these kaleidoscopic spectacles in *Midnight*—the panoramic view of the cityscape, the hustle and bustle of Nanking Road, the "dance of female breasts" and the "death dance", and the frenzy of the stock market—characters who view these spectacles also become part of the view. Their confrontations with the urban spectacles and their psychological and behavioral changes thus incurred (like shock, fear, overexcitement, pleasure, temptation, intoxication, anxiety and depression) constitute a specific textual regime that is governed by the visual regime of the spectacles, as the spectacles define not only the literary devices but also the thematic concerns in *Midnight*.

The Politics of Speculation

The illusiveness of the kaleidoscopic spectacles of Shanghai can best be seen in the speculation fever that spreads through the whole city. As Mao Dun noted while commenting on his motives of writing *Midnight*, in the spring of 1930 Shanghai began to feel the repercussion of the world depression—the Chinese industrialists, groaning under foreign economic aggressions, were hindered on the one hand by the feudal forces and threatened on the other by the control of the money-market by compradore-capitalists—therefore, the actual productive sources of the city, i.e. the factories, were in total disarray.[9] However, Marston Anderson points out that, if from the ultimate perspective of history Shanghai is unproductive, it is nothing but inactive, because the city's economic energy comes not from productive labor, but rather from the pure fluidity of funds within the city (148). The one thing that Shanghai has no shortage of is money. As shown by the urban spectacles discussed previously and many others in *Midnight*, the city is still the "locus of a maximum concentration of energy," even though the economic life in the city

does not necessarily accrue funds or generate wealth. Yet, just as Anderson further suggests: “The nature of money is to be exchanged, and the pleasure of possessing it resides precisely in its potential transmission” (148). With the spread of the “speculation fever,” money becomes the sole object of nearly everyone’s pursuit. More revealingly, as the spectacular society of Shanghai turns the material life of everyone into a world of speculation, the theme of speculation defines not only economic but also other aspects of human activities in *Midnight*, such as emotional life, and even military and political events.

As the most important figure in the novel, Wu Sunfu (the owner of a large silk factory) is by any standard a competent and resourceful industrialist, who has the noble ambition to revive Chinese industry without the intervention of foreign capital and management. However as *Midnight* develops, Wu’s noble ambition is gradually undermined by the temptations of Shanghai’s speculation fever as he is “dragged deeper and deeper into the mysterious but all the more fascinating world of money and woman” (Zhang, 137). Perhaps somewhat ironically, it is on the occasion of his father’s funeral that Wu Sunfu first gets inveigled into two major speculative business deals: establishing the Yizhong Trust Company and trying his luck with government bonds. At the time, Wu has already succeeded in competing with the declining traditional manually-oriented industry by means of advanced modern technology and large capital investment. Intoxicated with his success, Wu considers the worsening economic and political situation at the time an excellent opportunity to take advantage of the insolvency of the smaller enterprises by merging them so that he can set up his own industrial empire. To carry out this ambitious plan of his, Wu Sunfu, together with a few other national capitalists, establishes the Yizhong Trust Company, which besides giving loans to the declining businesses, also engages in speculation. The initial success of his new enterprise (merging eight smaller factories with his cunning maneuvers and having its first big gain in the speculation of government bonds) lures Wu Sunfu deeper into the

speculation fever, leaving him unaware that Zhao Botao, a "compradore financier" backed by foreign capitalists, has the same ambition as his to absorb others' entrenched businesses with the money he makes from the stock market. Therefore, as David Wang remarks, "Stock exchanges become the arena where the two capitalist villains wage their war of life and death" (62).

It is somewhat ironic that "stock investment and speculation furnish Mao Dun's *Midnight* with a kind of reality" of Shanghai society, a reality yet "based on the most fictitious of dealings in money and commodities." As Wang further points out: "the mechanism of the stock exchange allows its buyers and sellers to conduct dealings as if they meant an actual transaction between money and commodities, while in fact they profit mainly from speculating on the fluctuations in the price of things in which they are purportedly interested" (62). As presented in the wild spectacle of the stock market, the highly volatile stock exchange activities provide a source of profit for a new class of urban investors who neither produce nor consume commodities but play with their abstract values. Yet, for the two Shanghai tycoons Wu Sunfu and Zhao Botao, unlike the "madding crowd" at the Exchange, they do not merely sit and watch the rise and fall of stock prices, instead, they race ahead of time through their connections and financial maneuvers, by receiving inside tips on the changing economic/political dynamic, or by producing the fluctuations according to their own vision. Early in the novel, the troops in the north advance or retreat often, not purely for military purposes, but in coordination with the rise and fall of the stock market as a result of some secret deal between the "top" speculators and commanders of the troops. Little wonder that all the frenzied activities at the stock market seem nothing but a mere puppet show to Wu Sunfu and Zhao Botao, as observed by Liu Yuying: "how comical it all was. . . . here in the Exchange was the 'madding crowd,' while somewhere outside away from it all Chao Po-tao and Wu Sun-fu were lounging on their sofas with their cigars and pulling the strings that made these puppets dance!" (296).

As Wu Sunfu savors the initial success of his speculative adventures and is thus lured deeper into the speculation of government bonds (in cut-throat competition with Zhao), he ceases to be himself. Calm and resourceful as he always was, given the worsening economic and political situation at the time, when troubled on the one hand by the workers' strike in his factories and cornered on the other by foreign capitalists (represented by Zhao), the patriotic capitalist is suddenly overwhelmed by his disordered and chaotic perceptions of the external world and becomes as powerless as his newly-deceased father. To make matters worse, his once noble ambition is further subverted when he meets Liu Yuying, the former mistress of Zhao Botao, who now volunteers to offer Wu inside information. With renewed assurance, Wu Sunfu enters into face-to-face confrontation with Zhao, refusing to acknowledge the difficult financial situation of his business. As it turns out, Wu not only falls prey to the irresistible power of this seductive woman, but also becomes victim of Zhao's monetary maneuvers when Liu later finds her way back to Zhao's hotel room: "No matter how he (Wu) tried, he just could not concentrate; especially when the memory of Liu Yu-ying's inviting smile, her lovely voice and her limpid eyes kept hammering away at his brain and distracting him as he tried to wrestle with his business problems" (331).

While Wu is almost "paralyzed" by the spectacular world of money and woman in his speculative adventures, the woman of his daydreams, Liu Yuying, moves smoothly from one spectacle to another, from the floor of the stock market to the luxurious hotel rooms—"Being a woman, she realized that men and women had different ways of making money: men used money as capital, whereas women used themselves as capital" (294). Having learnt her lesson from the failures of her father, her brother, her father-in-law, and her late husband in financial speculations, the twenty-one-year-old widow prefers to play safe in her daily speculations of government bonds; however, she is prepared to gamble recklessly in her "speculation" with Zhao Botao, from which she is expecting to "make quite a packet." In order to do that, she further involves herself with

Wu Sunfu, luring him deeper into the speculation of government bonds. This is Mao Dun's description of her eroticized body in the stock market: "When Liu Yuying looked down and saw that her dress of pale blue gauze was soaked with sweat and that her nipples showed through as two round, rosy blurs, she could not help smiling" (296). The voyeuristic pleasures of the male adventurers emerge again, only reminding the reader of Xu Manli's "death dance" discussed earlier.

In contrast to Liu Yuying and Xu Manli is Feng Meiqing, daughter of the provincial landlord Feng Yunqing who has squandered most of his fortune in speculation. In his desperate attempt to gain back what he has lost in the stock market, Feng Yunqing dispatches his own daughter to make love to Zhao Botao, in the hope that she can extract some secret financial tips. Yet, as it turns out, while prostituting herself to Zhao, the sixteen-year-old simply forgets her mission. In an attempt to conceal her mistake, Meiqing conjures up some false stock information, which hastens her father's fall into the abyss of bankruptcy.

Notably, as the speculation fever has contaminated the whole city, the theme of speculation defines not only economic but also other aspects of human activities in *Midnight*. David Wang notes: "One finds that even an emotional capacity such as love or hate can be codified as a kind of currency, fluctuating along with other objects in the market" (64). This can be seen not only from the speculative nature of the relations between Liu Yuying or Xu Manli with their tycoon friends, but also from the romantic affairs of other characters in the novel. Take Wu Sunfu's wife, Mrs. Wu, for example. She carries on a platonic affair with her old sweetheart, the military liaison officer Col. Lei, while she has no intention of giving up what she already owns with her wealthy husband. Col. Lei, on the other hand, while playing the role of a devoted lover to Mrs. Wu, yet never misses a chance to carry on with other attractive women around him, most notably, Miss Xu Manli. For Mrs. Wu's sixteen-year-old sister Lin Peishan, a lively and carefree young girl, life is "nothing more than one long game" (502) as she feels she

loves everybody and yet nobody (160), an attitude similar to that of Du Xintuo (Wu Sunfu's nephew), a happy-go-lucky young man who carries on with Peishan with no intention of marrying her because the Lins have no money. Not to mention Li Yuting, an economics professor, who merely shuns his engagement when the girl's father becomes broke.

Even political activities in the novel are tainted with speculative color. Besides the military maneuvers mentioned earlier, another notable example is the commemoration of the fifth anniversary of the May Thirtieth Massacre in Shanghai.[10] In Chapter 9 of *Midnight*, Wu Sunfu's cousin Zhang Susu and her boy friend go to attend the demonstration in Nanking Road dressed in their best Western clothes, "a little adventure" which Miss Zhang considers as "a welcome break in the dull monotony of her life" (226). While strolling about and looking for "fun and excitement", they move into the crowd on the dares of other friends and shout slogans to show off their nerve—despite their assumed "participation" in an action for the good cause, they remain "spectators" in an important sense. As Marston Anderson observes: "They watch the crowd like pornographers, half fascinated, half repulsed; though provided with a frisson, they preserve their emotional distance" (184). In other words, what emerges from the seemingly heroic acts of these urban bourgeois youths is nothing but the pleasure and excitement of viewing: "She (Zhang) smiled, but said nothing, for she was absorbed in watching the crowds milling around at the corner of Nanking Road and Tibet Road. . . . Her face became flushed as she felt a wave of excitement rising inside her" (226). However, as the foreign police start to open fire and to arrest demonstrators on the street, the exhilaration of these young people soon gives way to frenzy and depression. They quickly make their escape from the scene and take shelter in a nearby restaurant, where they run into the poet Fan Bowen, who took part in the May Thirtieth Demonstration five years ago, and who yet now degenerates into another "spectator" from his "grandstand view" at the second floor of the restaurant. It so happens that Lin Peishan and Du Xintuo

are also around in the same restaurant. The young people soon engage in exchanges of personal talks and flirtatious chatter. As the novelty of the demonstration diminishes, they grow restless again and Du Xintuo then suggests a trip to the new pleasure garden Rio Rita's. Hence the end of their little "revolutionary" adventure.

Alienation and Betrayal

While the society of the spectacle turns the material life of everyone into a universe of speculation, it further produces isolation of its inhabitants. The fact that both *Goddess* and *Midnight* are marked by the theme of isolation is worth noting. In the film, Ruansao's total lack of any kin or social network is rather obvious, and the only person that would speak up for her and her son is none other than the conscientious schoolmaster, who has only met her twice, once at her home and the other at the prison. If Ruansao's isolation can be somewhat explained by her profession—although the explanation is twisted with irony because she is alienated by the very commodity society that thrives on her commodification—the isolation and alienation that characters have experienced in *Midnight* are much more problematic, given their privileged social and economic status and the vast network of human connections in the city (which normally ensures a sense of warmth and security in traditional Chinese thinking).

On the one hand, despite the fact that these selected urbanites have the liberty to enjoy all the pleasures and excitements that the modern metropolis can offer, they are alienated from the modern urban environment in the sense that they do not feel completely "at home" within the spectacular society of Shanghai—an alienation somewhat different from the one experienced by the thug Big Zhang in *Goddess*, who is indeed physically alienated from the spectacle that he contemplates. While busily adapting their vision to the ever-changing and ever-illusive external world, these people are constantly haunted by the feelings of uncertainty and ultimate insecurity in their urban experiences. Although this sense of alienation is shared by many of the characters in *Midnight* to a greater or lesser degree, it is best exemplified by the case of Huifang,

Wu Sunfu's younger sister who accompanies Old Mr. Wu from countryside to the city of Shanghai. Country-born and country-bred as an old-fashioned "boudoir maiden," Huifang feels out of place and nervous all the time as she starts her urban life at her brother's private mansion. Every day seems to her a nightmare, and even more so when she is in company of modern city girls like Lin Peishan and Zhang Susu who can mingle and flirt naturally with men. Unable to find someone to share her troubles and unhappiness, Huifang is thus thrown into sheer despair and loneliness. Finally, she decides to put an end to her dreary existence in the city and to go back home to the country, and when this plan of hers is turned down by her brother Wu Sunfu, she can do nothing but shut herself in her own room and resort to *The Supreme Book of Rewards and Punishments* (which Old Mr. Wu has left her) to "alleviate her mental anguish" (487).

On the other hand, the sense of alienation also manifests itself in the relationships between people. In a city where the speculation fever prevails, where everything is weighed in monetary terms (like the number of bankrupt factories, the price of stocks and bonds, and the value of specific information), the resulting "dominance of the intellect over the emotion" (in Simmel's words) further leads to the isolation among its inhabitants. Despite the vast network of human connections in *Midnight*, one should note the highly effective and practical (and almost cold and indifferent) ways these Shanghai urbanites treat each other, be it in the business world or simply at home—they observe with their eyes and respond more with their mind (than with their heart). Friendship is built on financial interests whereas romance is negotiated on monetary terms. Even among family members there is not much love or emotional attachment—between husband and wife, between brothers and sisters, between parents and children. Little wonder that every one may feel isolated and alienated amid the busy crowds in the metropolis. Take Wu Sunfu for example. Despite his competence and resourcefulness, the shrewdness, manipulativeness and cruelty that Wu demonstrates in his dealings with business friends and workers (like swallowing up smaller factories and cracking down on

workers' strikes) marks him an archetypal capitalist villain, whereas at home, the domineering and cold way he treats his wife and his younger siblings makes him almost the "tyrant" of the household. However, when crises of various kinds emerge at the same time—worsening economic and political situation, loss of properties in his ransacked hometown, failures in the stock market, financial difficulties of his newly-merged factories, workers' strikes, and protests from his younger sister—even this seemingly invincible man is overwhelmed by loneliness and helplessness:

> Wu Sun-fu was slumped back in the right-hand corner of the car, his left leg sprawled along the seat beside him as he glanced out of the windows, breathing heavily. Suddenly an unusual sensation came over him: he was one of the captains of industry, ruthless and go-ahead—yet were his prospects really anything more than a mirage—just castles in the air? And what were the people around him but so many blurred, misshapen figures? His progress in industry was just like his present journey—an aimless rush through a blinding mist! (171)

Wu Sunfu's sense of alienation is further exacerbated when he encounters a devastating series of betrayals in his final showdown with Zhao Botao at the stock market. While Wu mortgages his house and his factory, pours in all his available capital and anxiously wait for the outcome, he is first told that his "secret" weapon, the female spy Liu Yuying, is also a double agent for Zhao. He soon learns another "unkindest cut" that even his own broker, Han Mengxiang, isn't reliable either, who simply flees when the chips are down and "sells the pass" to Zhao. With his last hope of victory gone, Wu Sunfu finally collapses at the Exchange, "his eyes staring and his face deathly pale" (517). When brought back home, no sooner has Wu started to regain his senses than he is told that even his own brother-in-law (who knows perfectly Wu's financial situation) has "stabbed" him in the back—continuously buying in while Wu's party is trying all out to hold the price down—another fatal blow that hastens Wu Sunfu's fall in the final fiasco. Out of sheer shock and despair, Wu snatches out a revolver and decides to end his life,

only to find his suicidal plan forestalled by the arrival of the family doctor. The novel ends with Wu's decision to leave Shanghai on the very same day and to take a vacation in Guling with his wife—an act somewhat echoing that of Ruansao in *Goddess* who finally decides to flee the city after experiencing a series of disillusionments.

CONCLUSION

A close analysis of the film *Goddess* and the novel *Midnight* makes it clear that the modern imagery of Shanghai has had considerable impacts on urban perceptions and experiences. Urban spectacles such as Western-style skyscrapers, the constant flow of pedestrians and automobiles, the flashing neon signs and traffic lights, the free-floating sexual images, and all the frenzied activities of financial speculation—which are briefly visualized in *Goddess*, but presented on a more concrete level and a broader scale in *Midnight*—prove to be much more than mere background of Shanghai's cityscape. They are actually quite instrumental in the construction of social practices, public perceptions and private fantasies.

On the one hand, as products of a highly-developed commodity society, these urban spectacles are not just collections of images; rather, in all their specific manifestations (both literal and technologized), they not only epitomize the prevailing model of day-to-day metropolitan life (like driving the newest model of foreign automobiles, or frequenting clubs, dance halls and cinemas), but also contribute to the formation of popular imaginations about the modern city. As configured through these urban images/spectacles, Shanghai emerges simultaneously as a city of "LIGHT, HEAT and POWER" with exhilarating modernity, boundless energy and innumerable opportunities, and as a city where such potential dangers as seduction, speculation, alienation and betrayal run rampant in every corner.

On the other hand, the abundance of visual stimuli in the spectacular metropolis inevitably elevates the human sense of vision to an incomparable height whereas in Guy Debord's words, sight is "the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived" (17). The prevalence of spectacles reinforces the overwhelming sense of phantasmagoria that permeates the entire metropolis, for the city of Shanghai takes on an essentially

illusive form, configured through one spectacle and then another. To adopt Pike's formulation, Shanghai can be seen as "a fragmented and subjective kaleidoscope, constantly shifting in time" (xiii). Under siege by these ever-alluring and ever-illusive spectacles, urbanites in general suffer from a sense of instability and insecurity in their experiences: from fascination and intoxication (Big Zhang and Wu Sunfu), to shock and resentment (Old Mr. Wu and Huifang), to alienation and isolation (Ruansao and Mrs. Wu), to disillusionment and desperation (Wu Sunfu and Ruansao).

If we take a look beyond the narrative level in *Goddess* and *Midnight*, we should also note the impacts of urban images/spectacles on filmic and literary imagination. For one thing, the spectacles that Wu Yonggang and Mao Dun present in their works are not constructed out of pure imagination—they largely originate from the outside world in the sense that they are either reproductions of actual urban spectacles or combinations of artistic invention and real setting. In this light, the comments of Shi Zhicun (a prominent writer among the New Perceptionists in Shanghai) on the specific spectacles that affect "modern" Chinese literature are worth quoting here: "harbors teeming with large steamers, factories reverberating with noise, mines harrowing deep into the earth, dancing floors playing jazz music, sky-scraping department stores, dogfights between air-planes, spacious race courses. . . . Even natural scenery is different from that of earlier periods."[11] Such impacts also prevail in filmic imaginations, as can be seen from the prevalence of urban spectacles as background settings in Shanghai films made at the time such as *Goddess.*

In addition, despite their differences as two different social discourses—the visual medium of film and written literature, both *Goddess* and *Midnight* are marked by the dominance of vision and the power of visuality in their configurations of Shanghai. As discussed earlier, given filmmakers' special emphasis on images rather than on words, *Goddess*'s rather unique visual structure takes the role of the verbal text and makes the audience learn to see the film through the visual images on the screen (like the cityscape,

the alley compound, the human face with various emotions, body gestures and clothes), which "make up the rich significations of time, place, gender and class identity, and human social interactions" (Chow, 25). It is exactly through these filmic images that the spectacular society of Shanghai is "reproduced" on the movie screen. For *Midnight*, the dominance of the visual imagery in the text is equally remarkable, if not more. By portraying the confrontations of selected characters and urban spectacles, and more important, by focusing on the psychological and behavioral changes of these people effected by these spectacles, Mao Dun captures not only the contemporaneity of his novel but also the impact of "the time" on individuals (with a wide spectrum of human emotions like shock, overexcitement, fascination, intoxication, despair and depression).

Moreover, what further calls our attention in this comparative study of *Goddess* and *Midnight* is the visual impacts of the new medium of film (as part of the society of the spectacle) on written literature, as can be seen from the traces of filmic language in *Midnight*—even though the novel itself has nothing to do with film, nor does the writer has any background in filmmaking. Although a detailed study of the linkages and mediations between the visual medium of film and modern Chinese literature is far beyond the scope of this study, Rey Chow's observations on the transforming power of technologized visuality are relevant here:

> In the twentieth century it is the power of visuality brought along by new media such as photography and film that transforms the ways writers think of literature itself. Whether conscious or unconscious, the new literary forms are, arguably, thoroughly mediatized, containing within them a response to technologized visuality. Like other traditional modes of discourses, including visual ones such as painting and architecture, literature must devise ways of dealing with the emerging predominance of visuality as a general technology of communication. (16)

In this light, even though we cannot know for sure whether the experiment with filmic language in *Midnight* is a conscious or unconscious effort on Mao Dun's part, the impacts of the film medium on this novel are quite possible. First of all, Mao Dun's preoccupation with "objective-observation-as-social-analysis" gives his literary representation of urban images/spectacles a realistic quality comparable to the crude realism found in the early films (which were largely based on one-to-one correspondence with reality). Take the opening sequence of *Midnight* for example. Quite similar to the typical diegetic device in Chinese films at the time, Shanghai of the novel is also evoked by the spectacular view of the Bund and Suzhou River—the towering skyscrapers, the rushing traffic, the flashing neon signs, etc. More notably, Mao Dun's language here is reminiscent of cinematic technique, like cutting, editing and focalization. The scene begins with a lowering of the narrator's gaze, from the setting sun in the distance to the nearer Suzhou River and then to the boats in the river, like a camera's tilt-down during one continuous shot. As the view comes closer and closer to the narrator's standpoint, the imagery camera now tilts up to view the framework of Garden Bridge and the overhead tram cable. Standing on the bridge, the narrator looks east and then west—as if in a continuous sweep of a camera, the Pudong (Pootung) District and the International Settlement are presented to the reader, with the shot finally focalized on the neon sign which carries the English words in original: "LIGHT, HEAT and POWER." After these establishing shots of the setting, another shot is cut in, showing three 1930-model Citroens flashing over the bridge, turning westward and heading straight along the North Suzhou Road. Only then does the storyline begin. Interestingly, Mao Dun not only employs cinematic cutting and editing in his literary representations of urban spectacles, but also applies similar skills in his panoramic narrative. Although *Midnight* in general follows the traditional linear progression, given the writer's "urge for comprehensiveness" (in Marston Anderson's words) and the numerous subplots that run through the novel (such as the peasants' uprising in the countryside, the workers' strikes,

and the romance of bourgeois youth), one can easily get the sense of montage as Mao Dun jump-cuts from one scene to another. Now that the film medium is also an integrated part of the spectacular society of Shanghai, the above brief analysis of the filmic elements in *Midnight* further bespeaks the overwhelming impacts of visuality (whether literal or technologized) on urban perceptions.

Therefore, while both the film *Goddess* and the novel *Midnight* do succeed in critiquing certain aspects of the spectacular society of Shanghai, the presence of the societal impacts (especially the visual impacts, which are the foci of this thesis) on these two works indicates that they have been affected to a greater or lesser degree by the very society within which they were produced. Furthermore, in their attempts to "reproduce" the metropolitan Shanghai (either on the silver screen or on the printed page), and to portray the social practices and urban perceptions effected by the exigencies of urban images/spectacles, both *Goddess* and *Midnight*, whether directly or indirectly, also participate in one way or another in the construction of the cultural imagery of Shanghai modernity. As we the audience/readers experience the allure of the spectacular metropolis in both works, our awareness of the societal influence on them makes us further beware of the overwhelming effects of the society of spectacle.

NOTES

1. For comments on the noticeable absence of the West from Chinese films of the twenties and thirties, see Jay Leyda, *Dianying*, p. 35. Leyda interprets this absence as "another, possibly deeper expression of a conflict felt so painfully by Chinese that even tokens of it could not find their way into Chinese films." For *Midnight*, the absence of the Western Imperialists, whom Mao Dun identifies as the ultimate villains of modern Chinese history, is equally notable. In Marston Anderson's words, they "are present only as a vague threat at the borders of the narrative." For Anderson's further observation on Mao Dun's failure to give representation to the Western Imperialists, see *The Limits of Realism*, p.147.

2. See Betty Wei, *Shanghai: Crucible of Modern China*, p.123. Wei comments on the attraction of the metropolis to Chinese: "From almost every province of China Shanghai attracted men and women, those who wanted to become rich overnight as well as those who sought a new chance in life. Kiangsu (Jiangsu), Chekiang (Zhejiang), Kwangtung (Guangdong), and Anhui especially saw hundreds of thousands of their people emigrate to Shanghai. Out of 620,421 Chinese living in the International Settlement in 1915, more than 75 percent. . . had hailed from these four provinces."

3. Leo Lee, *Shanghai Modern*, pp.43-81. Lee provides a comprehensive study of the ways in which the urban-based print culture (magazines, journals, textbooks, repositories, pictorials, calendar posters) profoundly changed the semiotics of every day practices at the popular level.

4. Ibid., pp.151-52.

5. Founded in 1930 by Luo Mingyou, the Lianhua Film Company was one of the most prominent films companies in Republican Shanghai. As a highly respected studio, Lianhua staffed its management, writing, directing and acting departments with well-

educated people. Many employees had Western education and a "progressive" outlook. Lianhua's films rejected the highly theatrical and exaggerated acting styles of the new theatre in favor of an emphasis on the cinema's visual potential. Many contemporary observers believed that the emergence of Lianhua ended the prevalence of such genres as martial arts and ghosts and immortals. In this regard, Lianhua initiated a new trend for social films. Between 1930 and 1937, the studio produced ninety-four films, many of which deal with pressing social issues, including *Goddess*. For further reading, see Yingjin Zhang, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film*, pp.10-13.

6. See Harriet Sergeant, *Shanghai: Collision Point of Cultures*, pp.287-291. See also William Rothman, "The Goddess: Reflections on Melodrama East and West," p.41.

7. For a detailed study of the disciplining dynamic of the "true character" and "good girl" standard for movie actresses in the 1930s, see Michael Chang, "The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful," pp.152-55.

8. See "About '*Midnight*'" (Mao Dun, 1939) as Preface to the Chinese edition of *Midnight* brought about in May 1955 by the People's Literature Publishing House, Beijing. The translation was by A. C. Barnes.

9. Ibid., p.6.

10. On May 30, 1925, the students and workers of Shanghai held a demonstration in the International Settlement to protest against the killing of a Chinese worker Gu Zhenghong by the management of a Japanese cotton mill in Shanghai for his part in organizing a strike. The British police in the Settlement opened fire on the demonstrators, inflicting heavy casualties. This atrocity gave rise to a country-wide anti-imperialist movement. See A. C. Barnes's version of *Midnight*, p.83.

11. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, a group of Shanghai writers explored the experience of urban modernity with modern urban themes and experimental literary techniques. This group which had Liu Na'ou, Shi Zhecun and Mu Shiying as its core members, has been generally labeled as the "New Perceptionists." Many critics have traced their works to the influences of French surrealism and Japanese new

perceptionism. For Leo Lee's writing on Shi Zicun, see *Shanghai Modern*, pp.153-89. See also Yingjin Zhang, *The City in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*, pp.154-55.

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