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Silence is Still Golden: Women and the Metropolis in Early Chinese Cinema

Yap Soo Ei

Ji Xing

Nicolai Volland

Yang Lijun

Paul Pickowicz

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Feng Xiaogang’s blockbuster *Aftershock* is making headlines these days, setting new records at the box office in China. We cannot say yet if the excitement is justified—*Aftershock* has only just hit the theaters here in Singapore. It is clear, however, that the current cinema craze in China is not at all a new phenomenon. In fact, new releases on the silver screen created similar sensations in Shanghai as early as eighty years ago. And many of these old films continue even today to fascinate. Films by pioneering Chinese directors of the 1920s and 1930s still dazzle, with their opulent sets, the metropolitan glamour of Shanghai, not to speak of their melodramatic stories of love and distress, passion and agony.

At a workshop held at the National University of Singapore in June and July 2010, directed by Paul Pickowicz and chaired by Yang Lijun and Nicolai Volland, we took a closer look at some of these films, gems of China’s silent film era. Although interest in “Golden Age” Chinese cinema has gradually picked up in recent years, many of these films remain little known, as opposed, for instance, to the works of directors from China’s “fifth” and “sixth” generations. Yet after several days of collective movie-watching and intensive discussion, there is little doubt about the richness of this treasure trove of early Chinese films.

Imagine, for example, the following opening shots: The camera zooms in on the supple thighs of a young woman. A few seconds later, you—the viewer—see her charming smile. She is wearing a simple short sleeved shirt, both arms exposed, and clad in shorts with one of the seams torn. In full view now, you are able to admire her slender body. She is in a playful mood. Such are the opening shots of Sun Yu’s 1931 film *Wild Rose (Ye meigui)*, set in an idyllic countryside. But this dream world will not last; misfortune will soon befall the female protagonist and the man she loves. Painful separation seems inevitable. Will the couple eventually reunite? What will lead them back together? Just a hint (spoiler alert!): they both sign up for a vaguely defined “revolution.”