PHONY PHOENIXES
Comedy, Protest, and Marginality in Postwar Shanghai
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On Friday, July 11, 1947, around nine o’clock in the morning, hundreds of people showed up at the Grand Theatre in Shanghai to attend the preview of the comedy *Jia feng xu huang* (Phony Phoenixes), produced by the Wenhua Film Studio and directed by Huang Zuolin. The film, featuring Shi Hui as a barber and Li Lihua as a charming young woman in search of a husband, had been widely advertised. Invitations had been sent to journalists and local authorities, and preview slides had been shown in movie theaters for several weeks. Given this extended promotional campaign, viewers’ expectations ran high, and disappointment ran deep when it became clear that no one would be able to watch the movie that day: a large group of angry men—hundreds of barbers, as they turned out to be—surrounded the building and formed human chains blocking all entrances. A student who attempted to break through was even injured. The barbers held out till the early afternoon, when they took to the streets nearby and slathered the movie billboards with paint.

The “Phony Phoenixes incident” (*Jia feng xu huang shijian*), as it was later referred to in memoirs and essays on postwar Shanghai cinema, provoked much sensation in the press and sparked a debate that lasted several days, eventually forcing the Wenhua Film Studio to change several scenes. It was also thanks to the protest, of course, that the comedy became an immediate hit, rivaling the box office success of the historical melodrama *Spring River Flows East* that was released in October that year.

One of the rare instances of documented audiences’ reactions to a popular movie, the barbers’ protest provides a unique illustration of the social dynamics that shaped cinema production and reception in 1947 Shanghai. The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize this event in the film culture of the times, detailing the activities of the film-studio, exploring cinema venues and viewing habits, and delineating the social tensions that brought together, in the same dispute, filmmakers, critics, barbers, and representatives of native place associations. By shedding light on this particular incident and uncovering some of the reasons...
why the barbers protested, I hope to further our understanding of the movie-going experience in postwar Shanghai and to speak to the question of “China’s margins” in relation to the difficult issue of cinema audiences in Republican China.

Filmmakers and film critics in Republican China often conflated cinema audiences with the elusive category of “petty urbanites” (xiaoshimin). But this term, initially coined by left-wing writers in the early 1930s to emphasize the supposedly conservative and low-brow tastes of the faceless majority, remains intrinsically vague and internally heterogeneous. According to Perry Link, “the most anyone says is that the term includes clerks, primary school students, small merchants, and others of the so-called ‘petty bourgeoisie.’” Hanchao Lu, who prefers the translation “little urbanites,” writes that this was “a blanket term popularly known and liberally used to refer, often with condescension, to city or town people who were of the middle or lower-middle social ranks. … Xiaoshimin was never precisely defined. It was less clear who should be included in the category than who should be excluded. The elite at the top and the urban poor would never be referred to as xiaoshimin. It was the people who stood in between who were called ‘petty urbanites.’” In her study of the activities of the publisher Zou Taofen, Wen-hsin Yeh follows Link’s definition of “petty urbanites” but identifies a specific subgroup, the “vocational youth” (zhiye qingnian), as the intended readership of Zou Taofen’s periodical Shenghuo Weekly. Vocational youth was an equally heterogeneous category composed of shop clerks and employees of small enterprises who had a few years of schooling under their belt but had not had the opportunity to go to college. In publishing the immensely popular Sheng-huo Weekly, Yeh argues, Zou Taofen helped the vocational youth to “constitute themselves as a new kind of reading audience.” Such popular periodicals created a sense of community among readers, linking personal concerns to national issues and paving the way for the Chinese Communist Party’s appropriation of people’s voices into a unified discourse.

The notion of xiaoshimin continues to be invoked in recent discussions of cinema audiences but it remains problematic—not only because of its widely acknowledged elusiveness, but also because of the diversity of cinema venues in Republican China, which was likely to generate movie-going experiences that varied significantly according to one’s specific social status and background. In this sense, the reception of cinema is hardly comparable to that of the kinds of popular fiction and journalism discussed by Perry Link and Wen-hsin Yeh. Magazines and books were widely circulated and shared—they were readily available even to people who could not afford buying a copy. This very form of almost simultaneous enjoyment of the written word might have helped disseminate norms and beliefs among heterogeneous urban groups. My hypothesis is that, in contrast, up to the late 1940s the movie-going experi-
ence to a certain extent reinforced social distinctions. In postwar Shanghai, a broad range of spectators—including intellectuals and other elites not readily associable with the xiaoshimin—attended different movie theaters scattered across the city and showing very different kinds of films. What was shown in first-run cinemas at a certain moment would become available to the patrons of peripheral, third-run cinemas only after several months. Therefore, while movie-going was a relatively common activity for people from many walks of life, it would generally not bring them together under one roof. Since the Grand was one of the most elegant movie theaters of the city and only showed first-run films, it seems safe to assume that barbers and other members of the lower rungs of the xiaoshimin were not among its most frequent patrons. These experiential dimensions of film-viewing and the unequal conditions in which it took place might have affected the ways a film was received, exacerbating rather than overcoming all sorts of social differences.7

And yet, as I shall detail further down in this chapter, in the late 1940s theaters such as the Grand were actively trying to expand their audiences by promoting themselves as places where people from all walks of life could convene to be enlightened and entertained. As film studios and theaters were opening their doors to less privileged viewers through free matinee tickets and other promotional campaigns, they were inevitably confronted with tensions and resistance regarding the very conditions of this process of inclusion. The Phony Phoenixes incident provides such an instance. It reveals how the strong immigrant component of Shanghai inhabitants—notably referred to as a city of “sojourners”—and its cultural and “ethnic” heterogeneity complicated film reception, precisely at the moment when the lower strata were no longer merely part of the urban cinematic imaginary but were beginning to participate as distinctive spectators in spaces that had generally been beyond their reach.

One of the elements that the barbers found offensive in the film was that one of its main protagonists, a barber played by Shi Hui—pronounced a few words in Subei dialect, which associated barbers with the less privileged immigrants from Subei. As we shall see, while most barbers were immigrants from Yangzhou, a city physically located in northern Jiangsu (Subei), they did not consider themselves as Subei people. By protesting, the barbers attempted to dictate the conditions of their presence in the cinematic imaginary of the city and to acquire a more prominent, if perhaps ephemeral, voice in the media. This involved distinguishing themselves from the lower strata of Subei immigrants, including the itinerant barbers who were not members of any professional association as well as from other sorts of manual workers who came from poorer areas within the region. The barbers’ attempt to “demarginalize” themselves, in short, brings to light the complex social layering within the largely silent masses of Subei immigrants living on the margins of Shanghai urban life.
But before dealing in detail with the social issues motivating the barbers’ protests, I shall discuss the main themes of the comedy and introduce the people involved in the Wenhua Film Studio and the spaces where the protest took place, so as to offer a mapping of the event that, in that hot summer of 1947, took barbers to the cinema and cinema to the streets.

**Phony Phoenixes: A Romantic Comedy in Postwar Shanghai**

Based on a script by Sang Hu, *Phony Phoenixes* is a story of fake identities and mutual cheating, culminating in a double marriage that unites the main couple and two of their friends in the consolatory embrace of laughter and romance. Yang Xiaomao, a.k.a. “San Hao” (Number Three), is the most acclaimed barber in Shanghai in the late 1940s. He has, however, grown weary of his meager income: he would like to change his business, become rich, and drive around in a big car, he confesses one day to one of his clients, general manager Zhang Yijing. But the manager himself is covered in debts due to the collapse of the stock market and replies with a request for help. He urges Yang Xiaomao to respond to a marriage ad, in which a Miss Fan, a young lady recently returned from the United States, is looking for a husband to share the responsibilities of administering a big fortune. Hoping to gain a portion of the woman’s wealth for himself, the manager helps Yang to write a letter, which presents him (Yang Xiaomao) as a rich returned student holding a Ph.D. from Oxford University. A photograph of a glamorous Yang Xiaomao is enough to convince Miss Fan that this candidate is not only rich and cultured but handsome as well. The two meet, and a series of hilarious adventures ensue, because, as the viewer is informed from early on, the woman is not rich at all. She is a single mother (probably a divorcee) with a six-month-old baby to take care of. She has not paid the rent for months, and her landlord has sent the police to urge her to leave the house within two days.

Much of the film is shot in interiors, mostly in the barber shop and in the tastefully furnished apartment of Miss Fan. Miss Fan herself sports a series of fashionable dresses. She has obviously become poor only recently and can still exhibit the remnants of the comfortable life she was accustomed to before separating from her husband. When Yang Xiaomao goes to see her, together with his colleague “Number Seven” who pretends to be his “secretary,” he is truly impressed and in turn attempts to show off. With the money that the general manager has given him, and accompanied by his “secretary,” he takes Miss Fan and her own “secretary” (a friend of hers who has recently divorced) to dine at a fashionable French restaurant. Here Yang Xiaomao knots a napkin around the necks of each of the two women, out of professional habit, as if he were about to do their hair. Then, believing that “à la carte” is the name of a dish, he cheerfully...
orders: “We’ll have an ‘à la carte!’” In the end, the bill is so high that he has to call up the general manager to ask for more money.

Yang Xiaomao/Shi Hui is clearly a stranger to Shanghai international entertainments, especially in comparison with the much more cosmopolitan Miss Fan/Li Lihua. Yang is an attractive man, but he is also meant to appear hopelessly provincial. His incompetence in things foreign is also shown later on, when he receives the women in the manager’s office: pretending that the office is his own, he answers a phone call and stammers a few words of jumbled French and Japanese, so as to show off his international business connections. Such failed attempts at cultural cosmopolitanism, of course, must have been a source of great amusement for those viewers who were familiar with foreign languages and things but were likely to be deemed offensive by barbers.

In any case, for all the ridiculous moments that should have revealed to Yang and Miss Fan that neither of them is what they purport to be, a reciprocal misrecognition keeps the cheating going for quite a long time. Both Yang Xiaomao and Miss Fan are too enchanted by the prospect that the other one is going to solve their respective economic problems to break the chain of mutual deception. Very soon, a wedding date is set, and, as it typically happens, on the very morning of the wedding the truth finally emerges. Miss Fan goes to pawn the engagement ring she has received from Yang in order to pay the rent, and there she sees Yang Xiaomao also entering to the pawnshop with the clothes and shoes that his colleagues have lent him to help him buy his wedding suit. At this point, Miss Fan not only discovers the bitter truth of Yang’s poverty, but also finds out that the engagement ring he had given her is a fake. She therefore resolves that she cannot marry such a poor swindler, and in a state of utter desperation calls up a retired official who had also replied to her marriage ad. The man is rich indeed but extremely old and ugly. In one scene he is seen carrying huge sacks filled with money (a clear reference to the rampant inflation of the time), which he is willing to give her if only she lets him become a father. Eventually, Miss Fan renounces wealth and marries Yang Xiaomao. She joins him in the barber shop, and her divorced friend marries Yang Xiaomao’s colleague.

*Phony Phoenixes* focused on an issue that was widely discussed in the media, namely the difficulties of single women (widows, ex-concubines, as well as divorced women) to support themselves due to the shortage of jobs at the time. For the women in the comedy, marriage is represented as the solution to economic distress, not because they finally find a husband who loves and supports them, but rather because it provides them with the possibility to live and work in a relatively nondegrading environment. More generally, the comedy conveyed a benevolent, if mildly ironic denunciation of decline of honesty in postwar Shanghai and an anxiety about being cheated.9

The theme of hoaxes and swindles was quite common in comedies of the war period such as Yang Jiang’s *Swindle (Nong zhen cheng jia)*, which was staged
in Shanghai in 1943.\textsuperscript{10} Similarly to Yang Jiang’s comedy, \textit{Phony Phoenixes} did not present the issue of cheating in a moralizing tone but rather suggested that particularly harsh circumstances forced everyone to cheat. Lack of sincerity should not simply be condemned: in order to survive, it was necessary to lie. Moreover, authentic feelings and a new life could emerge even from lies. The film thus voiced an ambivalent moral stance and ended on a cheerful note. Its final scene, which showed the two newly formed couples waving goodbye from behind the glass window of the barber shop, conveyed the hope of returning to one’s routine daily work, a perspective that might have seemed tragically remote to many who had lost their livelihood because of war or inflation. This overall conciliatory tone and hopeful mood may well be among the reasons for the comedy’s appeal to the Shanghai public at a time of social disintegration, economic crisis, and raging civil war in the rest of the country.\textsuperscript{11}

Mimicking Hollywood romantic comedies such as Ernst Lubitsch’s \textit{The Shop Around the Corner} (1940), \textit{Phony Phoenixes} provided a playful counterpoint to solemn representations of love, motherhood, and the raising of the future generation characterizing Chinese melodramatic movies since the 1930s. While medium shots prevail, the very few close-ups generally emphasize not so much depth of feeling but rather amazement or surprise and end up having a comic effect.\textsuperscript{12} Even if Miss Fan eventually decides to marry San Hao because she likes him, the reciprocal affection is simultaneously overstated and understated, with emphatic declarations of love immediately slipping into farce.

In Chinese melodramas of the 1930s and of the postwar period, the representation of motherhood often took on allegorical meaning, sometimes alluding to a traditional idea of womanhood that was incompatible with the revolutionary struggle, at other times highlighting the contradiction between new ideas of women’s liberation and a society that was unable to offer women the means to support themselves. Such melodramatic representations suggested that hope lay in the education of the children, and that for mothers themselves, there was often no way out apart from death.\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{Phony Phoenix}, however, the mother-child relationship is mostly a source of comic effect. For instance, when Yang Xiaomao goes to see Miss Fan without warning her in advance, she is holding her baby in her arms, and hastily hides him under the bed. At that point the child starts crying, but Yang is made to believe that it is a doll on the table that is crying. This is yet another proof of Yang Xiaomao’s gullibility and Miss Fan’s feminine resourcefulness, but the shot on the child lying under the bed might also offer an irreverent, if indirect, commentary on melodramatic representations of children.

In sum, drawing from the experience of wartime drama and seeking inspiration from Hollywood comedies, the filmmakers of \textit{Phony Phoenixes} addressed social issues in an indirect, humorous fashion. In particular, the comedy destabilized the melodramatic treatment of romantic love and mother-child relations, which in earlier Chinese films often appeared inextricably connected with the issue of
national salvation. This indirect mode of representing current political and social issues was one of the characteristics that set Wenhua apart from other studios especially in its first two years. And it is to the activities of the Wenhua Film Studio that I now turn, with the aim of providing a fuller picture of the cultural, economic, and social agents involved in the production of *Phony Phoenixes*.

**The Wenhua Film Studio**

The Wenhua film studio was founded in 1946 by Wu Xingzai, who in the late 1930s to early 1940s had comanaged such studios as Lianhua, Hezhong, and Chunming. The only private studio in postwar Shanghai that could rely on constant capital turnover and was able to engage in uninterrupted film production, Wenhua started its production in February 1947 and wasted no time, delivering twelve films in the following two years.\(^\text{14}\)

I have mentioned above the thematic affinities between *Phony Phoenixes* and wartime theater. Several members of the studio, in fact, had strong links with theater, most notably the director Huang Zuolin (1906–1994), who had studied drama at Cambridge University in the early 1930s.\(^\text{15}\) Zuolin had returned to China in 1937, and in the war years worked in Shanghai as theater director and producer, staging several important plays such as Cao Yu’s *Metamorphosis* (*Tuibian*, 1941) and Yang Jiang’s comedy *As You Desire* (*Chen xin ruyi*, 1943).\(^\text{16}\) At that time, Zuolin had set up a troupe called “Hard Work” (sometimes translated as “Bitter Toilers’ Troupe,” *Kugan jutuan*) which counted among its members Shi Hui, Zhang Fa, and several other actors who were then hired by Wenhua when the theater company was disbanded at the end of the war.\(^\text{17}\) Actor Ye Ming, who played Yang Xiaoma’s colleague “Number Seven” in *Phony Phoenixes*, later recalled that several theaters were converted into cinema venues after the war, and therefore work opportunities in theater were scarce. For these actors, to join the Wenhua Film Studio meant making a direct transition from the stage to the silver screen without having had much previous experience of cinema acting.\(^\text{18}\)

The Wenhua Film Studio was housed in the old location of the Lianhua Film Studio at Sanjiao Street in Xujiahui, on the western border of what used to be the French concession. Wenhua shared the compound with the Kunlun studio. All the different phases of film production were taken care of on location, apart from developing and printing of the film copies, which was initially done by the Shanghai Film Developing Cooperative and by the Zhongdian Film Lab.\(^\text{19}\) However, to accelerate the printing process, in mid-1948 a small laboratory was set up in the Wenhua Film Studio itself.\(^\text{20}\) Wenhua employed about 120 people, of which 40 were stable employees. The permanent staff included four actors, while stars such as Li Lihua would be employed on a yearly basis or for specific films.

Already in early 1948 the press celebrated the Wenhua Film Studio’s fast-
paced production and quick rise to success. An article in the April 1948 issue of *Cinema Pictorial* (*Dianying huabao*), for instance, explained that the amazing success of the Wenhua Film Studio was due to the talent and fame of the people involved, effective production planning, and efficient advertisement strategies. Its male actors were led by Shi Hui, Han Fei, and Zhang Fa, and its female stars included the much acclaimed Li Lihua and the popular actress-singer Zhou Xuan. The scripts were authored by such prominent authors as Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang) and playwrights Cao Yu and Sang Hu. Wenhua was so well organized that it managed to produce a film every two months, and roles were assigned well before starting shooting. Before a film came out, advertisement strategies were carefully planned. The billboards of the Wenhua film studio, conceived by the skilled artist Ding Xi, were particularly effective in catching the attention of passersby. In the concluding lines, the article also refers to *Phony Phoenixes* as a potential gold mine for the Wenhua studio: thanks to an article in the American magazine *Life*, the film was going to be distributed in London and possibly also in the United States. If the film was to be shown in all U.S. movie theatres, the article claims, it would earn US$3 million.

The Wenhua Film Studio, with its efficient production and distribution structure and its strong connections with theatre and film critics, was exceptionally well positioned in the cinema world of postwar Shanghai. It is no wonder, therefore, that *Phony Phoenixes* was one the first Chinese films to be shown at the Grand, a first-run theater that had previously specialized in foreign films. A glittering place of entertainment and attractions, the Grand lured different kinds of spectators but also turned many of them away—a physical manifestation of the contradictory popular aspirations of the film industry in republican Shanghai.

### The Grand Theatre

The Grand Theatre, located at 216 West Nanjing Road, was built in 1928 by the Chaozhou entrepreneur Gao Yongqing and named “Da Guangming yingxiyuan” (literally, Grand Light Movie Theater, rendered in English as “Grand Theatre”) by the editor of the *Shenbao* supplement *Ziyou tan* Zhou Shoujuan (1895–1968). The theater occupied two floors and had more than 1,400 seats. The extravagance of its décor, its bright yellow interiors, and the reliefs of female nudes that flanked the stage all contributed to the moviegoers’ experience. Before the show, spectators could watch slide shows in the lounge on the second floor, sip tea in the tearoom, or have a drink at the bar. A “Euro-American style” band of twenty-one musicians, also located on the second floor, accompanied the screening of silent films.

It was at the Grand that the famous protest against Harold Lloyd’s *Welcome Danger* (translated in Chinese as *Bu pa si*) took place on February 21, 1930.
The film dealt with opium smuggling in San Francisco's Chinatown and was perceived as portraying the Chinese protagonists in a degrading way. During an afternoon screening, playwright and Fudan University professor Hong Shen stepped up on the stage and called on the audience to leave the movie theater and demand their money back. The English manager of the Grand pushed Hong Shen off the stage and called the police. Hong Shen was held at the police station for about three hours, but as a result of his action, a press campaign ensued that called for a ban on films that humiliated China and the Chinese. Welcome Danger was soon banned throughout China, and in the following months several newspapers refused to carry advertisements for the Grand. According to recently published memoirs, it was due to this protest that the theater fell on hard times. It closed down in late 1931 and was demolished, but the Hong Kong entrepreneur Lokan (Lu Gen) soon commissioned the Hungarian architect L. E. Hudec to build a new theatre at the same location, which opened in June 1933 under the slightly changed name “Da Guangming da xiyuan” (the English name remained the same).

The new Grand Theatre was even more magnificent than the old. Its floor entirely covered with pure wool carpet, it had more than 1,900 comfortable seats, three large lounges, and three multicolored fountains, the most notable of which was located in a cubic glass construction above the main entrance. Its display of water under the rays of colored lights constantly distracted drivers and caused innumerable traffic accidents, so much so that the Ministry of Works finally had it removed.

At least until the mid-thirties the Grand only screened first-run American movies. In the early 1940s earphones were installed in all seats, through which simultaneous translation from English to Chinese was broadcasted. In the mid-1930s Percy Chu (Chu Bochuan), an executive with the Zhejiang Industrial Bank who had purchased both the Grand and the Cathay, persuaded the American distributors to allow Chinese films to be screened at the Grand but only during weekdays. Yet several sources report that the Grand continued to screen mostly foreign films, and that Phony Phoenixes was the first Chinese film to be shown there since the end of the war, a result that was possible only after long and tough negotiations between Wenhua and the movie theater and that testified to the high quality of the film.

The Grand changed management a few times in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1947 it was part of the Guoguang Corporation, which also managed the Cathay. From the few anecdotes that we have on the fortunes of the Grand in the postwar era, it appears that the management promoted the theater as an open and accessible place that welcomed audiences from diverse social and economic backgrounds. Starting from 1947, for instance, the Grand held matinee shows twice a month, distributing free tickets to military police and wounded soldiers through the Songhu Garrison Headquarters. On the occasion of these screen-
ings, the cinema appointed two military policemen to maintain order, but incidents and small-scale protests happened all the same. For instance, at one of these matinees about ten wounded soldiers holding metal crutches and carrying weapons forced their way into the theatre; the military policemen tried in vain to keep them out but were beaten up by them. A reinforcement of ten policemen was sent in from a police station nearby and arrested the wounded soldiers as they came out of the theater at the end of the screening.28

The protest of the barbers, it seems, was not an isolated episode but rather part of a series of clashes that surrounded the introduction of marginal groups into Shanghai’s more central movie-theaters. The dispute can be related to several previous episodes of popular protest against media representation of social or ethnic groups, and yet it went beyond them both in scale and effect.

The Grand Besieged

Weeks before Phony Phoenixes came out, there had been some contacts between Wenhua and representatives of barbers’ professional organizations. It is unclear whether it was the film studio that initiated these contacts, but it is very likely that its management showed the film to the barbers before the official preview at the Grand.29 Certainly the barbers’ representatives knew of the film well before the date of its opening, and they did not appreciate what they saw or heard about it. In fact, they warned Wenhua that if the film was screened without their approval, they would enter the movie theater and destroy all the seats. The film studio, however, decided to go ahead with the preview, promising the Grand to pay for the damage should any seat be ruined.30 Since Wenhua’s managers had already started advertising, they had no intention of postponing the show. Billboards with “true-to-life” portraits of Shi Hui and Li Lihua had been painted and posted at the corner of Nanjing and Chengdu Road,31 invitations to the first preview had been sent out, announcements were published in the press, and stills from the film, accompanied by the text “soon in this cinema,” were shown in the Grand. In addition, neon lights flashing the title Phony Phoenixes and the names of the studio and the actors were mounted on the façade and in the hallway of the Grand.32

On the morning of July 11, 1947, hundreds of people showed up at the gates of the Grand. For a moment, it seemed that what the filmmakers and the management of the movie theatre had hoped for, namely that this comedy would bring together “people from all walks of life,” was about to come true.33 But it soon became clear that the theater was besieged by angry barbers, whose picket lines, four men deep, blocked all the gates.34 The manager of the Grand immediately sent a telegram to the Bureau of Social Affairs (Shehuiju), an organ routinely involved in the mediation of labor conflicts. The bureau ordered the screening canceled, and signs announcing that “Negotiations are in progress, the preview is cancelled”
were hung outside. Around noon, the police arrived and scattered the crowd, but by that point, some of the barbers had already taken to the streets and smeared the faces of Li Lihua and Shi Hui on the billboards with white, red, and blue paint. Under the names of the actors, turtles were painted in red. The Zhongyang Daily also reported that barbers wrote on the posters the sentence “× tui qiangu.” The author of the article claimed that he did not know what the × stood for, but it could be “gou” (dog), and the sentence could mean “lackeys forever,” possibly an allusion to the fact that Li Lihua had acted in pro-Japanese propaganda films produced by the Huaying Studio during the Sino-Japanese War.

In the following weeks, the barbers’ organizations and the film studio held separate press conferences and meetings with associations and groups that could help them strengthen their respective positions. On July 19, the Barbers Trade Guild and the Professional Union held a joint press conference on the ninth floor of the Jinmen Hotel, during which they distributed an issue of the Guild Journal listing the nine scenes which, in their opinion, were offensive and ought to be cut. One of the incriminating scenes was when Yang Xiaomao, the main character, said “guai guai” (cute) with a Subei accent. Others showed Yang putting his hands on a woman customer’s shoulders, a gesture that was considered “indecent and obscene,” and then borrowing money, clothes, and shoes from his colleagues, which suggested that barbers were poor and lacked dignity. Another scene that was criticized showed how Yang sharpened his razor on his necktie (instead of the usual leather strop), apparently trying to commit suicide after Miss Fan had refused to marry him. Barbers claimed that such depiction was not only offensive to their profession but also a threat to social order.

The chairman of the Yangzhou Native Place Association (Yangzhou tongxiang hui), Jiao Dingkai, intervened in the press conference declaring that “it is intolerable that the film with its ugly representation humiliates the category of the barbers and even uses words in Subei dialect.” The joint statement of the Yangzhou Native Place Association and the two trade organizations (i.e., the Barbers Trade Guild and the Professional Union) claimed that it was exactly because cinema was such an effective tool of social education that it offended their profession. A film like Phony Phoenixes, they argued, would have an enormous impact on society at large, leading national and possibly even international audiences to look down on them. In this statement, the barbers’ representatives positioned themselves as supporters of state educational policies and guardians of public mores, and criticized the film studio for failing to do the same. Since the state was promoting the use of a standardized national language (guoyu), they claimed, film studios should follow suit instead of fishing for cheap laughs by using Subei dialect. Finally, they found faults with the film in comparison with other narrative and dramatic genres. Fiction and opera, they went on to explain, extol the good and condemn the vicious. Even though they might include episodes of banditry and debauchery, in the end the villains are punished and the virtuous glorified.
barber in *Phony Phoenixes*, by contrast, was not sufficiently heroic or virtuous. He showed little moral decency in act or speech and even tried to use his professional tools to commit suicide. In short, the barbers were making quite a strong aesthetic statement, claiming that the filmic representation of Yang Xiaomao lacked literary imagination: it failed to elevate him above imperfect humanity and did not manage to transcend the contingencies of daily life.

The *Phony Phoenixes* standoff lasted for several weeks. For all its rhetoric of inclusiveness, on July 22 Wenhua had to resort to a small private “closed-door” preview at the Guanghua Movie Theater, to which only film critics and journalists were invited and were asked for advice on how to change the film. That morning, the barbers’ organization appealed to the Bureau of Social Affairs demanding the cancellation of this preview as well. When the bureau declared that the matter was outside its competence, about five hundred barbers went to picket the Guanghua. Eventually they came to an agreement with delegates from the Journalists’ Association and the police, and the preview took place as planned.

**In the Media: Too Touchy?**

While the press was generally mildly sympathetic to the barbers, well-known intellectuals and foreign language media criticized their reaction. The *North China Daily News*, an English language newspaper, published a foreign resident’s letter to the editor, which accused the barbers of being “touchy” and narrow-minded: did they not know *The Marriage of Figaro*? If only they did, they would realize that barbers were often the protagonists of opera pieces, which in fact endeared them to the public. An article in the Chinese language *Zhongyang Daily* reported that a bystander had commented that “Such things did not happen in the past. From now on it will only be possible to make films about cats and dogs”—a casual remark that revealed a problematic tension between people’s desire to control the ways they were portrayed in the media, the desire of filmmakers to make a successful comedy, and censorship. Several playwrights, including Cao Yu and Ouyang Yuqian intervened in defense of the film. For instance, Li Jianwu, a well-known playwright and theater critic who had previously worked with Huang Zuolin, claimed that the film was sympathetic to barbers who made a living by working honestly. The people that the film really satirized, instead, were the manager who had lost all his money in the stock market, and the wealthy old official who had proposed to Miss Fan. In any case, Li Jianwu argued, the whole dispute derived from a misunderstanding of the aims of comedy as a form of art. When viewing a comedy, the public was expected to be detached, not to identify with the characters. Li Jianwu exhorted his readers to be broadminded and liberal enough to laugh about themselves and their weaknesses. Bringing in Aristophanes and ancient Greek to support his claims, he pointed out that the genre of the comedy ideally poked fun at everyone, and therefore its existence was a true sign of democracy.
The well-known playwright Hong Shen, who had started the protest against the American film *Welcome Danger* right there at the Grand seventeen years before, also wrote in defense of the filmmakers. Hong Shen admitted that he had not seen the film. Judging from the script, he conceded that there might be a couple of shots that were truly offensive and needed to be cut. However, all artistic works aimed at educating by means of social criticism, and for criticism to be effective, invention was necessary. At the same time, he reminded readers that it was a great achievement of modern art that common people had finally gotten on center stage, replacing the emperors and nobles of the past. He then explained that comedy was based on the principles of “simplification” and “exaggeration” (in English in the text, which is otherwise in Chinese), and that *Phony Phoenixes* was not a satire of the barbers but of the falsity of Shanghai life. Hong Shen compared the barbers’ conditions depicted in the movie with the much harsher life of the people in China’s interior and concluded that the barbers were not represented as poor or lacking in personal dignity. Rather, the film reminded them that, under the present circumstances, it was a great privilege that they could support themselves by means of an “ordinary profession.”

In sum, such intellectuals as Hong Shen and Li Jianwu, who were both close friends of the filmmakers, defended the film by claiming that it was a humorous representation not of the barbers in particular but of the economic difficulties of Shanghai inhabitants in general. Both critics articulated their claims by mobilizing “cosmopolitan” cultural affiliations: Li Jianwu mentioned Aristophanes and Greek comedy and Hong Shen used English words in the text. In doing so, they implicitly reinforced the point that barbers had found so offensive in the comedy: that they were provincial and unrefined. Not only had barbers no notion of propriety and good manners, as shown by the comedy, but they also did not understand the international/universal artistic form of comedy itself. With memories of wartime censorship all too fresh in mind, these critics had every reason to see the dispute as yet another threat to artistic autonomy. However, claims to artistic license could not be easily accepted by the people who were the object of representation. The “truthfulness” or “realism” of filmic representation was, after all, an important aspect of the popular discourse on film aimed to attract large numbers of viewers to the movie theaters. How could the barbers believe that the film was not really about them?

### A Question of Accent: The “Ethnic” Factor in Film Reception

While the press of the time largely depicted the *Phony Phoenixes* events as a struggle concerning the barbers’ “professional dignity,” the protest had much to do with their geographical origin, their relative socio-economic marginality, and general prejudices and conflicts among different social and “ethnic” groups in postwar Shanghai.
Most barbers in Shanghai came from the Yangzhou region, immediately north of the Yangzi River. Indeed, as mentioned above, the Yangzhou Native Place Association joined the barbers’ professional organizations to organize the protests against the Wenhua Studio.46

Immigrants from the area north of the Yangzi—including those from Yangzhou—were generally identified as Subei people, associated in the popular imagination with crime, poverty, and demeaning, low-status work. As recalled by the actor Ye Ming, “at that time, most of the people involved in the barbers’ trade in Shanghai were natives of Subei who had a strong sense of local belonging. Whether society treasured them or not had always been a very sensitive psychological issue. The theme of this film touched on precisely this problem. Film art supposedly takes as its subject the common person, but the barbers focused on the external implications of the professional role of the protagonist.”47

But in fact, people from Yangzhou felt that they did not belong to Subei at all. As one remarked, “Although Yangzhou people are located in Jiangbei [north of the Yangzi], they became ‘Jiangnan-ized’ early on. From the Sui [dynasty], they have represented the whole Jiangnan style. To say that Yangzhou is part of Jiangbei is totally absurd!”48 Although in the eyes of other Shanghai residents Yangzhou was part of Subei, people from Yangzhou considered their hometown as superior to the rest of the region. Indeed, while most Subei people were usually employed as coolies and night soil haulers, Yangzhou natives were relatively better off, and were mostly employed as barbers, bathhouse pedicurists, and cooks.49

The barber Yang Xiaomao was depicted as an occasional speaker of Subei dialect. Not only was he shown borrowing clothes and shoes, which suggested that he was poor; he also lacked urbanity and refined manners and could boast no knowledge of foreign things. The film thus associated barbers with a social group that the barbers themselves considered inferior to their own. Once they had come into public view through the powerful medium of cinema, barbers wanted to make sure that viewers would not get the wrong idea about their group as a whole. They had to draw a clear line between themselves and the underprivileged category of Subeiren, and, interestingly, they did so by adopting the rhetoric of the state. By arguing against the use of Subei dialect in Phony Phoenixes, they positioned themselves as promoters of the national language; by complaining about the comedy’s failure to take a clear moral stance, they represented themselves as guardians of the national mores and promoters of a healthy cinema.

In sum, by protesting against Phony Phoenixes, barbers aimed not only to assert their professional dignity but also to affirm their identity as distinct from Subei people and to reclaim a position that was at least one rung above the lowest on the social ladder. While the press portrayed the protest as an issue of professional identity, in fact, class, profession, and ethnicity were
practically inseparable in 1940s Shanghai. The film thus offered the barbers a pretext to redefine themselves as a specialized professional group distinct from the Subeiren and to claim a better place and role in the national space.

**Toward a Resolution**

The *Phony Phoenixes* dispute went up to the Movie Censorship Office of the Ministry of the Interior (*Neizhengbu dianying jianchachu*), which decreed that the filmmakers had not broken any law and were not required to modify the film. However, on July 24 the Bureau of Social Affairs stipulated that three scenes had to be cut, namely the sequence in which the barber put his hands on the woman customer’s shoulder, the sharpening of the razor on the tie before the attempted suicide, and Number Seven eating at the restaurant in his undershirt. When representatives of the barbers insisted on their nine points, the head of the bureau provided detailed explanations why these were not considered as offences. On the question of Subei accent, for instance, he claimed that Subei was a local language like any other and therefore could not be considered an insult. The head of the bureau also met with Huang Zuolin and other representatives of the film studio, who agreed to implement the three requested changes. The Bureau of Social Affairs had an important role in mediating the dispute. On the one hand, it admonished the barbers that if they did not comply with the agreement, “they would most likely lose the sympathy of society (*shehui de tongqing*),” while on the other, it requested that the filmmakers add words of praise for the barbers’ hard working spirit at the end of the closing credits.

The Wenhua Studio could not but comply with the demands of the Bureau of Social Affairs and accepted all three of its requests to modify the film. This was the conclusion of the *Phony Phoenixes* dispute, which lasted little more than two weeks in that hot summer of 1947 but greatly contributed to the film’s box office success. As the American pictorial *Life* wrote in October that year, this “comedy about an amorous barber [broke] records in Shanghai.”

**Epilogue: Out of Shanghai, Out of the Margins?**

In other Chinese cities *Phony Phoenixes* was also met first by barbers’ protests and then by growing numbers of curious audiences. The Shanghai barbers’ associations had sent telegrams and letters to their sister organizations in Nanjing, Tianjin, and other cities all over the country, calling on them to protest against the film. In Tianjin, the Hua'an Movie Theater invited a few inspectors from the Nationalist government’s garrison headquarters to a free private screening, in the hope to obtain their protection in case rebellious barbers would show up on the opening day.
But this did not help much. On the day before the opening, several barbers from the five largest barber shops in town, apparently incited by the local guild, started picketing the movie theater. After discussions with the police, the barbers sent five representatives who demanded to be invited to “inspect the film” before any ticket could be sold. The movie theatre agreed, but reportedly the barbers stood up and started protesting when they were only half way through the show, going up to the stage and even attempting to tear down the silver screen. Eventually the Tianjin barbers were pressured by local authorities and public opinion to come to a compromise. News of their protest quickly spread in the city, attracting large crowds eager to watch the movie that was creating such uproar all over the country. 54

Overall, the barbers’ protest functioned as an effective advertisement campaign for the film. Wenhua had to issue a much larger quantity of prints than they had expected, raising the number from an initial eight to seventeen. This created problems on how to arrange distribution on such a large scale. For some time the actor Ye Ming would fly to such cities as Hankou and Changsha to bring the prints in person, but very soon the film company established distribution agencies to deal with local theatres in the major cities of the north and the interior. 55

To conclude, the Phony Phoenixes dispute was one of the very few instances in which urban migrants came out of the back alleys “beyond the neon lights” and sought to control their representation in the media and find a voice in the national arena. Unlike Chinese migrant communities outside of China (see Ong’s and Barrett’s chapters), whose actions were discursively justified (if not motivated) by identification with a specific regional locality, in this case internal migrants who found themselves in a disadvantaged position could not find solutions by claiming to have an exclusive bond with their hometowns. Instead, they identified themselves with the national public discourse of morality and education and established a web of city-to-city relations that were based more on professional identity than on birthplace. By staging their protest as a defense of their professional dignity, rather than as a fight against regional stereotyping, they implicitly acknowledged that being from a place that was “too close” to Subei could not be publicly transformed into a source of pride.

The Phony Phoenixes incident offers rare documentation of film reception in China, illustrating how a film that was meant to promote social reconciliation ended up reinforcing social distinctions. The barbers used the movie-theatre as a venue to assert their identity as a group that was not to be conflated with the poorer migrant workers from Subei. In the process of becoming cinema audiences, they called attention to the multiple layers of marginality in postwar Shanghai. Many of the barbers acted as audiences without having actually seen the film they criticized, which reminds us of the variety of modes of reception that may supplement—and sometimes even disrupt and displace—the film-viewing experience itself. After those few weeks of protest some of the barbers probably all but forgot about the film and never went to see it. But many did, and perhaps enjoyed seeing charming
Shi Hui playing one of them on screen, even though he was not as morally upright and refined as they might have liked to imagine themselves to be.

NOTES

*An earlier version of sections of this essay was published in Italian as “Jia feng xu huang e la rivolta dei barbieri di Shanghai” [Jia feng xu huang and the Shanghai barbers’ revolt], in M. Scarpari and T. Lippiello, eds., Caro Maestro … Scritti in onore di Lionello Lanciotti per l’ottantesimo compleanno (Venezia, Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina, 2004), 655–66. I thank Libreria Editrice Cafoscarina for permitting me to draw on this article.


7. These observations are inspired by a conversation I had with Paul Pickowicz in San Diego, June 2007. For a detailed description of the Shanghai “class-based exhibition system” see Poshek Fu, Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), pp. 33–38. The social composition of early cinema audiences remains one of the most elusive issues in film studies of China as elsewhere. For interesting points of comparison see Miriam Hansen, Babel and Babylon. Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), and Jacqueline Stewart, Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

8. In fact, Yang Xiaomao and his colleagues serve both male and female clients, so strictly speaking they should be called “hairdressers” or “hairstylists.”
9. See the review “Phony Phoenixes” in *Cinema of Two Cities: Hong Kong-Shanghai* (Hong Kong: Eighteen Annual Hong Kong International Film Festival, 1994), 121.


13. See for example, *Shennü* [Goddess] (1934), *Xin nüxing* [New women] (1935), and *Liren xing* [Women side by side] (1949), which feature quite similar types of “vanishing women,” i.e., women who have to disappear for the sake of the future generation. For a recent theoretical elaboration of the trope of the “vanishing woman” in visual media and cinema, see Karen Beckman, *Vanishing Women: Magic, Film, and Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).


15. Huang Zuolin often appeared simply as “Zuolin” in closing credits. *Phony Phoenixes* was his first film. On this occasion, he probably worked very closely with the scriptwriter and director Sang Hu. Sang Hu was the director of notable Wenhua productions such as *Taitai wansui* [Long live the wife] (1947) and *Aile zhongnian* [The joys and sorrows of middle age] (1949).


20. Ye Ming, 31. Ye Ming also reports that when Shi Hui’s yearly contract expired in 1948, he asked the manager Wu Xingzai to be given the opportunity to direct his own films.

21. Some episodes in the private life of these actors, such as the love story between Shi Hui and Zhou Xuan, also attracted the audience’s sympathy.


23. Until 1945 this stretch of Nanjing Road was called Jing’ansi Street. Wu Hehu, “Da
Guangming yingxiyuan yishi gouchen” [Lost and found anecdotes on the Grand Theatre], *Shanghai dianying shiliao* 5 (December 1994): 106.


28. Wu Hehu. According to Zhiwei Xiao, “incidents involving unruly soldiers were so frequent that the military police began to patrol the city streets—with a particular focus on the movie theatres, which were viewed as “trouble-spots.” These incidents reflected “the general collapse of law and order in postwar Shanghai.” Zhiwei Xiao, “Movie House Etiquette Reform in Early-Twentieth-Century China,” *Modern China* 32.4 (October 2006): 530.

29. An article published in 1988 states that a preview for the barbers was held on June 13. Yu Zhi, “Dui ‘Jia feng xu huang shipian shi fengbo’ yi wen de bu yi” [An addendum to the article “The storm around the preview of *Phony Phoenixes*”], *Dazhong dianying*, (November 1988), 25. According to Paul Pickowicz, “films were often shown privately and informally to small interest groups (especially with politically sensitive films) for preliminary feedback. Minor changes could be easily made to the film afterward.” Quoted in Lu Liu, “Sorrow after the Honeymoon: The Controversy over Domesticity in Late Republican China,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 13.1 (Spring 2001): 1.

30. Shen Nong (pseud.), “Jia feng xu huang fengbo shimo” [The whole story of the *Phony Phoenixes* storm], *Shanghai dianying shiliao* 1 (October 1992): 71-74. Shen Nong specifies that two barbers’ organizations, the Lifaye tongye gonghui (Barbers trade guild) and the Zhiye gonghui [Professional union] led the protest.

31. Wenhu rented an advertisement space on the billboard in front of the Xianlesi dancehall for one liang of gold a month. Some sources report that the Wenhu posters were painted by the famous painter Zhao Xikui (1903–1984), and that they were generally lit up till midnight. See Shen Nong, 71. See also Ma Jingyuan, 60.

32. Neon lights were installed well in advance of the film opening and would initially run the text “This theatre is not currently showing.” This would then be changed into “This theatre is currently showing … ” The neon lights were kept for the entire period in which the film was shown; they would be then pulled down and used at second-run cinemas. See Ma Jingyuan, 60.


34. *Shenbao* (July 12, 1947) reported that more than 1,000 viewers gathered outside the Grand, 800 of whom were barbers. “Lifashi fengsuo da guangming: Li Lihua Shi Hui ban guilian” [Barbers blockade the Grand: Li Lihua and Shi Hui made up as monsters], *Shenbao* (July 12, 1947). See also Ye Ming, 33, and Shen Nong, 72.

35. “Lifashi fengsuo da guangming.” Jeffrey Wasserstrom has argued that the turtle, meaning “cuckold” or “bastard,” was a recurrent image used by students in patriotic demonstrations to insult those who collaborated with foreigners or bought foreign goods. See...


37. “Li Lihua shi zenyang chengming de?” [How did Li Lihua become famous?]. *Dianying* 8 (June 1, 1947): 14–15.

38. Throughout the film the barbers speak standard mandarin. On only two occasions do Yang Xiaomao and his colleague Number Seven pronounce a couple of words with an exaggerated local accent. I thank Ling Zhang for bringing these instances to my attention.

39. “Jia feng xu huang jiufen shehuiju jinri tiaojie” [The Bureau of Social Affairs intervenes today to mediate in the *Phony Phoenixes* dispute], *Shenbao* (July 14, 1947). The other scenes the barbers criticized were the following. (1) Yang Xiaomao tells manager Zhang that his wife believes that he (manager Zhang himself) has a lover. (2) When manager Zhang lends the fake ring to the barber, he says: “The ring is fake on a barber’s hand, but it is real on a manager’s hand.” (3) Barbers in the film are called “lifajiang,” but according to the barbers themselves they should be called by the more respectful term of “lifashi,” i.e., “master barber.” (4) When Yang Xiaomao goes to visit Miss Fan, he puts the cigarette he is smoking behind his ear, which is probably a reminder of his professional habits of keeping a comb or other tools behind his ears. (5) When the protagonists go to the French restaurant, Yang Xiaomao’s colleague Number Seven takes his jacket off, showing that he is only wearing an undershirt. The reports in the press of the time only list three or four of these scenes. The entire list can be found in Yu Zhi, “Dui ‘Jia feng xu huang shi fengbo’ yi wen de bu yi” [An addendum to the article “The storm around the preview of *Phony Phoenixes*”], *Dazhong dianying* (November 1988), 25.

40. Shen Nong, 72; Ye Ming, 33. The native place association that intervened in the dispute was in fact called “Native Place Association of the Seven Counties of Yangzhou” [Yangshu qi xian tongxiang hui]. Its members included migrants from Yangzhou and surroundings who were mostly employed in the service sector. In 1946 the association counted 2,784 members, but it later grew to more than 10,000. The Chairman Jiao Dingkai came from the town of Jiangdu, some ten miles northeast of Yangzhou. He was an accountant and held a public school degree. For details, see Guo Xuyin, *Lao Shanghai de tongxiang tuanti* [Native place organizations in old Shanghai] (Shanghai: Wenhui chubanshe, 2003), 775–840.

41. Shen Nong, 76.


43. “Titou siwu baowei ‘Da guangming’.”


46. “Jia feng xu huang jiufen shehuiju jinri tiaojie.”

47. Ye Ming.

49. Ibid., 85.

50. See also Elizabeth J. Perry, Shanghai on Strike: The Politics of Chinese Labor (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), and Bryna Goodman, Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai 1853–1937 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).


52. Shen Nong, 78–79. “Jia feng xu huang jiufeng jiejue” [The Phony Phoenixes dispute is settled], Zhongyang ribao (July 27, 1947). The scene in which Yang Xiaomao says “guai guai” with a Subei accent was also cut out (at least, it is not in the extant version of the film), but reports of the time do not mention it.


55. Ye Ming, 64.
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