

LIU NA'OU: THE FATE OF "MIDDLING MODERNITY" AND THE GLOBAL PURE FILM MOVEMENT IN REPUBLICAN-ERA SHANGHAI

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The "Taiwanese Dandy" Liu Na'ou (1905–40) is a legendary figure in the world of Chinese cultural studies for his historic role in introducing avant-garde neo-sensationalist literature to China and leading the anti-leftist movement "Soft Film," based on Western modernist film theory of the 1920s–1930s. Like so many of the corresponding figures in Paris or Berlin, he reveled in a cosmopolitan drive to advance formalism and subjectivity in the arts, but unlike them, he was severely punished: assassinated for allegedly collaborating with the Japanese and then condemned in history for his views.

Liu, though strongly influenced intellectually by the avant-garde, was primarily interested in applying modernist film theory to mainstream commercial films and dabbled in the Shanghai film industry as a producer, director, and script writer. More importantly, he used modernist ideologies to promote a form of liberal cosmopolitan nationalism in China through entertainment films that supported first the pacifist policies of the Kuomintang (KMT) government and later the collaborationist regime that followed the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45). Liu was instrumental in reorganizing the Shanghai film industry under Japanese rule and edited the collaborationist government's newspaper of the time, *Guomin xinwen* (*National Subjects Newspaper*). The ensuing stigma of being seen as China's quintessential wartime traitor has transformed both Liu and his works into an enigma that remains difficult to study to this day in China, where the wartime era continues to shape national discourse.

In 2001, a collection of thirty-three film essays by Liu Na'ou was published in an anthology of his writings, revealing for the first time the presence of modernist film theory in 1920s–1930s China.¹ In his writing, Liu consistently put forth the same arguments of film-as-art that preoccupied early Western film theorists in their efforts to dispel prejudices that

condemned the new visual mass medium to the realm of cheap entertainment and a mere reproduction of reality. In his dedication to translating and introducing foreign ideas, with the goal of advancing medium-specific techniques to create a new visual language distinct from older forms of art, Liu saw himself as part of a global campaign for Pure Film (*cuncai dianying*). The vibrant international network of cine-clubs, art-house theaters, and, most of all, printed materials that made such an aesthetic campaign possible is known to have included Japan, but little has been known about the key role played by Liu Na'ou in extending its reach from Japan into China.²

Prior to this anthology, Liu had been shrouded in mystery and taboo for six decades. In the Maoist narrative that established mainstream Chinese film historiography, Liu Na'ou is painted as the reactionary enemy of the early communists who struggled to promote national salvation and anti-imperialism through film.³ His assassination led his earlier writings on film form and aesthetics to be associated with moral decadence and treason—and to be deemed unworthy of scholarly attention in postliberation China. Research that followed the publication of the anthology has done much to revise the politicized reading of his work.

Recent groundbreaking studies by Bao Weihong and Victor Fan illuminate the connection between Liu's writings and modernist film theory in the West, but since they focus on the theoretical level, they do not explore the characteristics and activities that linked him to a transnational film movement and would have shown his participation in the vibrant film culture and practices of his time.⁴ Recognizing Liu as cultural translator and entrepreneur, rather than as purely a theorist, reveals the important connections between Liu's studies of Japanese modernist writers and their cross-over into film. This shift enables two important discoveries: first, that there was a widespread fascination with the new medium's ability to revolutionize the means of understanding reality; and second, that Liu is the missing link between

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the *Jun'eigageki undō* (the Japanese Pure Film movement) of 1914–23 and the West.⁵ Liu modeled his efforts to improve Chinese film on the successes of the *Jun'eigageki undō* in modernizing filmmaking practices and on its vibrant tradition of research. In so doing, Liu uses Pure Film's fascination with the West and push toward Westernization in order, paradoxically, to improve the standard of local films in order to compete better with Western films both at home and abroad.

Alongside nationalist efforts to improve local film cultures, the Pure Film movement encouraged a shared sense of identity among intellectuals from different parts of the world who felt bound together by their shared experience of modernity. Thanks to advances in transport and communication, they were brought closer together both geographically and culturally. The close connections between members of the Pure Film campaign worldwide are especially salient in terms of their engagement with shared goals, ideas, vocabulary, and references concerning the promise and direction of cinema in their time (all present in Liu's writings).

An appreciation for the full extent of this global discourse and its impact on China can enable an expansion of recent revisionist studies of early film history.⁶ Such contextualization enriches the reading of Liu's works in relation to the international development of filmmaking practices, and, more importantly, to the underlying modernist philosophies that have been obscured by his leadership of the Chinese Soft Film movement, which was sensationally and misleadingly defined by his colleague Huang Jiamo as “ice cream for the eyes and a sofa for the soul.”⁷

In mainstream Chinese film historiography, the Soft Film movement is notorious for its ideological battle against the leftists in what was to become known as “The hard film versus Soft Film debate” of 1933–35.⁸ The “hard” leftists believed that films should be judged by their social value, defined by the “three antis” (anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, and anti-capitalism) while the Soft Film proponents criticized this approach as political propaganda that limited freedom of thought, mirroring a Cold War dichotomy of communism and liberal democracy.⁹ Huang Jiamo's article “Yinxing yingpian yu ruanxing yingpian” (“Hard Film and Soft Film”), which instigated the debate, appeared just twenty days after the vandalism of a leftist studio stronghold by KMT Blue Shirts on November 12, 1933—a correspondence that has led to the conviction that the Soft Film movement was a part of the KMT's “white terror.”¹⁰

Liu Na'ou and his influential arguments about form and subjectivity, borrowed from sophisticated Western modernist film theory, were singled out by the leftists as

their biggest threat. A deeper reading of modernism suggests a radical potential in Liu's promotion of freedom in art and entertainment in the face of a rising didacticism promulgated by emergent leftist propaganda. Liu's cosmopolitan form of nationalism represented the “middling modernity” of Republican-era Shanghai that rejected the “hard” forms of nationalism destined to become the official moral standard during and after the war.¹¹

Pure Film's Entry into China

The Pure Film discourses could have easily traveled into China in the 1920–1930s directly from Europe and America through Shanghai, a booming port and already a major hub of international encounters. Instead, they took the circuitous route that modern Western intellectual trends and ideas often took—through Japan, where many Chinese intellectuals were sent for education around the turn of the twentieth century.¹² The role of Japan in the story of Liu Na'ou and film modernism in China is particularly salient: Liu Na'ou's identity as a Taiwanese and Japanese colonial subject, better versed in Japanese than Chinese, made the Japanese experience of modernity and intellectual discourses particularly relevant for him.

As evidenced by the surviving film books from his library, Liu studied the Pure Film movement and film-as-art through a wealth of Japanese-language publications coming out of Japan's thriving film-scholarship scene.¹³ It is also likely that Liu originally watched important avant-garde films like Dziga Vertov's *Chelovek s kino-apparatom* (*Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929) in the art-house cinemas of Tokyo, since the distribution of noncommercial films is not known to have existed in Shanghai at the time.¹⁴

It was through his personal experience living in Taishō-era Japan in 1922–26 that Liu Na'ou became a devout follower of modernism. Born into a large land-owning family in Taiwan, then under Japanese colonial rule, Liu had been sent to Tokyo, where he studied English at the prestigious Aoyama Gakuin University. During this time, Liu witnessed the monumental changes wrought by rapid Westernization and social and political liberalization in Japan. He became heavily influenced by the vibrant avant-garde scene that emerged from the devastation of the 1923 Kanto earthquake, and identified most with the symbolist Shinkankakuha school's reflection of the dramatic changes, traumas, and shocks of modernity.¹⁵ As he explained in a translator's preface to a collection of Shinkankakuha stories, of all the modern Japanese literary styles, the Shinkankakuha movement best captured the essence of the era through its exploration of the senses, including



Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*.

sight and sound, to understand the world and its emotional demands.¹⁶

Liu Na'ou's reputation for adapting the Japanese *Shinkankakuha* into the Chinese neo-sensationalist school (*xin ganjuepai*) and for translating several Japanese modernist writers, including Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, is a significant factor in identifying the source of his crossover into film.¹⁷ Notably, Tanizaki played a key role in the *Jun'eigageki undō* in the late teens and early 1920s, while the *Shinkankakuha* writer Yasunari Kawabata scripted the one surviving, much-celebrated Japanese avant-garde film, *Kurutta ippēji* (*A Page of Madness*, Teinosuke Kinugasa, 1926). The realization that Liu modeled his activities on the modernists' involvement in both the *Jun'eigageki undō* and cinema is crucial to understanding the traits that define his particular approach to advancing Chinese cinema and culture.

Liu suspected that the depiction of decadence in Japanese capitalist society could reveal how such problems could affect future society and forecast new trends, referencing a common belief in 1920s avant-garde art that human sight is flawed by the fragmentation and shocks of modernity. Accordingly, art's purpose was to reveal truths about reality not visible to the naked eye. Charles Taylor's assertions that modernist filmmakers believed they had an important role to play as a propeller of change, and that artists were venerated as "heroes, visionaries, seers" for their ability to reveal truths about reality that ordinary people were unable to see, helps explain Liu's choice to dedicate his career to the arts.¹⁸

Peng Hsiao-yen's study of Liu's dandyism is pertinent for explaining the political nature of Liu's work. Building on Michel Foucault's definition of a modernist as "a conscious actor, [who] represents and transgresses the age he lives in,"

she argues for the dandy as “a cultural translator [who] transforms the influx and outflow of heterogeneous information through the transcultural site. . . . Unlike the modern girl and boy who float with the trends, the dandy makes this his occupation.”¹⁹ As trendsetters on the frontier, modernists designed their works to affect change and advance a better society.

Liu Na’ou chose to develop his career in China instead of Japan or Taiwan in order both to escape the miseries of being a second-class Japanese citizen and to fulfill an ideal of supporting the development of his native China.²⁰ The choice to pursue the modernist avant-garde, with its mark of sophistication, was essential to his endeavor to escape his colonial identity and his cosmopolitan aspirations. Advocating shared sophisticated arguments enabled him to engage with foreign intellectuals on an equal footing; by so doing, Liu challenged the political imbalance of colonizer and colonized.

The *Jun’eigageki undō* members’ successful efforts to modernize the production and exhibition practices of the Japanese film industry according to Western models provided a solution for what Liu saw as lacking in the Chinese film industry. Recognizing the importance of intellectual research and debates over reforms in the industry, Liu was perhaps inspired by the likes of Norimasa Kaeriyama to pioneer a Pure Film movement in China that would function “on a discursive level” and seek “a contemporary recognition of film as a unique and culturally respectable form of art.”²¹

Liu Na’ou’s first known film essay, “Meditations on Film” (1928), provides a good introduction to the core ideas of film as art that permeated his work up until his death in 1940.²² As Liu explains in an editor’s note in *Wugui lieche* (*Trackless Train*), the journal where the article appeared, he hoped to be the first to introduce the idea of film as art to China. Interestingly, *Trackless Train* was not a film journal but primarily a literary one, issued by a publishing house Liu created with a group of close friends and financed entirely with his personal funds. It aimed to introduce cutting-edge ideas and works from Japan and the West, and provided a place for the young writers to publish their writings, notably becoming the launchpad for erotic neo-sensationalist stories.

The first section of “Meditations on Film” is titled, not surprisingly, “Film and Art” and opens rhetorically: “Is film an art?” Liu echoes early Western film theorists in extolling film as the art of the modern times: “Film’s art is distinct from older forms of art because it is created by several machines and chemicals. It is the revolutionary son of the art world. . . . [W]ithout the aid of machines in the twentieth century, art will be made obsolete.” Liu fervently announced

that the mechanical art was in its cradle stage and rallied readers to “serve its future.”

His second segment, “Film and Poetry,” continues the Pure Film movement’s belief in the revolutionary potential of film, since it exceeds other art forms in capturing the imagination and evokes experiences and sensations by expressing them in a realistic form. His fascination is evident in “Film and Female Beauty,” which praises film for providing a platform to discover and appreciate the beauty of women around the world. With “The Silver Screen’s Gift,” he reaches a level of religious fervor:

Tired from work, I enter the cinema to enjoy one or two hours of devotion. I want to worship, I want to rejoice. The white canvas in front of me encompasses the entire world from the Eastern Hemisphere to the Western Hemisphere, from the outside to the inside—one’s heart—all represented on this white canvas. . . . [The views that the cinema provides] expand one’s mind and put one’s spirit at ease, while giving the eyes too much to consume. One ought not to forget all these endowments of grace by the silver screen.²³

The essay’s subsequent criticisms of Chinese cinema are in sharp contrast to this idolization of Western films and seem to magnify a feeling of shame. Liu describes the “inside of a Chinese cinema hall” as being almost like a madhouse, with people constantly spitting up phlegm, the audience in the front wearing hats that block the screen, men reading the subtitles aloud, noisy chatter, hawkers calling out for business, children clapping, a loud cracking of melon seeds, and “indescribable” music. He jokes that the theater owner still cannot understand why some Chinese are willing to pay three or four times more to watch films in foreign theaters. Whether or not this reflects an elitist attitude, it reasserts his preference for Western fashion and ideas.

In a section devoted to the film *Shanghai yi wunü* (*A Shanghai Taxi Dancer*, Wang Cilong, 1928), Liu elaborates on the crude and vulgar manners of the audience that were also, for him, characteristic of Chinese-made films, and expresses a nationalist concern for the quality of Chinese cinema. Charging that crude, vulgar films were “an insult to all Chinese dignity and should not be lightly forgiven!” he urged the film industry to move out of its immature stage and “win credit for Chinese people on the screen.” This clear connection between artistic quality and “national dignity” motivated people like Liu to want to develop Chinese cinema.

The final section, “Film and Theater,” returns to another important theme in the Pure Film discourse, dating back to early theorists like Münsterberg. Liu asserts: “Film history is

the history of efforts to detach from theater.” It is here that he uses the term “Pure Film” for the first time to identify mainstream directors such as F. W. Murnau and Charlie Chaplin as leading advocates of using film’s own unique properties to tell a story. Liu makes it a point to express the concern of Pure Film directors that the introduction of sound in film would revive the old problem of canned theater and destroy the visual language they had worked arduously to develop during the silent era.

The Culture of Research: Film as Art

An important revelation of Liu’s anthology is that a majority of his writings were dedicated to translating and introducing foreign theories. Pure Film’s emphasis on research (what the Japanese termed *kenkyu*) was intended to elevate the film medium to a respectable art form and distinguish it from crass forms of commercial production practices.²⁴ According to the first American professor of film studies, Victor O. Freeburg, cinema was not by nature an art, but rather was shaped by the belief that it could turn into one with the proper training of producers and consumers.²⁵ Liu, though rooted in the basics of film aesthetics, was inclined toward the avant-garde film theories that appeared in French independent cinema journals and were supported by the rise of cine-clubs and the specialized film lectures and exhibitions of the 1920s.²⁶

Liu’s article “Film Art Theory,” published in the mainstream journal *Dianying zhoubao* (*Film Weekly*), best exemplifies his emphasis on research and his choice to introduce the major film theories circulating within this avant-garde film network.²⁷ His article is an elaboration of an earlier piece, “Russian and French Film Theory,” which served to introduce the French *cinéma pur*, German Absolute Film, Soviet Montage, Vertov’s *Kino-eye*, and subjective film. Liu opens his essay with a message to filmmakers in China to take his discussions about film art seriously. Proclaiming himself a film scholar, he explicitly defines film art as “aiming to represent all of life’s forms and content, while resorting to human emotions but using only one camera and one sound-recording machine.”²⁸

As he reviews the major theories that advance the avant-garde ideas of film as art, Liu is skeptical of the more radical French and German experiments: by removing all vestiges of theater and literature, he worries, their films are completely removed from human life. He cites an article by Paul Romain published in *Cinéa-ciné pour tous* that admires these avant-garde works for their technical skill, but he worries that “theorists can confine themselves to experimental laboratories, but creative artists should not

院戲影登爾卡

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戲影術藝義主漫浪新的錄紀界戲影全破打
作傑一唯平生紐穆家演導大國德
品精演合等士女諾蓋妮珍及林勃奧治喬星明影電

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Drama dealing
with the
Eternal Conflict
of Pure and
Illish Love.

情海波瀾
(出日名原)

此部電影之偉大，自開演以來，即受各界
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An ad for *Sunrise* in the Shanghai newspaper, *Shen bao*.

completely abandon plot”—an element of cinema that Liu describes as an essential life element.²⁹

The final section of the essay therefore makes a case for the literary roots of cinema; however, claiming cinema as the revolutionary child of literature, Liu also warns of the improper use of or overdependence on subtitles. He shows his preference for film without titles, as best exemplified by F. W. Murnau’s skillful utilizations of film form. Like the earlier *Jun’eigageki undō*, Liu looked to the classical Hollywood style emerging at the time. He demonstrates the importance of mastering filmic techniques through a detailed analysis of shots in the Chinese film *Tixiao yinyuan* (*Between Tears and Laughter*, Zhang Shichuan, 1932), finding there a limited use of shots and excessive number of titles. He sharply contrasts its wordiness with the summary of shots in Murnau’s *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927; also known as *Sunrise*), a comparison that he would later publish in “Zhongguo dianying miaoxie de shendu wenti” (“The Deep Problem of Portrayal in Chinese Film”).³⁰

Although Liu would dedicate his career to making commercial feature films, he continued to advocate for avant-garde

Table 1. Liu Na'ou's shot comparisons in *Sunrise (1927)* and *Between Tears and Laughter (1932)*, as presented in *Xiandai dianying/Modern Screen* magazine in 1933.

<i>Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans</i> (F. W. Murnau, 1927)	<i>Between Tears and Laughter</i> (Zhang Shichuan, 1932)
Intertitles: 5%	Intertitles: 40% (35% expository titles, 5% dialogue titles)
Film techniques:	Film techniques:
Long shot: 13%	Bust shot: 40%
Medium long (full) shot: 25%	Medium long (full) shot: 15%
Midbust: 2%	Overlaps, double exposures, fades, etc.: 5%
Bust shot: 29%	
Close-up: 3%	
Extreme close-up: 15%	
Overlaps: 4%	
Fade out: 2%	
Fade in: 2%	

ideas to improve mainstream industrial practices. As Aaron Gerow argues, “European conceptions of avant-garde film influenced the Japanese film scene in conflicting ways. On the one hand . . . they complicated the visions of modern cinema based on Hollywood’s Fordist model while, on the other hand, they percolated down to the ‘vernacular’ level where they had a lasting effect on the popular cinema.”³¹ However, Malte Hagener’s study argues that the commercial and the avant-garde were not necessarily oppositional in Europe but frequently intersected.³² The avant-garde often based their studies and theories on Hollywood films they admired, and were in turn sometimes absorbed into commercial film companies to experiment with new techniques.

Liu Na’ou understood the avant-garde as a forerunner of developments in the industry. As he wrote in his essay “Explanations of Famous European Films,” he hoped to inspire local filmmakers to challenge and develop the medium of film by highlighting the innovations and ideologies in the films of René Clair, Sergei Eisenstein, and Carl Theodor Dreyer.³³ Also, in an attempt to show Chinese directors how a proper script should be written, Liu made an interesting choice: to translate Sergei Eisenstein’s script of his unfinished *¡Que viva México!* (1931).³⁴

Modernist Philosophy and the Fight for Film Art

While Liu never managed to create a Chinese Pure Film movement akin to *Jun'eigageki undō*, avant-garde film theories of film as art would find their way into the mainstream Shanghai film industry under the banner of “Soft Film.” Following the Japanese bombings of the city on January 28, 1932, the national crisis that had begun with the annexation of

Manchuria a few months earlier became the primary concern for Chinese cinema. The entry of leftist filmmakers into the film industry and increasing pressure on the industry to make films for “national salvation” began to conflict with many who had worked to build the entertainment industry based on Hollywood ideals.

It is in this context that Liu Na’ou, along with five friends, created and funded *Xiandai dianying/Modern Screen* magazine in 1933 to provide a platform to voice their discontent with the new totalitarianism and to set the industry back on the correct path. The term “Soft Film” was coined by Huang Jiamo, one of the magazine’s editors, to encompass these divergent voices, but Liu’s articles based on global Pure Film theories would receive the largest following in their effort to protect liberalism in art against the didacticism of propaganda.

Victor Fan’s in-depth analysis of the philosophy behind Liu’s *Modern Screen* articles posits that the Soft Film movement “did not envision the cinema simply as a petite bourgeois entertainment” but also understood cinema as an educational tool, whereby “the spectators were best educated via an aesthetic process of immersion.”³⁵ In this sense, “cinema does not imitate life; rather, it reveals life in an aesthetic experience, a process in which the beholder is immersed in the cinematographic image, in its approach to reality.” Cinema, then, is the aestheticization of life “into a commonsensical life rhythm,” a crucial component of *photogénie*, the quality that Louis Delluc once defined as “the miracle of cinema.”³⁶

As Fan has pointed out, Liu’s *Modern Screen* articles on improving Chinese cinema are based on two important ideas: *photogénie* and subjectivity. The source of this can again be traced back to Liu’s admiration of Japanese Shinkankakuha. Gerow’s study of *A Page of Madness* emphasizes that the term “Shinkankakuha” “is also used to name the French Impressionist cinema (as well as, at times, 1920s German film). He points out that “in the discursive field of 1920s Japan that set of films [French impressionist and 1920s German films], the Shinkankakuha writers, and *A Page of Madness* were all articulated as part of the same cultural phenomenon.”³⁷ Liu advocated the same fundamental position—that, in Gerow’s words, “cinema is a purely visual medium unique among the arts whose power lies in a sort of mystical *photogénie* founded in a rhythmic, poetic and almost musical editing of images that offers a new means of perceiving reality.”³⁸

While leaning heavily on the French theorists, Liu followed the Japanese in refusing “avant-garde film purism” in order to prepare “the ground for the discussions of cinematic

essence that would proliferate in Japan in 1920s.”³⁹ Liu does not talk exclusively about French films; he references Hollywood, German, and Soviet films, showing he was conscious of the global engagement of Western film theorists with each other’s work. Contextualizing his writings within the global Pure Film discourse demonstrates their synthetic nature.

In almost all the *Modern Screen* essays that became part of the Soft Film debate, Liu repeated the film-as-art manifesto from his early “Meditations on Film.” For example, in an obvious reference to French film culture, he titles his first article “Ecranesque,” opens with a declaration, and claims a quintessential modernity for it:

[L]ike architecture, cinema is the best form of art to portray the mechanical civilization’s social environment. The language of cinema (Cinegraphique) is anti-literature, anti-drama, anti-painting. The combination of continuous movement and organic sound is the source of cinematic beauty.⁴⁰

Movement is given particular mention because, for him, it defined film’s revolutionary potential as a visual art.⁴¹ To show the neglect of this essential factor in the Chinese film industry, Liu notes that none of the Chinese words for film reference movement, using terms such as *dianying* (electric shadows) and *yingxi* (shadow play)—unlike English terms like *movie*, *motion picture*, and *flicker*. In “The Deep Problem of Portrayal in Chinese Film,” Liu explains:

Movement is the first element that makes film an art; it is full of implied meaning and most able to express meaning that can be understood by people. It can replace theater’s sound, color, and language; it is internationalism as well as a global language. Audiences regardless of class or education are able to understand it.⁴²

Liu argued that “the biggest problem in Chinese cinema is the heavy emphasis on content” because by neglecting technique and style, the filmmaker was led to an overemphasis on intertitles to tell a story, depriving film of the visuality that allows it to become a universal language. He specifically targeted “those with Marxist traits” for being both an artistic and political failure for inadvertently transforming the mass medium into a minority one by making it inaccessible to the illiterate majority:

[I]t is dangerous to be overly obsessed with content when the technique lacks maturity. This results in a deformed child whose head is too big and body too small. You may think that stuffing society, class, consciousness, and whatever you want into a broken house may constitute something for the masses. In reality, who would

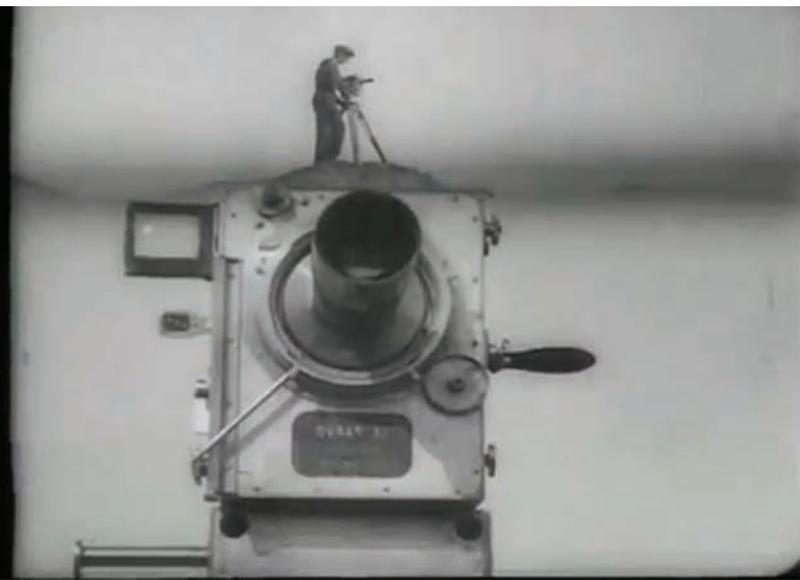
have guessed that this type of massification is in fact a product of elitism. . . . [W]ith regard to this village massification it appears that the priority is reading words and watching films second, because Chinese-made films are heavy on words and light on pictures.⁴³

Advocating the abolition of intertitles also served his desire to integrate the viewer more fully into the film and to directly express the characters’ inner feelings. In “Regarding the Writer’s Attitude,” Liu warned Chinese filmmakers that even a film passionate about social justice appears forced if it lacks creativity and breaks the sense of internal realism.⁴⁴ In his textbook-like essay “Camera Mechanism: Position, Angle, and Technique Theory,” Liu educates the reader about camera position, how to achieve subjectivity by changing point of view, and how camera distance, position, and angle can produce different effects.⁴⁵

Liu is more severe in his political criticism when he writes that propaganda films that force people to feel a certain way and deny the viewer an active participation in extracting their own meaning make for “a very unhappy experience” and “art’s evil side.”⁴⁶ Here he is sharpening his earlier argument that excessive intertitles and inadequate film technique transform the screen into a book that “kills film, and worse, kills one’s freedom of imagination.” In “Ecranesque,” he explicitly argued that films that use visual methods of portrayal are much more effective than those that rely on explanation since they mobilize the senses, instead of a rationality that can backfire in its didacticism.⁴⁷

Liu most likely derived this philosophy from Immanuel Kant’s *Ding an sich* (“thing in itself”), which he explains briefly in his essay “Film Art Theory.” He was possibly introduced to Kant through his studies of Shinkankakuha, whose founder, Yokomitsu Riichi, directly references *Ding an sich* as an important influence in his essay “On Neo-Sensation.”⁴⁸ Liu expanded the idea over several articles that argued for the importance of form and aesthetics in spite of the national crisis resulting from Japan’s growing military aggression against China—something that preoccupied all sectors of art, society, and politics in the 1930s.

Liu prized above all the ways the Pure Film discourse was encapsulated in Rudolf Arnheim’s classic *Film as Art*.⁴⁹ The importance he placed on Arnheim can be seen in the care with which he translated a summary of each chapter of the book and serialized it over a period of four months.⁵⁰ Arnheim’s enumeration of how aspects of the film medium differed from a true rendering of reality would prove useful to Liu in his battle against the leftists who were early members of the Communist Party.



Liu Na'ou (left) in *A Film by a Man who has a Camera* and Dziga Vertov (right) in *Man with a Movie Camera*.

From Page to Practice: *A Film by a Man Who Has a Camera*

The striking influence of a transnational film discourse on Liu's writings is paralleled by the resonances between his one surviving amateur film—*A Film by a Man Who Has a Camera*, shot around 1933 on a 9.5mm Pathé Baby camera—with the two city symphonies upon which it was modeled: Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1928) and Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt* (*Berlin: A Symphony of a City*, 1927). The first obvious clue is found in a text, the prologue to *Man with a Movie Camera*, that contains the very same manifesto found in Liu's writing: "This experimental work aims at creating a truly international language of cinema based on its absolute separation from the language of theater and literature."

Vertov and Ruttmann were both clearly steeped in the international Pure Film discourses of the day and articulated the same ideas of *photogénie*, rhythm, and movement as challenges to reality/vision that feature prominently in Liu's own film writings. It was "photogénie and editing, or montage [that] allowed the filmmaker's voice to take center stage" and poetically depict the life of a city, according to Bill Nichols.⁵¹ By reinventing documentary footage, the use of *photogénie* and rhythm could transform reality into something magical.

Liu's variation on Vertov's title for his own suggests an admiration that was also indicated in his essays, for he dedicated a section to Vertov's "kino-eye" (interestingly cited as *le ciné-oeil*, suggesting he accessed French sources) in his introductory essays on Russian and French film theories. Liu

argues that "the purpose of cinema's eye is to extract the important things from the messiness of life, and put them together in a rhythmic form. . . . [T]his mechanical eye is to be like words written by writers to record the life of society."⁵²

In addition to Vertov, Liu commended Ruttmann for achieving Pure Film's "four successful conditions: rhythm, no evidence of theater, no manmade sets, and no intertitles."⁵³ Liu wrote in his "Film Art" article that he was particularly attracted to the emotions and beauty of Ruttmann's films—qualities that contrasted with the emphasis on science and math in the works of German Absolute Cinema proponents Viking Eggling and Hans Richter, who emphasized abstraction-in-motion as a goal. Further, John Dréville discussed Ruttmann's *Berlin* in relation to French *photogénie*, writing that it "brought out the photogénie of urban life" and even argued that *photogénie* could be best realized in documentary and not fiction films.⁵⁴

Upon a first viewing, Liu's *Film by a Man Who Has a Camera* has a random sequencing of shots and a preoccupation with children, relatives, and friends that make it feel more like a home movie than an artistic experiment to be screened at international film festivals or cine-clubs. While Vertov and Ruttmann's films show the life of a city from morning to night and tell a story through a montage of images, Liu's haphazard sequencing and selection of shots organized into five "reels"—"Humans," "Tokyo," "Scenery," "Guangdong," and "Parade"—deprive his film of an internal coherence. Moreover, the film is shot in four cities—Tainan, Tokyo, Shenyang, and Guangdong—which is a



Comparison travelling shots from cars, planes (crane) and trains in *Tokyo* (top), *Berlin* (middle) and *Man with a Movie Camera* (bottom).

departure from the “city symphony” tradition that focused on only one city.

A Japanese advertisement of the period shows that the Pathé Baby camera was aimed at the serious hobbyist, with portable cameras like the Cine-Kodak Eight marketed for family home movies. Liu’s film and equipment suggest a merger of the two. Alongside an overemphasis on friends and family, there are experimental shots that show an obvious affinity with the city-symphony films’ inclusion of key features of the modern city. Liu’s cityscape shots (trams, a night shot of roads in the Tokyo segment) look almost identical to shots in Ruttmann’s film. Other sequences, which capture the more human side of city life, such as the Tokyo segment’s opening with a pan across a park’s lake and a romantic shot of couples rowing, are also comparable to Ruttmann’s shots of couples in a park that similarly capture the soft lighting of sunset.

Liu’s film’s attention to modernity is notably captured through modes of transport: striking shots taken from an

airplane, traveling shots from a car moving through traffic, and a shot from a train climbing up a misty mountain. The sensations produced by the movement and angles create a new sensory experience not accessible if one is traveling on foot. Similar shots appear in both Ruttmann’s and Vertov’s films, although in lieu of an airplane Vertov includes an aerial shot over a dam.

The city symphony’s influence is also seen in Liu Na’ou’s attention to modernity in form and content. The rhythmic editing, speed, and movement that he calls for so prominently in his articles are strong features of his filmmaking, too, although not as controlled as in the work of Vertov or Ruttmann. The average shot length is five to seven seconds, with none lasting more than thirty, producing a lively tempo in which different scenes repeatedly flash by the viewer. Liu is not as eccentric as Vertov in using film to shock his viewer or make an artistic statement, so *A Film by a Man Who Has a Camera* has a milder imitation of the dizzying effects of



Varying representations of the Wako Tower in *Tokyo*.

movement than do the films of his European counterparts. The frenetic movement of the camera to produce the shock effect that defines the modern experience does appear, though, in one short montage of a crowd where Liu cuts between differently angled shots and pans that move against the flow of the crowd to create a jarring visual sensation. Comparable shots can be found in both Vertov's and Ruttmann's films, but Vertov is again much more dramatic, famously in the enlarged shot of himself superimposed over the crowd.

These stylistic devices that manipulate reality seek to demonstrate the revelatory nature of cinema by increasing the viewer's consciousness of form through cinematic devices such as camera angles, plays on perception, and quick cutting. Liu's angled view of a road, for instance, creates a more dynamic shot and focuses on geometric lines within a common image to challenge the audience's customary perception of reality. Once again, these homages are less daring than the originals, since both Vertov and Ruttmann combined the techniques with superimposed moving shots and split frames that create an even more disorienting visual experience.

Another obvious modernist film technique that Liu tries out is the shooting of the same object from different angles and distances. His shots of the Wako clock-tower building in Tokyo's Ginza district are a playful attempt to fragment objects, as different angles and compositions create very different impressions of the same building. In the first shot, the focus is solely on a small clock and flag. The second reveals them as one part of an impressive large round building that occupies the entire corner of a block, evoking a sense of the building's imposing presence. The scale of the building is emphasized by a panorama pan shot from above that puts the building in perspective in its environment. However, this sense of scale is dramatically revised in the next shot, when the building is framed behind trees, lampposts, and, most noticeably, the imperial Japanese flag. It is no longer

a commanding force but is pushed to the background, subordinated to the Japanese flag.

One sexually suggestive sequence in the Guangdong segment is the closest that Liu comes to creating a coherent sequence within his portrayal of city life, using purely visual means. The sequence depicts the Westernized "modern girl" and the moral degradation of city culture. It begins with a pan of three women's shoes, then cuts to a man who steps up from the left onto a set of stairs and watches as two women and a couple walk down in succession from the right. The camera shifts to position him in the background as he watches more women and other couples pass by, until the sequence ends with a voyeuristic shot of a girl buckling her shoe and flirtatiously flashing her legs. The sensuous sequence has a precedent in Ruttmann's much shorter *Berlin* scene that shows a couple's legs entering a taxi, followed by a quick close-up of a man's hand stroking the bare arm of his female companion.

Liu's final segment, focused on a temple parade in Tainan city, is the only one that appears to be organized from beginning to end for the film. It starts at the head of the parade, where participants are seen carrying tablets and what appear to be deities in sedans. Showing Japanese dancers as the last performance, followed by a shot of them dispersing, helps to complete the sequence, concluding with a still shot of someone who might be the mayor. This ending can be interpreted as both a credit for the event's organization and a closing reminder of the Japanese presence and cultural hybridization in Taiwan at that time.

The increasing sophistication of shots and editing as the film progresses from segment to segment suggests Liu Na'ou's potential to create a complete and cohesive poetic film. One can only speculate as to whether he ever shot any other films that have been lost over time. Given the amateur approach and personal content of this one, it is highly unlikely that he ever intended to release it, instead probably keeping it

as part of his family albums or diaries. Like the Japanese Pure Film that Liu so admired, his personal leanings toward commercial films that lay closer to the lives of the average viewer could be a reason he did not invest more effort into creating a complete city-symphony film to spur an avant-garde film movement in China like those in Europe and Japan.

Conclusion

Framing Liu Na'ou as part of the global Pure Film campaign shows how various members shared not only the same inspirations, goals, and activities, but for some, the same political fate. Although aesthetic experimentation based on subjective abstraction may have been celebrated as a form of liberal cosmopolitanism during the 1920s, the decade of the 1930s became, as Robert Stam describes it, “the hangover after the party” with the rise of Nazism, Fascism, and Stalinism.⁵⁵ Liu's insistence on clinging to aestheticism and liberal cosmopolitanism well into the tumultuous 1930s inevitably brought him into the vicious battle over nationalism. The fact that Liu took the same path as several of his Japanese mentors in supporting Japanese imperialism during the war, and the fact of certain European film modernists (such as some Italian futurists) siding with Fascism, confirms the darker side of formalism. While such political affiliations have not hindered scholarship on European or Japanese film modernism, such is not the case in China, where the primacy placed on film history in defining the “imagination” of the modern Chinese nation through the Communist Party's official narrative continues to plague reevaluations of the role of modernism in China even to this day.

Notes

1. The first collection of Liu's film essays was published in Kang Laixin and Xu Qinzhen, *Liu Na'ou quanji* [The Liu Na'ou anthology] (Tainan Xian Xinying Shi: Tainan Xian wen hua ju, 2001) and *Liu Na'ou quanji: Zengpuji* [Liu Na'ou anthology: Supplement] (Tainan Xian Xinying Shi: Guoli Taiwan wenxueguan, 2010). The anthology was published shortly after the pro-Taiwan independence party—the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP)—came to power in 2000, and the reinstatement of Liu in Taiwanese literary history was part of an effort to highlight prominent Taiwanese figures who had significant cultural influence abroad.
2. See Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).
3. The mainstream narrative of Chinese film history is based on Cheng Jihua, Li Shaobai, and Xing Zuwen, *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi* [History of the development of Chinese cinema] (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1963). As the first

comprehensive history of the Chinese film industry, this Maoist account was instrumental in identifying the objects of discourse and setting the parameters that all subsequent studies have had to adopt.

4. Bao Weihong, *Fiery Cinema: The Emergence of an Affective Medium in China, 1915–1945* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); Victor Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
5. The Japanese Pure Film movement (*Jun'eigageki undō*) period is usually vaguely defined as lasting from the 1910s to early 1920s, but Joanne Bernardi identifies the most vibrant years as 1914–23 in her *Writing in Light: The Silent Scenario and the Japanese Pure Film Movement* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 22. I follow her timeline.
6. I refer here to the famous 1978 Brighton conference and to more recent claims for a return to classical theory, as in the special issue of *October* that was published as *October* no. 148 (Spring 2014). See also Noel Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 10.
7. Huang Jiamo, “Yinxing yingpian yu ruanxing yingpian” [Hard film and Soft Film], *Xiandai dianying/Modern Screen*, no. 6 (1933): 3.
8. For a full revisionist study of the debate and new definition of Soft Film as a movement, see Donna Ong, “Liu Na'ou and the 1930s Chinese Soft Film: Modernism, Film Art and Politics in Republican Era Shanghai” (PhD diss., University of Hong Kong, 2015).
9. The “three antis” were proposed in Zheng Zhengqiu, “Ruhe zoushang qianjin zhi lu” [How to embark on a progressive road], *Mingxing yuebao* [Star studio monthly] 1, no. 1 (May 1, 1933). For more about the debate, see Pang Laikwan, *Building a New China in Cinema: The Chinese Left-Wing Cinema Movement, 1932–1937* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002); and Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
10. Cheng et al., *Zhongguo dianying fazhanshi*, 397. White terror refers to the KMT's violent suppression of Communist Party members that was marked by the April 12, 1927 incident. Chiang Kai-shek and conservative factions of the KMT carried out a full-scale purge of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) in Shanghai and in the ranks of the KMT itself.
11. For more details, see Qian Suiqiao, *Liberal Cosmopolitan: Lin Yutang and Middling Chinese Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).
12. The idea that Chinese modernity is “translated” and “mediated” is well established in literary studies. The triangular relationship, in which Japan plays a major part, has also been used to challenge the simplistic binary of “the West and the rest.” See, e.g., Shih Shumei, *Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Lydia He Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900–1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

13. The film materials known to survive in Liu's book collection, now in his grandson Lin Chien-hsiang's possession, were notably all in Japanese or were Japanese translations of Western publications, including *Teihon sekai eiga geijutsu hattatsu-shi* [The evolution of world motion picture arts] (Tokyo: Film Critic Society Publishing Unit, 1933); Victor O. Freeburg, *Pictorial Beauty on the Screen* (Tokyo: Nai-gai sha, 1932); and *Eiga kagaku kenkyu* [Scientific film research] nos. 6, 8, and 10 (1930).
14. E.g., Jun'ichirō Tanizaki mentions in his review of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* that he had watched the film at the Kinema Club in Asakusa, Tokyo. Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, "Karigari hakase o miru" [A viewing of Dr. Caligari], *Jiji shinpō* [Current events], May 1921, and *Katsudō zasshi* [Moving picture magazine], August 1921.
15. The Japanese Shinkankakuha movement was, like the Chinese neo-sensationalists (*xinganjue pai*), composed of a loose group of writers gathered around a central figure and publication: the journal *Bungei jidai* [Literary age], which began publication in October 1924; and the writer Yokomitsu Riichi, who later described his work in the 1920s as a "war of utter rebellion against the Japanese language." See Alan Campbell, "Yokomitsu Riichi," in *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, vol. 8 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1983), 331–33.
16. Liu Na'ou, *Seqing wenhua* [Erotic culture] (Shanghai: Diyixian shudian [Front Line Bookshop], 1928).
17. Mentioned in Shi Zhecun's memoir "Zuihou yige lao pengyou: Feng Xuefeng" [Feng Xuefeng, my last dear friend], *Xin wenxue shiliao* [Historical materials on the new literature], no. 2 (1983): 202. These Japanese writers experimented with film techniques in their literary narratives. See Thomas LaMarre, *Shadows on the Screen: Tanizaki Jun'ichirō on Cinema and Oriental Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2005), 250–51.
18. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 420.
19. Peng Hsiao-yen, *Dandyism and Transcultural Modernity: The Dandy, the Flâneur, and the Translator in 1930s Shanghai, Tokyo, and Paris*. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 15.
20. Matsuzaki Kenji, "Shanghai jinbun ki" [Shanghai men of letters]; Chinese translation in Kang and Xu, *Liu Na'ou quanji: Zengpuji*, 256.
21. Bernardi, *Writing in Light*, 13.
22. Ge Momei and Meng Zhou [Liu Na'ou]. "Yingxi manxiang" [Meditations on film], *Wugui lieche* [Trackless train], no. 4 (1928): 205–9; no. 5 (1928): 281–84.
23. English translation from Shih Shumei, *Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 272.
24. Aaron Gerow, *A Page of Madness: Cinema and Modernity in 1920s Japan* (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 2008), 23.
25. Victor O. Freeburg, *The Art of Photoplay Making* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), 49. For Freeburg's significance, see Dana Polan, *Inventing Film Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 102.
26. Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915–1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 251.
27. Liu Na'ou, "Yingpian yishu lun" [Film-art theory], *Dianyning zhoubao* [Film weekly], nos. 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 15 (1932).
28. Liu Na'ou, "Efa De Yingxi Lilun" [Russian and French theory], *Dianyning* [Movie], no. 1 (1930).
29. Paul Ramain, "Sur le soi-disant 'film pur'" [On the so-called "Pure Film"], *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, no. 128 (March 1, 1929): 7–8.
30. Liu Na'ou, "Zhongguo dianying miaoxie de shendu wenti" [The deep problem of portrayal in Chinese film], *Xiandai dianying/Modern Screen*, no. 3 (1933): 2–3.
31. Gerow, *Page of Madness*, 11.
32. Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back*, 124.
33. Na'ou [Liu Na'ou], "Ouzhou mingpian jieshuo" [Explanations of famous European films], *Xiandai dianying/Modern Screen*, no. 3 (1933): 33–34.
34. Liu Na'ou, "Moxige Wansui [Viva Mexico by Eisenstein]. *Liu Yi* [Six arts], nos. 1, 2, and 3 (1935).
35. Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality*, 77.
36. Fan, *Cinema Approaching Reality*, 83.
37. Gerow, *Page of Madness*, 14–15.
38. Gerow, *Page of Madness*, 10.
39. Gerow, *Page of Madness*, 11.
40. Liu Na'ou, "Ecranesque," *Xiandai dianying/Modern Screen*, no. 2 (1933): 1.
41. Liu Na'ou. "Dianyning jiezhou jianlun" [A brief discussion on film rhythm]. *Xiandai dianying/Modern Screen*, no. 6 (1933): 1–2.
42. Liu Na'ou, "Zhongguo dianying miaoxie de shendu wenti." Translated by author.
43. Liu Na'ou, "Zhongguo dianying miaoxie de shendu wenti." Translated by author.
44. Liu Na'ou, "Guanyu zuozhe de taidu" [Regarding the writer's attitude]. *Xiandai dianying/Modern Screen*, no. 5 (1933): 1–2.
45. Liu Na'ou, "Kaimaila jigou: Weizhi jiaodu jineng lun" [Camera mechanism: Position, angle, and technique theory.] *Xiandai dianying/Modern Screen*, no. 7 (1934): 1–5.
46. Liu Na'ou, "Guanyu zuozhe de taidu."
47. Liu Na'ou, "Ecranesque." *Zaobao* [Morning post], August 5–6, 1935.
48. Yokomitsu Riichi, "Shinkankakuron" [On neo-sensation], in *Teihon Yokomitsu Riichi zenshū* [Complete works of Yokomitsu Riichi: Definitive texts], vol. 13 (Tokyo: Kawade Shobō Shinsha, 1981–82), 76.
49. Rudolf Arnheim, *Film als Kunst* (Berlin: Ernst Rowohlt, 1932).
50. "Yishu dianying lun" [Art-film theory], published in sixty-two daily segments in *Chenbao* [Morning news] from May 4 to September 3, 1935.
51. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 90.
52. Liu Na'ou, "Efa De Yingxi Lilun."
53. Liu Na'ou, "Yingpian yishu lun."
54. John Dréville, "Le documentaire, aimé du cinéma," *Cinéma-gazette*, no. 2 (1930): 51.
55. Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 67.