

13. THE EVENING RAINS IN BASHAN: MOUNTAINS IN CHINESE CINEMA IN 1980

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In the spring month of May in 1981, Chinese cinema announced its inaugural Golden Rooster Award (*Jinji Jiang*). This brand-new triennial award, named after the zodiac animal of that year, was intended to be the authoritative voice for future Chinese cinema, judged by a jury consisting of professional filmmakers and critics. The name “golden rooster” was chosen also for its auspicious symbolism: a mascot ushering in the dawn of a new era and calling for much needed changes after the recent Cultural Revolution (officially 1966–1976) that left the nation in ruins. That year the first Golden Rooster award for the best feature film went to not one but two recipients, *Bashan yeyu* (*The Evening Rains in Bashan*, Wu Yonggang and Wu Yigong 1980) and *Tianyunshan chuanqi* (*Legends of Tianyun Mountains*, Xie Jin 1980). These two films also won in most of the other categories.¹ The award for best female actor in a leading role was given to Zhang Yu for her performance in two films: *Bashan yeyu* and *Lushan Lian* (*Romance in Lushan Mountains*, Huang Zumo 1980); the latter was undoubtedly a pop culture phenomenon and the most sensational box-office success of the era, though not a favorite of critics.² Therefore, in the first year of the new era, as the Golden Rooster crowed its premiere call, three magnificent filmic mountains loomed on the horizon of a twilight Chinese screen. They can be understood as historical heights, both offering a retrospective review of the past and proclaiming an aspirational, prospective, and new landscape for Chinese cinema. While each of the three mountains signals an exciting vision for its respective genre (melodrama, rom-com, et

cetera) and merits discussion on its own, this chapter focuses on *Bashan yeyu* as a close study of mountains in Chinese cinema. It is a film that has had little screening exposure outside of China and even less attention in English scholarship, despite the accolades from Chinese critics and audiences alike after its release. But besides the film being of undeserving obscurity, I chose *Bashan yeyu* because it is an important film in both Chinese film history and in global cinema for its original approach to cinematic landscape, especially its intermedial experiment with mountains.

The film depicts a group of passengers who become temporary roommates on a ship on its route between Chongqing in Sichuan and Yichang in Hubei, among the famous Three Gorges on the Yangtze River. Throughout the film, the mountains of Sichuan (Bashan) are persistently present on screen, either as landscape shots, or visible through the window in the interior scenes in the boat cabin, or in the background in scenes shot on the deck (Figure 13.1). The diegetic time is one day and one night amid the Cultural Revolution. A middle-aged political convict, a poet by the name of Qiushi, boards the ship accompanied by two plainclothes police officers: a shadowy old man named Li Yan, and a young woman called Liu Wenying (played by Zhang



Figure 13.1 Mountains of Sichuan in *Bashan yeyu* (1980)

Yu), barely out of her teens, in semi-military attire and zeal both typical of the Red Guards. The trio meet the rest of the passengers, an assembly of different professions and ages on their respective river voyages: Song, a sardonic young factory worker who used to be a Red Guard but has grown cynical and remorseful of his past participation in the violence; Lin, a school teacher who is frustrated because she can no longer teach literature since all classical writers have been branded as counterrevolutionary; and Guan, a Peking Opera actor who can no longer perform on stage because his old theater pieces have all been denounced as counterrevolutionary. While these professionals' talents and passions are uniformly denied by the political storms of the time, the two peasant representatives in the chamber, both female, are in utter distress and destitution: Apricot (Xinghua) is a young peasant girl on her way to fulfill a transactional marriage as she has been sold to pay off her father's debt; the old widow Granny is making this boat trip to visit the water grave of her only son, who died in the Yangtze River in the crossfire between Red Guard clans. Besides the eight passengers in the cabin, the film also includes a few of the ship's crew: the captain, the policeman, and the Party representative (who is given astonishingly little importance in this film) in the steering room, as well as the cook in the kitchen. There is also a street urchin, a mysterious orphan girl with piercingly suspicious eyes, scurrying all over the different decks on the ship in search of someone. She turns out to be the daughter of the poet. The film ends with the reunion between father and daughter, followed by their eventual liberation, sanctioned by the two convoys, aided by the crew, and blessed by all other passengers.

The capsuled time and space shared by a small set of typecast fellow travelers follows a well-tested narrative form in literature and cinema. From Guy de Maupassant's short story *Boule de Suif* (1880) to films such as *Frau im Mond* (*Woman in the Moon*, Fritz Lang, 1929), *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), and *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), this form, with great economy, provides a microcosmic view of both the societal structure and the psychological complexities of the time. The canned journey, whether it is a train on its tracks, a stagecoach between posts, or a ship from one dock to another, operates on a preset route, sliding back and forth regularly. It functions like an incision into the world, revealing its ails and problems. The small enclosed set of the film also reminds Chinese audiences of similar settings in modern stage plays such as *Chaguan* (Teahouse) by Lao She (1957) and *Leiyu* (Thunderstorm) by Cao Yu (1934), beloved masterpieces banished during the Cultural Revolution.³ Even though the film is solemn in subject matter and somber in tone, audiences were also tantalized by the familiar thrill in entertainment cinema, the suspension in a prison breakout, and the whodunit in an enclosed space. The little girl character keeps the audience in their seats: Who is she? Whom is she searching for? Will she find her father? Such an

emotional grip on the audience is a familiar trope in Chinese melodramatic cinema, reminiscent of a tried and true film narrative in 1930s Shanghai cinema, featuring an orphan searching for their family.⁴ *Bashan yeyu*'s emotional regime culminates in the last scene with a tearjerking music sequence: The little orphan sings a song, which is a secret code of her identity, known to the audience but hidden from her father. This music performance, shot with passionate zooms and cross editing, intensifies the emotional build-up for the final release in the moment of actual recognition. Therefore, the film serves as an emotional cue for two things: It activates the public memory of displacements and bereavements in the recent decade of Cultural Revolution, during which familial emotions were illegitimatized and negated; it is also a cue for film memory. After decades of disruption in film productions and filmgoing experiences, it reminds Chinese audiences of popular cinematic conventions once popular but suspended in recent decades.

THE TRUE MOUNTAIN AND WATER: THE SEARCH OF LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS IN CINEMA

Since the 1920s, many Chinese filmmakers have looked to the tradition of Chinese visual arts, especially landscape paintings, for inspiration in their search for innovative modern cinematic forms. For centuries, Chinese painters regarded landscape as the most important subject. Their practice and theoretical treatises on landscape art had a profound impact on Chinese culture and society, not only as concepts in representational art but also as philosophical discourses on truth, reality, and the cosmic order to which all human activities shall be aligned. In the tradition of landscape painting, mountains are the main character, usually paired with water in the form of rivers, lakes, or ocean, and in Chinese this practice is simply called *shanshuihua* (painting of mountain and water). In his treatise on landscape art titled "Lofty Ambitions of Forests and Streams," the master painter Guo Xi (ca. 1000–1090) wrote about the ideal of "true mountain and water" (*zhenshanshui*), or true landscape.⁵ To Guo, true landscape, with its effervescent clouds and mist varying in moments, seasons, and climates, cannot be achieved in painting by a simple definition of close observations, which are bound to be fragmentary and momentary in nature, but only by a painter who sees the whole view of the mountains from various distances, in movements, and through time. Since mountains appear differently to a beholder at each step, from each angle, and in each atmospheric instant, Guo asks, "How could a painter not familiarize himself with all of these views?" (Bush & Shih 2012). This ideal of "true landscape," informed by a comprehensive understanding of reality, is therefore achieved by additive and composite observations. As art historian Wen Fong comments on the "additive" composition within Chinese landscape painting: "... [T]he picture unfolds

sequentially: individual elements, each a discrete image, are read on an additive basis, one by one” (Fong 1992, 73). In other words, the landscape painting ideal decries a view from a singular point with a singular vanishing point, or any singular instant of time. This mobile temporal spatiality in Chinese landscape painting, with its alluring affinity to the film medium, provides an inspirational threshold of intermedial experiments for Chinese filmmakers, including Wu Yonggang, who was trained as a painter in Shanghai before becoming a filmmaker. Wu often compared the film aesthetics in *Bashan yeyu* to those in Chinese painting (1986, 16). In a published directorial statement, Wu Yonggang states:

In *Bashan yeyu*, there is no sensational event or dramatic plot twist, nor are there a monumental hero or rousing heroic deeds, but a group of ordinary people, good people with humanity and a sense of justice. There is no bad person. This group of people convene by serendipity on a boat. Everything that happens in one day and one night on that boat reveals their respective thoughts, opinions, attitudes, and feelings, the sum of which, evidently, shall be the subject of this film. (1986, 16)

This statement is remarkable in the explanation of intention and its proclamation against a monolithic monumentality often found in central male heroes in Chinese films. The focus on the variety of experiences and views is greatly reinforced by the film’s multilevel spatiality. Even though much of the film is set in a small cabin and the camera is rather static—rarely do we see a tracking shot—the film’s spatial design is an architecture of vision composed of ever-changing camera angles, over-the-shoulder and point-of-view shots from each character. The seemingly endless character combinations in the frame are achieved through minute changes of camera positions, which are distributed among the eight characters’ two-level bunk beds. With this perspectival complexity, the small space of one room is fully utilized. Therefore, the monolithic narrative and singular vision (based on the poet Qiushi) that is promised in the beginning of the film is dispersed and equal weight is given to the perspectives of different genders, ages, and walks of life. Unlike *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950), which negates the authority of a master narrative by pitching multiple conflicting narratives against one another, *Bashan yeyu*’s multi-point-of-view is not meant to deconstruct but to construct a history through composite experiences. Meanwhile, it also proposes a vision of a modern China where each citizen occupies their own valued position in a just society where the boundary of power is well defined and at the same time respected and executed socially and holistically.

At the beginning of the film, the poet Qiushi is the hero and the main subject for the audience. Qiushi is indeed an important figure throughout. He is the

savior, the only one who sees the attempted suicide of Apricot and jumps into the water to save her; he gives the young Red Guard the sight to see the truth that she is the real prisoner, though he is the one in handcuffs. With few exceptions, most subjective shots depict his point-of-view. The image of Qiushi in the film, down to the combed-back hairstyle and the cosmopolitan professorial attire characteristic of intellectuals in 1940s Shanghai, is modeled after that of Wen Yiduo (1899–1946), the martyred modern poet, as well as Qu Yuan (c. 340–278 BCE), the ancient poet and politician. Both are from Hubei, the ancient Chu kingdom where the film takes place. Therefore, in *Qiushi* we see the official model of the ancient scholar and the modern humanist intellectual reunited and reinstated on the post-Mao screen. However, as the film progresses, the audience realizes that Qiushi does not satisfy the conventional expectations of a male lead. Some critics complained that he comes off as unconvincing and empty, as his pedantic speeches exhibit “righteous angst” not dissimilar to the heroes in the official “*yangbanxi*” (model opera) during the Cultural Revolution (Mei Dongwei 1981, 21). In contrast, the other characters, in supposedly supporting roles, have much more gravitas and texture. Each impresses the audience with their stories suggested by behavioral patterns carefully crafted and excellently acted out. (For example, the scaredy-cat Peking Opera actor ducks under his cover whenever there is a whiff in the air that any conflict might happen, suggesting a reflex developed after perennial persecution.) Indeed, the ensemble acting in supporting roles won many praises. The official note from the Golden Rooster committee sums up the jury’s opinion: “[T]his film, through its original concept and lyrical artistic style, constructs an ensemble of characters each with distinctive personalities and represents the beautiful heart of Chinese people during a given historical period.” The veteran film critic Xia Yan noted how the actors superbly used nonverbal bodily movements and facial expressions to sculpt the characters on screen (1981, 5). The actor Xu Huanshan followed suit and complimented that “their acting is cinematic, not theatrical” (Xu Huanshan 1982, 19). Perhaps we can say in painterly jargon that the supposedly main character, idealistic and mythic, is rendered void like a mountain of mist, while the ensemble of characters are portrayed with striking brushstrokes and substantial texture. It is quite symbolic that among the Golden Rooster awards that year, the best male leading role was left “vacant,” while the best actor in a supporting role was given to this ensemble of supporting actors.⁶

However, the film’s allegorical story, its reference to popular film genres, and its melodramatic emotive regime led to the criticism that it was not credible, and the story was not “real.” Critics had trouble with the uniform “goodness” of the characters: In this film, everyone is nice or eventually turns nice (Wu 1986, 20). They asked if it was an allegory of the nation, why was there not a single bad person on the boat? If there were no bad people in China, how come we suffered

through a blood-drenched ten years? These questions also stemmed from a generic confusion, as this film is difficult to place. It did not quite fit into the popular “retrospection film” or “scar film” of the time. Scar films tell the story of the recent past and aim to provide a national catharsis with a quick denunciation of the Cultural Revolution through restaging the history as Manichean battles on the silver screen. The good and evil roles are often unequivocally defined in the hope of a wholesale absolution of the nation/the audience, though at the expense of serious inquiries into the population’s massive complicities in this complex history.⁷ *Bashan yeyu* certainly does not ascribe to that Scar formula. Yet, the criticism about realism, or the lack thereof, was significant, as realism was an important movement for forward-thinking filmmakers at the time. The director Zhang Nuanxin and critic Li Tuo, in their groundbreaking article “Modernization of Chinese Film Language,” advocated “realism” in the name of Bazin as a fast track to bring Chinese cinema into the new era and abreast global cinema in the 1980s.⁸ Though their interpretation and reframing of Bazin’s long-take theory was mostly a Trojan horse to introduce a candid approach to the cinematic representation of social reality, realism, as it was defined at the time, was shorthand for an antidote to decades of deceitful practice that mandated film as a propaganda tool constructing screen realities *à la carte* to suit the Party’s political needs *du jour*. Understandably, *Bashan yeyu*’s idealized portrayal of the ship’s characters attracted suspicion from critics weary of the former manipulation of truth on screen.

To these criticisms director Wu Yonggang offered the following response, which again finds its source in Chinese landscape art theory. He wrote:

I am a humanist, I advocate writing about true humans, humans with humanity, and humanity that has been trampled during the past ten years. I believe that is realistic enough. Realism is to capture the core of life, the core of human thoughts and feelings. (1986, 86)

Here, Wu Yonggang aptly opened up the discussion of realism by questioning a documentary’s representation of reality, which to him is inevitably fragmented and not necessarily more faithful to the “core” and the truth than an allegorical fictionality based on the ideal of humanism; the true view of a mountain. His parsing in terms of documentary vs truth and fragments vs whole bears remarkable resemblance to the discussion of truth in landscape painting theory in traditional Chinese art.

MOUNTAINS ON THE YANGTZE RIVER, CINEMATIZED

While *Bashan yeyu* proposes an approach to truth and history approximating the composite view in traditional landscape art and the egalitarian



Figure 13.2 Mountains as markers of the journey along the river in *Bashan yeyu* (1980)

perspective of humanism, the film's treatment of the landscape on screen also engages traditional landscape art with a cinematic update. It begins with landscape scenes on the Yangtze River, followed by the boat sailing through the mountains of Sichuan (*bashan*) until the journey ends with the father and daughter fleeing the river into the mountains. They are all filmed from the moving ship—which constantly sails on the river, as if a tracking trolley is in perpetual motion (Figure 13.2). Therefore, even in the tense interior scenes, audiences can still see the window that the mountains outside are receding steadily, like the flow of time. In this sense, the mountains function as a watermark among all frames, an aide-memoire of the river journey's continuous progress, the progress of diegetic time and location (and of viewing time), and the momentous progress of the era.

It is easy to see the parallel between this continuous movement of landscape in the film and the traditional landscape handscroll format, as one critic astutely observed: "This film feels like a moving handscroll of ink painting, with its night rain, the fleeting cliffs outside of the heft, and the receding silhouette of the Goddess Peak" (Xie 1981, 23). In handscroll painting, a journey going up a river is an iconic subject, as seen in the famous twelfth-century painting *Up*

the River During Qingming and the numerous scrolls specifically depicting the journey on the Yangtze River. In fact, the title *Ten Thousand Miles on the Yangtze River* has been regarded as the ideal vehicle to showcase a painter's magnificent skills, like those of either the seventeenth-century painter Wang Hui or the twentieth-century painter Zhang Daqian. The handscrolls, viewed in smaller frames successively and continuously, are compositions that require continuity and mobility in views, a journey simply speaking, instead of a portrait of a single monumental mountain. "*Bashan*" in the title is indeed the plural form of the mountains of Sichuan, the anonymous mounts receding on the bank, not an arch mount like the Tai Mountain, which is often taken as the symbol of the nation.

For the shooting, the filmmakers obtained special permission from the Transportation Ministry to charter a passenger ship, *Dongfanghong* (The East is Red), and shot almost all scenes on this ship while it was in constant movement back and forth between Sichuan and Yichang on the Yangtze River.⁹ The shooting of landscapes from moving vehicles such as boats and trains was popular in early travel cinema; Jean Epstein famously called these forms of panning shot "landscape's dance," in that "through the window of a train or a ship's porthole, the world acquires a new, specifically cinematic vivacity" (1988, 237). These panning sequences animated the otherwise static mountains, provided kinetic energy to the screen even though the technology of tracking shots was yet to be available, and satiated the audience's desire for mobility and access to a virtual tour. But those looking for a cinematic landscape of attraction, to use Tom Gunning's famous phrase here, will be disappointed in watching *Bashan yeyu*. The mountains in *Bashan yeyu* display no excessive fetish in cinematic landscape; they are certainly not landscape porn. Nor are the mountains in the slightest sense seen through a tourist gaze, as the camera does not linger, and the ship keeps moving on. None of the famous scenic spots among the iconic Three Gorges, except for the Goddess Peak (which I will discuss later), are called out in the film. The cinematography adopts a rather "homely" approach, no National Geographic-style dramatic shots of wonder, even though the scenery itself still exudes marvel. Indeed, the mountains on the river are presented as rather familiar views, as if nature has become "second nature" seen from the standpoint of those who have taken so many trips on the same route that this river has become home. I would point out that it is precisely this "plain" approach to landscape where one can find the Bazinian realism that other modern filmmakers called for. While the human actors were all professionals and the narrative is allegorical, the filmmakers kept the landscape on screen extraordinarily "real." For a convict marching toward his possible death, for a mourning mother, and for all the passengers who are downtrodden in one way or another, the "plain" view of the landscape is appropriate. The Yangtze in its unbecoming brown hue therefore continues to flow, while the

mountains keep receding on the bank, unadulterated and unfiltered. There is trash in the water around the docks. In the landscape of *Bashan yeyu*, we see the faithful-to-life approach to and the respect for the natural flow that it was accused of missing.

The Yangtze water, changing and moving while Goddess Peak stands forever, is not only muddy but also treacherous. It kills. The water is the grave of the young (the young peasant son and Apricot, who attempts to kill herself), but the mountain is the haven of liberty and love, to which the poet and his daughter must flee. The film's ending is interesting in its symbolic designation of locations: The mountain is reserved for the intellectual Qiushi—only through him can the audience get off the boat and unlock an “inside” view of the mountain. The mountain is where the poet can obtain utmost freedom and humanity (as a father) while the remaining passengers, including the converted escorts and the kindhearted policeman, must remain on the ship on its predestined route going down the river. In other words, if this ship on the Yangtze River is a version of Noah's Ark, the first and perhaps only ones who found land (mountains) after the Great Deluge are the intellectuals, the victims during the past decade of the Cultural Revolution.

Bashan yeyu's treatment of mountains as a utopia for intellectuals is a cinematic update on the traditional iconography in literati art, which associates mountains with hermits of great virtue and talent. Consistent with the traditional iconography of utopia in Chinese literature and art, the route to a utopia, the haven in the mountains, begins by a river journey. The utopia in the film, the destination “mountain space of freedom,” is entered not through any generic stream but the great Yangtze River, the mother river of Chinese civilization. More importantly, in *Bashan yeyu* the utopia is far beyond the traditional literati space of personal spirituality. The film proposes that utopia can only be obtained through a new order of law, egalitarianism, and humanism, displayed on the ark on the river. Therefore, in *Bashan yeyu* it is not the intellectual as a monumental heroic figure who finds the mountains a utopia, but mountains that are identified as the intellectual space of utopia, given to the intellectual through the birthing canal of a collective benediction by other members of society, under the shared credo of humanism.¹⁰

THE GODDESS PEAK: THE PAST AND FUTURE OF CHINESE CINEMA

Though the mountains are passing by the boat as an unnamed landscape throughout the film, one particular mountain is specifically called out: the Goddess Peak (*Shennüfeng*), a famous scenic spot on the Yangtze. The Goddess Peak appears in the film at the fortieth minute, approximately at midpoint of the film, from the perspective of the brooding poet looking out on the deck in the moonlight while the boat is moving. The mountain's silhouette therefore

is a continuously changing shape against the night sky and intercut with close-ups of Qiushi's pensive gaze, accompanied by lyrical music. At the end of this sequence, the black silhouette of the Goddess Peak is replaced with a white silhouette of a human "goddess" draped in a white veil, Qiushi's deceased wife, followed by a sequence of her performance as an opera actress in Qiushi's memory. However, the first time the word *shennü* (Goddess) appears in the film is at the twenty-ninth minute, when the school teacher recites a verse supposedly written by our poet. "Every night the sleepless Goddess finds herself powerless, she can only try to part her veils." The teacher continues to ask the listening passengers in the cabin, "Isn't this beautiful? The Goddess is but a legend and a part of the culture, how come writing about her became a crime?" Therefore, we learn that the crime of Qiushi was that he wrote a poem about the Goddess, *shennü*.

To understand the significance of the Goddess Peak in this film, one must look at the filmography of the director Wu Yonggang, who was the author of the iconic Chinese film from the silent era, *The Goddess (Shennü)* (1934).

The young Wu Yonggang entered Shanghai's Tianyi Film studio and subsequently Lianhua Studio as an art director and set designer. In 1934, he was given the opportunity to direct the silent film *The Goddess*, and the film star Ruan Lingyu agreed to join as leading actress. *The Goddess*, Wu's debut directorial work, tells the story of a single mother who struggles to support her child's education through sex work. The film is now considered one of the world's masterpieces with Ruan's superb acting and Wu's deft composition, effective framing, and expressive use of light and darkness. After *The Goddess*, Wu Yonggang made the lesser-known but equally magnificent and decidedly modernist film, *Lang Tao Sha (Waves and Sands)*, (1936). In this black-and-white sound film, Wu delivered a philosophical treatise through an existentialist story of revenge, justice, greed, and survival with avant-garde techniques and minimal setting and cast: A sailor, Dragon (played by Jin Yan), kills the lover of his wife, runs away, and is hunted by a detective (played by Zhang Zhizhi, the villain pimp in the film *The Goddess*). The two, however, are accidentally stranded together on a deserted island and form a bond. One day, a ship comes into view on the horizon. The detective hits Dragon and handcuffs him to himself as he fantasizes about a great reward for this capture if rescued. However, the ship does not stop, and the film ends with the close-up of two skulls and a handcuff on the white sandy beach.

The connections between *Bashan yeyu*, *The Goddess*, and *Lang Tao Sha* are obvious. *Bashan yeyu* verbally and visually recalls *The Goddess*, the iconic work that made Wu's place in film history. In Qiushi's longing eyes *The Goddess* is remembered as a lost love. The first half of *Lang Tao Sha* is set on a ship, in which Wu Yonggang designed a multilevel perspectivism in a confined space through deft camera positioning. The second half of the film happens

on the beach, featuring the dynamic between a fugitive in cuffs and his captor. Traces of these films are displayed in *Bashan yeyu*. Made in 1980, *Bashan yeyu* therefore revisits Wu's own directorial career. However, this revisit is not a happy voyage down memory lane. Wu's career has been the tragic story of a humanist filmmaker who did not fit into existent political camps. In 1934, when *Goddess* was released, Wu was criticized for his humanism. The influential leftist critic Chenwu wrote, "The filmmaker's deep depiction ... of the human soul is by far incomparable with other shallow films in our theaters, but here is also precisely where the danger is. The director's emphasis on 'humanity' makes him prone to whitewashing or dissolving the film's social critical significance" (1993, 497). *Lang Tao Sha* attracted similar criticism and dealt a fatal blow to Wu's career. The humanist concern and the existentialist interrogation in this film were taken as an untimely and dangerous distraction, if not careless treason, during the war. Leftist critics were especially frustrated that Wu's humanist cinema would damage the momentum for societal changes that were urgently needed (Ni Lao 1936, 2). One critic worried that "after seeing the film, the audience takes home a sad sense of resignation, instead of a rage against this unjust society and a will to change" (Li Yi 1993, 497). Eventually, after the Communist takeover, *Lang Tao Sha* was singled out to be blamed for the "grave error" by the Shanghai film industry. The official Chinese film historian Cheng Jihua delivered the final say about this film: "[I]t advocates an absurd and counterrevolutionary thought, as it distorts the class struggles and national struggles and turns them into mutual vengeance based on a desire to 'survive'" (Cheng 1980, 459). This sealed *Lang Tao Sha*'s fate as well as Wu Yonggang's in the subsequent decades. He was branded a rightist, deprived of the chance to work in film except a couple of opera films before he was named as "dark warrior of the 1930s" and sent to a labor camp at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. From the 1930s as a young and talented experimentalist who made *The Goddess* and *Lang Tao Sha*, the most brilliant twin peaks in Chinese film history, to 1980 as a sick old man of seventy-three when he finally had a chance to return to directing a major feature film, Wu took on *Bashan yeyu* with mixed feelings.

Bashan yeyu's river journey is therefore also Wu's own filmography. In this film, he used silent-film techniques for the acting and framing of the characters to intensify the psychological changes, techniques that won him great accolades in *The Goddess* (Lin Shan 1981, 5). Like *Lang Tao Sha*, *Bashan yeyu* is set on a ship and features the dynamic between a fugitive/prisoner and his custodian. The emblematic close-up of the handcuffs in *Bashan yeyu* is a powerful reference to the same close-up shots in *Lang Tao Sha*. Qiushi's wife, the goddess in white veil, is featured as an opera actress. Her image and her stage performance sequence are both quotations from Wu's opera films in the 1950s. In this context, the Goddess Peak on the river in *Bashan yeyu*, seen through the

point-of-view of a poet in handcuffs, is a tribute to the ambition and the quest for modernist Chinese cinema that has been rendered void by history. That quest, having started with his film *Goddess*, seems to have been a bygone illusion, as the Goddess Peak is superimposed onto the silhouette of a dead artist, a ghostly woman in white. This goddess also reminds Chinese audiences of the poetic tropes that made this stretch of mountains household imagery: In the poet Song Yu's (290–223 BCE) erotically-charged rhapsodies, *Rhapsody of Gaotang* and *Rhapsody of the Goddess*, the Goddess Peak on the Three Gorges is the site of dreams, fantasies, and sexual encounters. It is associated with a sorceress who visits men in their dreams, then leaves them forlorn when they wake up and find her gone (Song Yu 2000, 273; see also Schafer 1980, 43–48; Watson 1962, 259). In this sense, she is not unlike the alluring yet cruel life of an artist and the capricious history that Wu dealt with. On the other hand, the Goddess Peak derives her name from another myth of a goddess and her eleven sisters, who came to earth to help Great Yu the flood-tamer drain the Chinese earth after the Great Deluge and make it habitable for ordinary humans. She and her sisters became the twelve peaks on the Three Gorges and remain in petrified yet humanly form as a sentinel, helping rivermen safely through the treacherous river passage.

In 1980, two years before his death, Wu Yonggang's last film *Bashan yeyu* is truly a pinnacle of humanism, his perennial passion and simultaneous liability. While the elegiac adoration of the Goddess Peak in the middle of the film is certainly a haunting remembrance of the past, Wu also intended for the river journey to turn sharply under the benevolent Goddess Peak, to a more hopeful future. The Goddess Peak, presented through the longing look of Qiushi (and the audience), therefore, is at the same time a historiographic monument of not having been, a monument of love lost, a sentinel of humanism safeguarding the dramatic transition of history, and a prospectorial height for the future for both Chinese cinema and the Chinese nation.

CODA: MOUNTAINS ON YANGTZE RIVER

The Goddess Peak on the Yangtze River in real life survived the notorious Three Gorges Dam project and still stands today above the water, though her height has been shortened significantly by hundreds of meters. The Three Gorges Dam project, with a cost of over 20 billion USD, has been a highly controversial hydraulic construction that resulted in the forced relocation of over two million residents, not to mention the enormous impact on the ecosystem and the irrevocable loss of culture and heritage. The project found an enthusiastic supporter in Mao Zedong, who in 1956 wrote a poem about his vision: “[W]alls of stone will stand upstream to the west to hold back the clouds and rain in the Wushan Mountain, till a smooth and wide lake rises from these narrow gorges. The Goddess Peak, if the Goddess is still well there, will surely

marvel at a world so changed” (quoted in Sheldon Lu 2009, 46).¹¹ The belief that human beings can change and conquer nature is a main feature of Maoist ideology. Mao even thought of the Goddess, but he was sure that she would also agree with this grand scale alteration of nature.

Despite decades of debates and opposition, construction started in 1993 and was officially completed in 2020. During the process, the water level between Wuhan and Chongqing rose more than 500 feet, submerging 13 cities, 140 towns, 1352 villages, and 115,000 acres of prime agricultural land, as well as countless archeological sites, historical and artistic treasures. The Yangtze River today is no longer the one we see in *Bashan yeyu*.

Today’s audience will see the film differently than that of 1981. They may look for the “real” mountains and sites that once were seen from the ship in the celluloid strips taken in 1980, which are now submerged under water. And after the bloodshed in 1989 that ended the quest for democracy in Post-Mao China, Chinese intellectuals have undergone dramatic changes since its re-awakening in 1980. The humanist utopia that the father and daughter fled to, for a time seemingly accessible in real life in the 1980s, is now suspended as only a cinematic landscape from a bygone era. The audience today might be surprised by the liberty and courage the film took in its critical interrogations of history, which is rare in today’s Chinese mainstream cinema. They may ask, where have the mountains gone? The Goddess Peak, if she is still well, must indeed marvel at the world so changed, but will also wait to inspire and safeguard future passages.

NOTES

1. Among the other awards, the best playwright award was given to Ye Nan and the best music award to Gao Tian for their work on *Bashan yeyu*, the award for best cinematography was given to Xu Qi, and the award for best art director was given to Chen Shaomian and Ding Chen for their work on *Tianyunshan*. Xie Jin also won the best director award for *Tianyunshan*, a film that I have written about extensively in my book *Literati Lenses: Wenren Landscape in Chinese Cinema in the Mao Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2019).
2. Since 1980, the film *Lushanlian* has continued to be routinely screened on the mountain of Lushan and is still showing there today, holding the Guinness Record for the longest first run of a film in one cinema.
3. *Teahouse* is set in a small teahouse in Beijing, while the drama of *Thunderstorm* happens in a chamber on the grand scale of a crumbling aristocratic family. Interestingly, both plays were adapted into great films in the ensuing years of the 1980s. For an account of the history of modern Chinese drama, see Chen Xiaomei, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002).
4. One of the earliest Chinese *yingxi* blockbusters, *Guer jiuzuji* (*An Orphan Rescues His Grandpa*, Zhang Shichuan, 1923), produced by Mingxing Studio in Shanghai, started this formula of an orphan reuniting with their family, followed by *Yulihun* (*The Death of Yuli*, Zhang Shichuan and Xu Hu), *Kuer ruonü* (*Miserable Son and*

- Daughter*, Zhang Shichuan, 1924), *Mang gu nü* (*The Blind Orphan Girl*, Zhang Shichuan, 1925), *Zimeihua* (*Twin Sisters*, Zheng Zhengqiu, 1934), *The Spring River Flows East* (Cai Chusheng and Zheng Junli, 1947), and a later revival of the genre in the Taiwanese tearjerker *Mama zai ai wo yici* (*My Beloved*, Chu Huang Chen, 1988).
5. True and Real in Chinese language are interchangeable. See Guo Xi's treatise translated and collected in Susan Bush and Hsio-Yen Shih, *Early Chinese Texts on Painting* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012) and Susan Bush, *The Chinese Literati on Painting: Su Shih (1037–1101) to Tung Ch'i-ch'ang (1555–1636)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971).
 6. It is also the only time in the history of Chinese cinema to date that this category has been awarded to an ensemble.
 7. Scar film dominated the Chinese screen during these few years right after the Cultural Revolution. It shared the same name in literature, named after the popular novel *Scar*. While they provided a much-needed emotional release and anger-venting in public cultural space, the melodramatic Manichean structure of the narrative also provided a quick acquittal to the protean and flux agents that are accountable in the recent violence, which in turn blocked the more profound interrogation and reflection that the nation needed to engage in. See my own discussion in *Literati Lenses*.
 8. Two articles that were published in 1979 in China were highly influential; one is Bai Jingsheng's "Throw Away the Crutches of Theater," calling for an independence of cinema from theater. The other was Zhang Nuanxin and Li Tuo's "On Modernization of Film Language," advocating for Chinese cinema to do away with theater in the perspective of world film history.
 9. The film's cinematographer was Cao Weiye.
 10. It is not the intention and is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a comparison between *Bashan yeyu* and the other two films. For the analysis of *Tianyunshan* in the same year, see my writing in *Literati Lenses*.
 11. Mao, whose poem pictured the dam being built in the Three Gorges, was not the first to come up with the idea of a large dam on the Yangtze. Sun Yat-sen proposed a Yangtze dam project in 1912, and similar ideas were discussed from time to time during the 1920s and 1930s. But it was the CCP government that pushed through the project despite many objections. See Audrey Ronning Toppint, and Lyman P. Van Slyke (1988), *Yangtze: Nature, History, and the River*. Reading: Addison Wesley.

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