Shanghai and Globalization through the Lens of Film Noir: Lou Ye's 2000 Film, *Suzhou River*

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In the 1990s, the film industry in China decentralized with the bankruptcy of the state-owned studio system. Privatized independent film companies took over where the government had left off and a more independent film culture emerged. Although obstacles such as political censorship, financial pressures, and Hollywood infiltration were still in the way for Chinese filmmakers, privatization of the film industry was under way. As a result of this process, new film productions of controversial subject matter came into being. In 1998 one of China's first independent film production companies—Dream Factory—was founded. Dream Factory's first production, in association with Berlin-based German producer Philippe Bober, was the *Suzhou River,* directed by its founder Lou Ye.[1] The 2000 film, though winning prizes at international film festivals such as the Rotterdam Film Festival and the Paris Film Festival, has been banned by the Chinese government since its production.

Suzhou River is set in contemporary Shanghai during a transitional period of institutionalization of globalization and capitalism. The film combines various aspects of film noir—aspects such as noir anxiety, negative space, moral conflicts, duality and foil characters, identity crisis, "Liebestod" or love death— to create a world that can be seen through multiple perspectives and it associates noir styles and themes with social concerns and social attitudes. Stylistically, the film depicts the violent nature of the transformations in noiresque moods of bleakness, disillusionment, and pessimism with shaky handheld camerawork, expressionistic lighting, disorienting visual schemes, and a dark and gloomy appearance. Thematically,

saturated with the "amour fou" and "femme fatale" narratives of romance and love are negative experiences associated with commercialization and globalization.

Globalization, either in terms of foreign trade and investment or globally shared social and cultural experience, plays a prominent role in the film. It is seen not only in the numerous bar scenes showing American and European alcoholic drinks served and consumed, but also in the film's romantic storyline revolving around the Western mermaid fairy tale, an example of the cultural experience of deterritorialization. The effects of globalization on ordinary Chinese are shown both at the daily living level and at the emotional level, as the social and emotional experiences of urban Shanghai residents have become more and more intertwined with cultural and commercial influences that have their origins elsewhere. The mermaid folklore creates a bridge across cultures and histories, and signifies an ideal view of Western influences. The myth that globalization (as symbolized by the globalized icon of a fairy-tale mermaid going through history and across cultures) can be relied on for fortunate "magical" change is buffeted by its mutation into a seductive consumerist culture/reality (as symbolized by the image of a sexy and commodified "mermaid.")

In *Suzhou River,* we are granted access to a highly subjective personal world via a voyeuristic camera. Voice-over narration is juxtaposed with point-of-view shots. A present but invisible videographer narrates the story with extreme close-ups that express the private desires of characters with heightened intensity. The videographer/narrator is involved in a relationship with the showgirl Meimei at the local bar Happy Tavern, and shot a lot of intimate close-ups of her. The videographer then takes us through a story he was told by a motorcycle courier named Mardar. Recently released from jail, Mardar explains his love for Moudan, whom he was entrusted with in his job as a courier.[2] Pressured by his criminal boss, Mardar betrays their love by kidnapping Moudan to blackmail her father, but she escapes and jumps into the Suzhou River, claiming she'll come back and look for him as a mermaid. Years later, Mardar begins his search for Moudan and becomes obsessed with Meimei, who looks like Moudan both in her appearance and in her role

as a night club commercial show mermaid. Eventually Mardar finds Moudan, and dies along with her in the Suzhou River in a drunken driving accident.

Duality and foil characters (Moudan and Meimei) play central roles in the film. We see this in two ways in the movie. First, the entire relationship between Mardar and Moudan is a foil to the relationship between the videographer/narrator and Meimei. The idea of ideal love between the "legendary" Mardar and Moudan adds to the relationship tensions between the videographer/narrator and Meimei's relationship. Second, the mermaid symbol also acts as a foil in the movie; Moudan clings to a faith in the transformative power of the historical mermaid fairy tale, while her alter ego Meimei, named after "Mermaid," personifies the commercial appropriations of the fairy tale. Moreover, the Moudan persona is named after what is arguably China's national flower, the peony. The Chinese national essence and cultural identity are thus grounded into her identity. [3] If Meimei's commercial mermaid identity is about the adverse impact globalization has on Chinese society, Moudan's identity of innocence and pure love is associated with belief in magical transformation through the importation of Western ideals.

Importation of Western ideals manifests itself strongly through the symbol of the mermaid, which is an imported image/idea from the West. Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* advocates classic notions of selfless love and eternity. Moudan's leap of faith into the Suzhou River for the idea of pure love is similar to the Little Mermaid's willingness to give up life for the sake of the immortal soul. The Andersen fairy tale mermaid, with the innocent and pure girl/love image, is about single-minded devotion and faith. It is also about wishful thinking in terms of the magical powers of transformation and promises of eternal love, as well as the disillusionment with those promises. According to the definition of a fairy tale, its central characteristics of must include magic and/or magical characters and unique adventures. According to J.R.R. Tolkien,

> A "fairy-story" is one that touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy. Faerie itself may perhaps

> most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power…"[4]

The "Faerie" in *Suzhou River* is the mystical mermaid imagery that traverses the subconscious of the city residents of Shanghai, including Moudan. Moudan has been trapped in a world with an absent mother and an uncaring father. Her conception of the mermaid is what she thinks will eventually set her free from the physical entrapment of the kidnapping and the emotional entrapment of Mardar and her family. She runs to the edge of the bridge and explains to Mardar that she is wounded by his betrayal and that she will jump into the water and become a mermaid. She says that if he truly loves her, he will find her. Moudan's faith in the fairy tale magic of transformation into a renewed afterlife reflects Shanghai residents' faith in potent cultural (or non-cultural) symbols of the West as reference points. The concept of the mermaid (essentially a globalized cultural symbol of the West) as a courier of hope and transformation is manifest in one particular shot in the film: a mermaid perches on some rocks bordering the Suzhou River. In addition to her radiant blonde hair, her costume is an alluring glow of golden orange, in sharp contrast to the filthy river and its bleak embankment. The golden beauty of the mermaid conveys a sense of optimism as opposed to the pessimistic reality, and infuses the attractiveness of the shinning West with a magic power for potential future transformations. For Moudan, the reality is a cruel wasteland but the faith that she irrationally clings to is her otherworldly horizon.

If the mermaid means faith in a new horizon and transformation, the image of the Suzhou River that extends throughout the movie signifies the city of Shanghai's past history and present reality. The movie begins with the camera winding down the Suzhou River, panning the boats, people, and buildings on and alongside the river. We are presented with a sense of world weariness, seen through a river gallery of anonymous men, industrial smokestacks, decaying warehouses, derelict buildings, and rubbish-strewn embankments. Darting camera work and jump cuts randomly capture people working and living

on their boats, filming the river as the lifeblood of the city as well as a symbol of the undocumented history of the city. As the film narration goes: "If you watch long enough the river will show you everything. It will show you people working, it will show you friendship, families, love, and loneliness as well."[5]

Flowing through the center of Shanghai, the 78-mile long Suzhou River was built during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) as a transportation waterway to spread goods. The history of Shanghai and the life of its working class people are closely tied to this waterway. The countless flour mills, textile mills, oil plants, chemical plants, and warehouses on the banks of the Suzhou River brought modern industry to Shanghai. At the same time, they brought pollution to the river. Many of the blue-collar workers living in the area suffered from poverty and the area turned filthy, foul-smelling, and impoverished. As it is often said: "Life in Shanghai is bound to the Suzhou River"[6] . Once the stronghold of industrial China, the river has become a dismal wasteland—a sample of environmental calamity as industrialization turns it into a reservoir of urban decay. We hardly need to be reminded that Shanghai used to be the industrial stronghold of socialist China. The Maoist dream of an industrialized China was that backyard steel mills and communes characterized the countryside while smokestacks and factories sprang up in the cities.[7] But the reality of the river mocks the Maoist socialist vision of a forest of smokestacks and factories. Its degenerated state is a reminder of historical failures. Its wasted and degenerated state is a sign of Shanghai's need for change.

Lou Ye resorts to relentlessly shaky handheld shots to portray a fluid world of cultural assimilation filled with anxieties and uncertainties. The river itself is allegorical of the erosion of cultural boundaries. It highlights Shanghai's Treaty Port identity as the waterway that brought China into contact with international trade. When commodities are transported from one place to another along the river, culture travels too. For the director, who claims that the only constant in the city is the Suzhou River, which "feeds the city like the artery feeds the heart," the river is both a symbol of roots and a symbol of

change.[8] The restless handheld camera shots mimic the winding and meandering flow of the river, revealing traffic and connections and signifying the breakthrough of an enclosed society. The river's drift also presses the idea of disorientation and the dissolution of all that is concrete, acquiring a cluster of connotations related to spatial and temporal change, fluidity, instability, transience, fantasy, and intoxication.

The powerful sensual presence of the river with its stories of romantic love is also about disillusionment. Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* tells how illusions and disillusions act as catalysts for the Little Mermaid to start a new life. The Little Mermaid's vision of life under the sea is that it can never be as magnificent as life on land. She is disillusioned with her "underwater" life and is re-born on land as human in search of love. Once her goal of living on land is achieved, she suffers the blow of disillusionment as the mermaid's true love is in love with another woman. [9] The motifs of illusion and disillusion are inserted into the twin love stories of the film.

In an interview, Lou Ye made an interesting comment on the mermaid motif in the following excerpt:

> The whole idea [of the mermaid] is a Western import, like Coca-Cola and McDonald's—everything the Fifth Generation filmmakers refused to admit as Chinese…But how can you draw this line? As a child, I can remember my parents telling me Andersen's "The Little Mermaid." And when did my parents first hear it? It's impossible to say. This, I think, is very important with the filmmakers of my generation. We're not interested in being cultural immigration officials saying, this is Chinese, this is not Chinese.[10]

Lou Ye rejects the notion of the mermaid as a pure Western symbol. Rather, he refuses to draw a line between cultural differences and proposes a global framework to think beyond the West-China dichotomy. For him, the mermaid is also a symbol of the constantly shifting Chinese culture, which synthesizes foreign influences. Growing up with Western stories

and products rather than Maoist propaganda, Lou Ye sees the world as one global community, which has a great impact on how his generation views its immediate surroundings and interprets the formation of China's contemporary cultural landscape. The mermaid icon is first of all associated with an illusionary promise of freedom and an outlet. This icon that Moudan and the Shanghai residents believe in and cling to forms a sharp contrast with the contemporary alter-mermaid, who is the street-smart and hard-bitten Meimei. This mutation from the naïve schoolgirl image to the seductive show girl image, as well as the presence of the mermaid as illusion, entrapment, and commodity signifies the post-socialist cultural mutation—illusionary beliefs in the magic power of transformation are turned into disillusioned entrapment of consumerism.

If the mermaid means magic renewal and transformation to Moudan, for Meimei it is an entrapment of consumerist reality. As Moudan's alter ego, Meimei is associated with another historical myth of the mermaid icon. Historically, mermaids have meant many things to different cultures. They once symbolized a sort of seductive "femme fatale" who lures sailors to their deaths. "Most ancient cultures, from Greeks and Romans to Celts and Nordic tribes have references to merpeople and water spirits, with all sorts of body configurations and motives." From the Greek tradition, passed down from Homer's *Odyssey,* the sirens are gorgeous half-fish or half-beast women singing beguiling songs to lure men and kill them.[11] This siren image suggests that the mermaid may be beautiful and desirable, but she is a trap. Meimei's conversion into a commodified mermaid entrapped in the bar's water tank points toward this notion of a trap.

Moudan lives in a fantasy dream whereas Meimei is entrapped by consumerism. Meimei relies on her job of posing as a mermaid in the Happy Tavern for economic and individual independence. This popular contemporary longing to commodify and retain a mermaid's form is an interesting amalgamation of cultural mutation. As a cultural symbol drawn from the Western fairy tale tradition, the mermaid is incorporated into a contemporary Chinese setting as the inspiration for a consumerist display of female sex appeal. It is deprived of its

original idealistic values of selfless love and new life, leaving the empty mermaid shell for commodified gratification.

The cultural void is also marked by Meimei's houseboat, which serves as a tangible reminder of her transient lifestyle with its physical status of rootless fluidity. The seemingly random documentary shots of a dazed Meimei wandering through the streets without a clear sense of location and belonging address the disintegration of place-bound identity. Her destabilizing identity is further clouded by her resemblance to Moudan. Her wig and mermaid costume signify a post-national identity based upon Western/commercial influences. In addition to Meimei, all of the other main characters are urban transients with "unknown origins." We are hardly provided little information about their family background or social relations, other than their occupations and crime involvement.

The city pays a social price for the shiny-lit façade-illusion of urban development. Far from the official presentation of Shanghai's glamorous development, Lou Ye presents the city at its back-alley level by establishing a correlation between the intoxication of the waters and the intoxication of the main characters. As the backdrop in the film, Shanghai is a shadowy and discolored city of intoxicated youths, criminals and smugglers, and seedy nightclubs. Scenes at a local bar and along the river interchange with each other. The bar culture promotes the new consumerist philosophy of instant gratification, and alcoholism plays a major role in the film's plotline. First, Moudan's father earns his money through his black-market dealings in Russian vodka. Later his ill-acquired money becomes the root of Moudan's kidnapping, which constitutes the central line of the story. Moudan's intoxication with Mardar's company and Mardar's intoxication with the motorbike are other forms of intoxication in the film. It is small wonder that the two of them eventually die together after drinking a bottle of Russian vodka and then speeding into the river on Mardar's motorbike.

The film's noir-style cinematography highlights the harmful aspects of commercialized life. As is common in the film noir genre, low-key lighting is used throughout the movie to create a negative space. The neon light, produced by modern technology, gives off light that doesn't brighten the room and highlights the

theme of commercial intoxication. The images of decay, which are stressed through washed-out coloring as a result of the use of color correction filter, add to the same structure of feeling—the sense of weariness and degradation in social life. The towering skyscrapers in the smog, which are the newest landmarks and the very icon of transnational capitalist impetus, are an ever-present reminder of the post-Mao consumerist China and urban development.

Suzhou River presents Shanghai, usually a showcase of China's economic development, as a negative urban space making the transition from socialist underdevelopment to multinational capitalism. Shanghai is a city caught between cultures, where crumbling old buildings and a polluted river coexist with the contemporary consumption of Western products and modern technology. This is a space littered with social and natural wreckage and a space where all the rules have quietly changed.

The presence of the globalized icon of the mermaid as both myth and commodity signifies incongruity and mutation of contemporary culture. The fact that Mardar and Moudan drowned together, intoxicated, in the Suzhou River during a motorbike ride delivers the message that the sought-after magical power of globalization doesn't fulfill wished-for promises. If the innocent and idealistic mermaid Moudan and her belief system represent China's idealized view of a promising globalization, the hard and bitten "temptress mermaid" Meimei (Metzger 2007), entrapped and commodified within a consumerist water tank, showcases a concrete consumerist reality with negative social consequences.

Endnotes

[1]Ko Fanfan, FilmFestivals.com,.www.filmfestivals.com/paris_00/itw_louye.htm (accessed July 2005).

[2]The names in the film are not directly translated into Chinese pinyin, but are translated from Chinese into an English-friendly version. Hence "Mudan" is "Moudan," whereas "Mada" is "Mardar." *Suzhou River,* directed by Lou Ye (2000, Strand Releasing Home Video, 2001).

[3]Whether peony (mudan) or plum (mei) should be the national flower of China has been to the subject of a long-running debate because both flowers are national favorites. According to the online article "Chinese to Decide National Flower" at *People's Daily*'s English Web site, "Chinese are now trying to make decision on their national flower between the peony and Chinese plum blossom. The selection is much harder than it would seem at first glance since both flowers are favored by a large group of people since long ago." "Chinese to Decide National Flower," *People's Daily,* November 26, 2001, http://english.people.com.cn/200111/26/eng20011126.85345.shtml (accessed July 2005).

[4]J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories," *Tree and Leaf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/introduction/ftdefinition.html (accessed July 2005).

[5]*Suzhou River,* directed by Lou Ye.

[6]Bu Jia, "Stories of the Suzhou River," *China Pictorial*, June 2002, http://www.china-pictorial.com/chpic/htdocs/English/content/200206/3-2.html (accessed July 2005).

[7]R. Keith Schoppa, *The Columbia Guide to Modern Chinese History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 112-115.

[8]Ko, Fanfan, FilmFestivals.com,.http://www.filmfestivals.com/paris_00/itw_louye.htm (accessed July 2005).

[9]Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid,* http://hca.gilead.org.il/li_merma.html (accessed July 2005).

[10]"The World is Watching," Chicago Reader Web site, January 3, 2001, http:www.chireader.com/movies/archives/2001/0103/010309.html, (accessed July 2005).

[11]Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Mythology: The Age of Fable* (Philadelphia: Courage, 1990), 195.

[12]Sean Metzger, "The Little (Chinese) Mermaid: Importing 'Western' Femininity in Lou Ye's Suzhou He (Suzhou River)," in *How East Asian Films are Reshaping National Identities: Essays on the Cinemas of China, Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong,* Andrew David Jackson, Michael Gibb, and David White, eds. (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007).

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