

ROUTLEDGE ADVANCES IN FILM STUDIES

# American and Chinese-Language Cinemas

Examining Cultural Flows

Edited by  
Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip



# American and Chinese-Language Cinemas

Critics frequently describe the influence of “America,” through Hollywood and other cultural industries, as a form of cultural imperialism. This unidirectional model of interaction does not address, however, the counter-flows of Chinese-language films into the American film market or the influence of Chinese filmmakers, film stars, and aesthetics in Hollywood.

The aim of this collection is to (re)consider the complex dynamics of transnational cultural flows between American and Chinese-language film industries. The goal is to bring a more historical perspective to the subject, focusing as much on the Hollywood influence on early Shanghai or post-war Hong Kong films as on the intensifying flows between American and Chinese-language cinemas in recent decades. Contributors emphasize the processes of appropriation and reception involved in transnational cultural practices, examining film production, distribution, and reception.

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# **American and Chinese- Language Cinemas**

Examining Cultural Flows

**Edited by Lisa Funnell and  
Man-Fung Yip**

First published 2015  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

and by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,  
an informa business*

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

American and Chinese-language cinemas : examining cultural flows /  
edited by Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip.

pages cm — (Routledge advances in film studies ; 34)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Motion picture industry—United States—History. 2. Motion picture industry—China—History. 3. Motion picture industry—United States—Chinese influences. 4. Motion picture industry—China—American influences. I. Funnell, Lisa, 1980— editor. II. Yip, Man-Fung, 1973— editor.

PN1993.5.U6A854 2014

791.430951—dc23

2014017807

ISBN: 978-0-415-73182-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-84956-0 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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# Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our contributors, whose insightful work is featured throughout this book. We are grateful to the editors at Routledge, and especially Felisa N. Salvago-Keyes and Andrew Weckenmann, for supporting our project and offering guidance throughout the various stages of publication. Finally, we dedicate this book to our families, who have offered us unconditional love and support as we pursued this project.

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# Introduction

## Examining Cultural Flows

*Lisa Funnell and Man-Fung Yip*

The shift towards the transnational has been one of the most prominent trends within film studies generally, and Chinese-language cinema studies more specifically, over the past 10 to 15 years. A growing number of publications have appeared that move beyond the standard national cinema paradigm and reconsider film historiography from a transnational perspective.<sup>1</sup> But, as noted by Song Hwee Lim, the description of a cinema as transnational does not necessarily displace the notion of the national but rather repositions it within a broader geopolitical and cultural framework (5). Continuing and developing this rapidly expanding area of inquiry, this collection explores the transnational flows and connections between two major film industries and cultures, namely American and Chinese-language cinemas.

Hollywood is a leader in global film culture. For decades, Hollywood has saturated the international film market with its products, enjoyed some of the largest box-office returns, and maintained consistent (popular) cultural influence beyond a single picture or cycle of films. In the Chinese-speaking world, Hollywood made its presence felt as early as in the Shanghai cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, not only dominating the local film market but also providing a model, both commercial and aesthetic, for many Chinese filmmakers and film producers. Although this presence was diminished after the establishment of a Chinese communist regime in 1949, Hollywood films continued to exert a major impact on both the Hong Kong and Taiwan film industries during the postwar era. In the 1990s, as China began to loosen its restrictions on foreign film imports, Hollywood became attentive (again) to the huge and largely untapped mainland Chinese film market, which comprised (as of the mid-2000s) over 200 million moviegoers—not including the 60 million ethnic Chinese living in Taiwan, Hong Kong, the United States, and Canada and throughout Southeast Asia (Curtin 1). In order to generate box-office revenue in the Chinese-speaking world, American production companies began investing in Chinese co-productions; setting up production centers in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong; and incorporating Chinese themes, actors, and commercial products into their films. Michael Curtin describes Hollywood's tactics as "the latest turn in a strategy that has perpetuated American media dominance in global markets for

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almost a century and contributed to the homogenization of popular culture under the aegis of Western institutions” (1).

While Curtin is right in pointing out that Hollywood’s growing focus on the Chinese-speaking film market is nothing new but a continuation of its longstanding strategy of overseas market penetration, his reduction of such a strategy to “American media dominance” and “homogenization of popular culture” is perhaps too hasty and has to be read with caution. Critics frequently describe the influence of “America,” through Hollywood and other cultural industries, as a form of “cultural imperialism,” but such a view often fails to address the complex dynamics involved in transnational cultural flows. Zhiwei Xiao argues that scholars typically stress Western domination—which is often construed as Americanization—rather than the role of agency and appropriation in the cultural transaction (88). The problem of cultural imperialism theory, according to Ryan Dunch, is that colonized people are viewed as passive recipients of Western cultural texts, a sentiment that relays a condescending attitude towards the subalterns (302). Despite its laudable emphasis on unequal cultural relationships, then, the concept of cultural imperialism cannot adequately account for the active reception and creative reinvention of American (popular/film) culture in the Chinese-speaking world. Moreover, the idea entails a unidirectional model of interaction that addresses neither the counter-flows of Chinese-language films into the American film market nor the influence of Chinese filmmakers, film stars, and aesthetics in Hollywood.

While focusing on a variety of transnational formations, the chapters in this collection seek to reconsider Sino-American film exchanges beyond the cultural imperialism paradigm and emphasize instead the processes of appropriation and reception and/or the multidirectional nature of cultural flows. Taken together, the chapters not only bring a broad historical perspective to the subject, focusing as much on the Hollywood influence on early Shanghai films as on the intensifying flows between American and Chinese-language cinemas in recent decades; they also attest to this collection’s goal of a multileveled and multidimensional approach, one that recognizes cinematic transnationalism as a complex phenomenon taking place at various levels of film production, distribution, and reception.

This collection consists of four parts, each emphasizing and exploring Sino-American film flows at a particular level of analysis. The first part, *Style, Narrative, Form*, examines how elements of narrative and film style circulate across borders and become the objects of appropriation for filmmakers. Zhiwei Xiao considers the phenomenon of Chinese remakes of American films during the 1930s and explores the ways in which Chinese filmmakers copied, appropriated, and subsequently transformed Hollywood’s original film texts. He argues that early Chinese films need to be understood in connection with the Hollywood films that were distributed in China because, in many cases, the latter functioned as crucial subtexts against which the Chinese productions were conceived and deliberately set to contrast. Alison

Hulme discusses the emergence of what she calls the “two cinemas” of 1930s Shanghai—Hollywood-influenced films and the critical realism tradition—within the political context of the time. These two co-existing cinemas, she goes on to argue, can be seen as a precursor for the existence of capitalist and communist dreams in current-day China. Katherine Spring discusses the influence of the global digital transformation on the rise of the “synth-pop” score in Hong Kong cinema and its concomitant assimilation of Hollywood soundtrack style. Examining the music from John Woo’s *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), Spring draws attention to the possibility of a “glocal” aesthetic in Hong Kong film music that is informed by Hollywood scoring practices. Kin-Yan Szeto considers Ang Lee’s *Life of Pi* (2012) within the larger context of both his English- and Chinese-language films and investigates how he critically explores the sensibility of desire through film narrative, cinematography, spectacle, and cross-cultural ideological engagements.

The second part, *Genre*, explores the copious ways in which genre functions as a “contact zone” where American and Chinese-language cinemas meet and interact with one another. Kwai-Cheung Lo considers the development of the “minority nationality film” in mainland Chinese cinema during the 1950s and 1960s. He examines how this emerging genre became a substitute for Hollywood films in the People’s Republic of China while paradoxically contributing to the state policy of creating a “national style.” Man-Fung Yip discusses Hong Kong-based martial arts/action films of the 1970s and 1980s as an example of “minor transnationalism” and explores the complex processes of appropriation, negotiation, and cultural translation at work in these films. Vivian Lee considers the intertextual references between recent Chinese war films and their American and East Asian counterparts. In particular, she examines how Chinese filmmakers utilize generic conventions and paradigms in Western cinema to serve specific aesthetic, ideological, and commercial ends.

The third part, *Marketing, Exhibition, Reception*, considers the various ways in which film, film culture, and film stars are marketed and consumed across national borders. Weihong Bao and Nathaniel Brennan explore the meaning-making process surrounding Chinese-language cinema both at a site of production (Chongqing) and at a site of exhibition (New York) in order to explore how its politics of reception are tied to ethnic community, geopolitics, and international communication. Their chapter illustrates how film distribution and exhibition networks operate as sites of meaning production, discursive struggle, and community formation. Brian Hu moves beyond the concept of nostalgia to examine why overseas Chinese consume Chinese-language films. He considers Chinese-language cinema within the context of immigrant communities and argues that Chinese-language movie theaters provide semi-private spaces for ethnic minorities. Lunpeng Ma explores the consumption of Hollywood in postwar China, focusing specifically on the film magazines *The Metro News* and *Western Movie Pictorial*. He considers how Hollywood—its stars, films, studios, and cinema

system—was presented, translated, and consumed through print culture. Yiman Wang retraces Anna May Wong's controversial reception in prewar and wartime China utilizing newly discovered archival materials. She argues for the importance of a "third" term of Sino-American film interactions that centers on the film activities of diasporic Chinese.

The fourth part, *Performance, Identity, Representation*, considers how contemporary Chinese-language and American films engage in discourses of national, ethnic, and/or racial exchange through both content (i.e. how the films convey meaning through casting, characterization, and identity performance) and context (i.e. how the films themselves perform identities via funding and distribution). Victor Fan considers the Chinese Fifth Generation in terms of inter-regional discourse and explores the cultural synergy between mainland China, Hollywood, and Hong Kong in the 1980s and 1990s. He explores the "failure" of these films to perform Chinese nationality and views them as a form of American independent film that was outsourced to the studios and production companies in the People's Republic. Finally, Kenneth Chan examines techno-Orientalism and the representation of the violent ethnic other in the American film *Dark Matter* (2007), directed by Chen Shi-Zheng.

## NOTES

1. Examples of this burgeoning trend of publications include the following collections: Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden's *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader* (2006), Nataša Durovicová and Kathleen Newman's *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives* (2009), Leon Hunt and Leung Wing-Fai's *East Asian Cinemas: Exploring Transnational Connections on Film* (2008), Philippa Gates and Lisa Funnell's *Transnational Asian Identities in Pan-Pacific Cinemas: The Reel Asian Exchange* (2012), and Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome's *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (2013). For examples specifically on Chinese-language cinema, see Sheldon Hsia-Peng Lu's *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, and Gender* (1997) and Lingzhen Wang's *Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts* (2011).

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Section I

**Style, Narrative, Form**

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# 1 For Better or Worse, *Don't Change Your Husband!* Remakes and Appropriations of American Films in Republican China, 1911–1949

*Zhiwei Xiao*

As one of the most important forces shaping the global cultural landscape, Hollywood's importance is partially reflected in the fact that no serious account of other national cinemas is possible without sufficient knowledge and understanding of it. For example, anyone writing about early Chinese cinema has to take into account that during much of the first half of the twentieth century, 80 to 85 percent of the films shown in the country's movie theaters were Hollywood products. This fundamental fact necessitates a different way of conceptualizing Chinese film history and compels scholars to look at the narrative style, cinematic techniques, and aesthetic orientations of Chinese cinema in terms of the domestic film industry's survival strategies, driven by the need to develop a competitive advantage against Hollywood. In this regard, the observation by Stephen Crofts that national cinema is usually defined against Hollywood seems to apply to the Chinese case as well (49). A fuller and more nuanced understanding of early Chinese cinema thus requires more attention to Hollywood and its impact on the Chinese film industry. This chapter is an attempt to examine a prominent trend in early Chinese filmmaking, namely the Chinese remakes of American films. By demonstrating the ways in which Chinese filmmakers copied, appropriated, and eventually transformed Hollywood's original film texts through the remake process, I argue that early Chinese films need to be understood in connection with the American films that were distributed in China because in many cases, the latter were the crucial subtexts against which the Chinese productions were conceived and deliberately set to contrast.<sup>1</sup>

Scholarly assessment of Hollywood's impact on Chinese filmmaking has undergone a noticeable shift in recent years. In contrast to the conventional view of early Chinese cinema as mere copies and imitations of American films, a new generation of scholars stresses the agency of Chinese filmmakers by focusing on the ways in which the Hollywood model was appropriated, adapted, and transformed to address local conditions.<sup>2</sup> Yet, regardless of one's position on the issue, the majority of the scholarship on this subject seems to be more preoccupied with the "long take" than the "close-up"—that is, most published work tends to discuss the general picture of Hollywood's presence in China rather than offering detailed case

studies of Hollywood's impact on specific films. By exploring the phenomenon of Chinese remakes of American films during the 1930s through case studies, this chapter demonstrates that Chinese filmmakers often directly borrowed ideas and techniques from Hollywood films but then rewrote and transformed the American originals. This common practice represents an important aspect of Chinese cinema in the pre-communist era and deserves more scholarly attention.

While primarily situated in the context of Chinese film studies, this chapter also bears relevance to the scholarly literature on film remakes. Most of the published work on this subject seems to be preoccupied with Hollywood remaking foreign films or producing updated versions of its own earlier box-office successes.<sup>3</sup> However, as a number of recent studies suggest, filmmakers in other countries have been engaged in similar practices by copying American films. Just as Bollywood films “quote, borrow from, and transform Hollywood’s original texts” (Richards 349) and Spanish filmmakers “copied” American films in the late twentieth century (Herbert 31), Chinese filmmakers did the same in the early twentieth century and continue to do so today. As Rashna Wadia Richards has proposed, we need to move away from a Hollywood-centered approach and broaden our perspective to include other varieties of the remake phenomenon (344). By discussing the Chinese remakes of American films, I hope to both complicate and enrich the current discourse on the subject.

### **DON'T CHANGE YOUR HUSBAND: ONE TALE, TWO VERSIONS**

In 1928 Da Zhonghua-Baihe Film Company in Shanghai produced a film called *Qinghai chong wen*, the literal translation of which reads something like “kisses again.” Yet the film’s producer followed the common practice of the time by providing film captions in both Chinese and English and giving the film an English title, which is identical to that of Cecil B. DeMille’s 1919 Hollywood production, *Don’t Change Your Husband*. Whether the choice of this English title was motivated by a desire to exploit the publicity generated by DeMille’s film or intended as homage and acknowledgment, it deliberately sets the film against a prior Hollywood text and invites a comparative viewing.<sup>4</sup>

*Don’t Change Your Husband* is the second film in DeMille’s trilogy about marriage and divorce, which began with *Old Wives for New* (1918) and ended with *Why Change Your Wife* (1920) (Higashi 56). The film opens with a caption that reads: “This film does not deal with the tread of victorious armies, nor defeated Huns—but is just a little sidelight on the inner life of Mr. and Mrs. Porter—who found that they should not have looked for their marital troubles with a telescope—but with a microscope.” Immediately, DeMille frames his story as a conjugal issue and in psychological terms. Leila Porter, the wife, is unhappy with her husband, James Porter,

because he has many habits that she finds annoying: he drops his cigar ashes everywhere, eats onions, and does not wear his collar properly. Worst of all, he neglects Leila's emotional needs and even forgets their wedding anniversary. Leila is finally fed up with him and decides to spend a weekend with her friend, Mrs. Huckney, at the latter's country house. While there, she falls in love with Mrs. Huckney's nephew, a man named Schuyler Van Sutphen, who offers a contrast to her husband in every possible way: he is attentive, good-mannered, and always dressed meticulously. But shortly after Leila divorces James and marries Schuyler, she finds serious flaws in her new husband: Schuyler is financially broke and even uses Leila's money to keep a mistress.

James, on the other hand, begins to reform himself after the divorce. He regularly works out with a personal trainer, shaves his mustache, makes efforts to dress properly, and spares no expense to look polished. Even his Chinese servant, who used to wear a long Chinese gown before the divorce, is now dressed in a Western suit. James has also stopped eating onions, and this change, which is arguably reflective of his overall transformation, is made clear to Leila when they have dinner together. More importantly, the film gives the impression that the personal improvements of James go hand in hand with his newfound career success; a close-up of newspaper headlines informs the audience that he has been promoted to president of a trust company.

While the film initially contrasts James and Schuyler through costuming, mannerisms, and attentiveness to Leila, it later compares them by juxtaposing James' growth with Schuyler's degeneration. For example, Schuyler may not drop his cigar ashes everywhere or put his feet on Leila's knitting work as James did, but he throws his matchsticks all over the place and snatches the newspaper from Leila's hands before she has finished reading it. Likewise, although James used to stay at work late into the night, Schuyler is worse and only uses "working late" as an excuse to spend time with his mistress. With his changes, James is rewarded with a promotion by his company, while the moral deficiencies of Schuyler have resulted in the failure of his business. It comes as no surprise that Leila, upon learning about Schuyler's extramarital affair and financial troubles, leaves him and remarries James. Interestingly, the film hints that James has somewhat "returned" to his old ways after they remarry. In the final scenes of the film, Leila can be seen playing solitaire with James seated next to her; although James no longer drops cigar ash onto her cards, he still buries himself in his newspaper. Leila seems more willing to accept some of his habits because James offers her the emotional attention she desires. The film ends with James remembering their anniversary and giving Leila a present he picked out well ahead of time.

The Chinese version of *Don't Change Your Husband* is notably different. The film begins with a man named Chen Mengtian, a dandy college student, returning home in his limousine after a long night of wild partying. He looks

drunk and wretched, with an equally inebriated girl leaning on his shoulder. Their car even knocks a street peddler to the ground and speeds away without stopping. The film then cuts to the male protagonist, Wang Qimin, who shows up at work late one morning and is fired as a result. Back at home, Wang's wife, Xie Lijun, is seen cleaning the house. As she dusts the desk, the scene cuts to a close-up of a photo frame that has the portraits of her and her husband juxtaposed next to each other. She pauses briefly and then replaces her husband's portrait with a picture of Chen. As she looks at Chen's picture affectionately, the caption reads: "Babe, you have not written me for days and I am not going to let you get away with this." It is clear that she and Chen have been having an affair. As Xie sits down and begins to write to Chen, Wang comes home, much to Xie's surprise. Wang notices the change in the photo frame and confronts Xie about it. Xie is defiant and runs away. At this moment, Wang's mother returns with groceries. Wang shows her a letter Chen wrote to Xie, which Wang intercepted early that morning, causing him to arrive late for work.

In the next scene, Wang's mother shows up at her in-laws' house with the letter and demands an explanation. Xie's mother claims ignorance about the affair, but as soon as Wang's mother leaves, she tells her servants to go to Chen's place to bring Xie home. Meanwhile, after leaving home, Xie goes to Chen's apartment only to find him driving away with another woman. She is devastated and collapses to the ground. Fortunately, the servants show up and bring her home in an automobile. Later, Xie's mother manages to have Chen brought to her house to discuss the situation. Chen suggests that Xie divorce Wang and marry him. A few days later, the two parties—Wang accompanied by his mother and Xie escorted by her mother along with Chen—meet in a divorce attorney's office. When it comes to signing the legal papers, Wang is apparently reluctant to go through with the proceedings and Xie also seems to have a moment of hesitation, but they both have agents eager to act on their behalves: while Wang's mother signs the papers for him, Chen grabs Xie's hand and makes her sign the documents as well.

After the divorce, Wang's mother watches her son languishing in depression but is powerless to help him. In the meantime, Xie begins living with Chen despite her concern over his faithfulness. As Chen keeps repeating his devotion to her, there is a close-up of Chen's maid, who, upon overhearing his promises, bursts into a sarcastic laugh behind his back. Things get more complicated when Xie's father, an upright and tradition-minded gentleman who is unaware of his daughter's divorce because he spends most of his time in another town tending his business, returns home to attend a birthday party given in his honor. Not wanting him to learn about his daughter's divorce, Xie's mother begs Wang to show up at the birthday celebration and to pretend that nothing has happened. Wang agrees to cooperate but cannot hide his true emotions during the party. In the end, the old man learns of the truth and condemns his daughter's behavior. Meanwhile, Chen receives a telegram from his father, who threatens to cut off further financial support

if Chen does not return home immediately to consummate his marriage to a girl to whom he is betrothed. Faced with his father's ultimatum, Chen quickly packs his suitcase and hurries home.

Devastated by Chen's abandonment, Xie falls unconscious. Her father decides that the best solution to the mess is for Wang to take her back. Wang agrees but has to convince his mother to forgive Xie. His mother reluctantly accepts the proposal, and Xie, still unconscious, is brought back to Wang's house. When she wakes up and realizes what has happened, she runs to a waterfront and attempts to kill herself. Fortunately, Wang has been following her and arrives in time to save her. In the final scene, the couple embraces, and the film ends with Wang saying to a repentant Xie: "Knowing that you are remorseful and have a good conscience I now love you even more."

### A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Given that the Chinese version of *Don't Change Your Husband* shares with its American precedent a basic narrative structure, one that involves a modern housewife being fed up with her good but boring husband, seeking a more gratifying relationship outside marriage, but ultimately finding herself disillusioned with her lover and returning to her husband, we can reasonably view the Chinese film as a "remake." On the surface, the film's use of an English title seems to be motivated by the desire to appeal to the overseas Chinese audience, most of whom were not able to read Chinese. In fact, since overseas Chinese communities represented a major market outlet for films produced in China, it was quite common for Chinese films to have English subtitles during the 1920s and 1930s. But in this specific case, there is arguably a deeper reason for using an English title invoking DeMille's film. To me, the identical title not only confirms and acknowledges DeMille's film as a source of inspiration but also deliberately enlists it as a subtext that highlights the variations as well as deviations in the Chinese film from the original text.

As a marker of the films' thematic thrust, the title of DeMille's film and its Chinese remake seems to position them as a morality tale, a warning to married women that they should be content with their current marriages because any attempts at finding an ideal husband are not simply illusionary but dangerous and ruinous. In both films, Xie and Leila are unhappy with their husbands, who may be honest, hardworking, and caring but who are also dull and unromantic, which leaves the two women feeling unsatisfied. As Leila complains to her husband, "Jim, I know it will hurt you, but I can't stand this corn beef and cabbage existence any longer." In Xie's case, although she does not clearly reveal why she no longer loves her husband, it is clear that her lover is more attentive to her and brings her cigarettes, wine, and other items of sensuous pleasure. While the lovers in both films appear

dashing and attractive on the surface, they are presented as being morally corrupt on the inside. In addition to cheating on their women, there are other details that cast them in a negative light. At the end of DeMille's film, for example, Schuyler is seen wooing another woman, using the same line he used to seduce Leila earlier. Likewise, Chen in the Chinese remake is presented as callous and irresponsible in the hit-and-run scene at the beginning of the film. In this regard, a contemporary review seems to be too generous in describing the film as a play with no villain ("*Juchang xiaoxi*" 2).

It is also worth noting that the wives in both films begin to cross the line of conjugal fidelity before their marriages are dissolved. Just as Leila flirts with Schuyler and indulges in an elaborate fantasy sequence in which she and Schuyler are half-naked and dancing in the Garden of Eden, Xie too has apparently committed adultery before divorce, as evidenced by the letters between her and Chen. In each case, a particular symbolic detail is used to signify the "trespassing." During the dinner sequence in DeMille's film, Schuyler is seen, in close-up, knocking down a male figurine (standing for James) on the dining table and placing another (presumably representing Schuyler himself) next to the figurine of Leila, who has no objection to what he is doing. In the Chinese version, Xie replaces Wang's picture in their wedding photo frame with that of Chen. In both films, it is the wife who is unhappy with her married life, crosses the line of propriety, and initiates divorce. She is also the one who suffers the consequences of her choice. Both Leila and Xie are betrayed by the men whom they perceive as better alternatives to their husbands. Schuyler keeps a mistress after marrying Leila, and Chen simultaneously has several relationships, including an engagement, albeit one arranged by his parents, while courting Xie. In the end, both Leila and Xie are forgiven and taken back by their all-loving and understanding husbands. From today's vantage point, it is rather puzzling why some of DeMille's contemporary critics would think of him as often taking "the feminine point of view" in *Don't Change Your Husband* ("Hundreds" II11).

Despite the similarities in subject matter, narrative structure, and message, the two versions of *Don't Change Your Husband* are drastically different in their perspectives on issues related to family, marriage, infidelity, and divorce. First, the marital issues of the two couples unfold against the backdrop of different family structures. Although no kids are involved in either case, Leila and James fit the standard definition of a nuclear family: they live by themselves as two independent adult individuals, and their parents make no appearance whatsoever in the film. In contrast, the love triangle in the Chinese remake involves three different families, and the role of the parents is crucial in the development of the story. First, Wang's mother lives with Wang and Xie after they are married. We do not know to what extent Xie's unhappiness with her marriage could be attributed to her daily interactions with her mother-in-law, but the film does show that Wang's mother has no affection for Xie, and as soon as she learns of Xie's extramarital affair, she is eager to denounce her. In fact, she overrides her son's reluctance to go