The Story Teller: Benjamin Brodsky and His Epic Travelogue, *A Trip Through China* (1916)

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In the embryonic stage of early Chinese cinema, Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960), an American photographer, film director, film producer, and film entrepreneur, was one of the most pivotal figures. He introduced China to the United States through an epic travelogue, *A Trip Through Chin*a (1916). The work was in part the result of the efforts to satisfy a Western journeyman's desire to tell the story of another culture. Nevertheless, between 1916 and 1919 the film was openly screened in major cities in America, particularly in New York, for commercial and educational purposes. In this paper, Brodsky's pioneering project is explored, focusing on his constructs and representations of Shanghai and local people. This paper considers Brodsky's unsophisticated approach to indigenous culture to have arguably sharpened national and ethnic stereotyping. The travelogue reflects a style of thought that was fundamentally grounded in an ontological and epistemological system of values far more intrinsic to the West than the East

Keywords: Benjamin Brodsky, *A Trip Through China*, early Chinese film, travelogue, cinematic narrative, ethnographic film, Chinese identity

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In the first two decades of the twentieth century, through his talents of filmmaking and film distribution, Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960) resolutely set out to explore and yet capitalize on the dissimilarities between China and the West. He not only ushered in the newly emerging era of cinema in the Far East, but also produced documentary films about China, Hong Kong, and Japan. Through an epic travelogue, *A Trip Through China* (abbreviated *Trip* hereinafter), Brodsky introduced Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and other interior cities of China to audiences in the United States.[1] At a time when most Americans knew nothing or very little about Asia in general and China in particular, Brodsky and his work were crucial to opening up a unique window

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[1] In the film, Brodsky uses the title, *A Trip Through China*, but *A Trip Thru China* appears in most promotional advertisements in the United States. Also see Ramona Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II, Taking *A Trip Thru China* to America," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 18, no. 2 (2011): 143, 173. Curry notes that the *American Film Institute Catalogue* lists the film as *A Trip Through China*, but newspaper headlines and advertisements in the 1910s often shortened the preposition. The film also played under the title of the *Trip Through* (or *Thru*) *China* in the East, the Midwest, and the West of the United States.

through which those in the West could glance and then fantasize about that distant land. As significant as it was or is, however, *Trip* has never been thoroughly examined; it was neither analyzed in the two volumes of Cheng Jihua's authoritative project, *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* (中國電影發展史 *History of the Development of Chinese Cinema*) nor in Jay Leyda's pioneering work, *Dianying/Electric Shadows: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China*.[2] Brodsky has long remained one of the most "enigmatic" filmmakers in the history of early Chinese cinema, as contemporary film scholars Law Kar and Frank Bren suggested.[3]

Even so, during the past decade, the biography of Brodsky has sparked great interest among a number of international filmmakers and film historians. Directed by Hsieh Chia-kuen and produced by the film historian Liao Gene-fon in collaboration with the National Taiwan University of Arts, a documentary film *Xunzhao buluosiji* (尋找布洛斯基 or *Searching for Brodsky,* 2009, 60 minutes) premiered on July 2, 2010, during the Taipei Film Festival.[4] In the film, Hsieh compares original scenes of the cities included in *Trip* to contemporary views of these metropolises.[5] The project was a fruitful outcome of Liao's study of Brodsky when Brodsky's grandson Ron Borden discovered a copy of *Trip* in 1989 and later donated the most complete surviving version of the travelogue (9 reels, 80 minutes) to the Chinese Taipei Film Archive in Taiwan.[6] In addition, in their collaborative work *Hong Kong Cinema*: *A*

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[2] Cheng Jihua, *Zhongguo dianying fazhan shi* [History of the Development of Chinese Cinema], 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 1963); Jay Leyda, *Dianying-Electric Shadows: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1972).

[3] Law Kar and Frank Bren, "The Enigma of Benjamin Brodsky," *Hong Kong Film Archive Newsletter*, no. 14 (November 2000), 7-11.

[4] Derek Elley, "Review," *Film Business Asia*, July 5, 2010, http://www.filmbiz.asia/reviews/searching-for-brodsky.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

Cross-Cultural View, Kar and Bren contributed a chapter, titled "Ben Brodsky's China," offering a rich narrative of Brodsky's early life and his film career, especially his interactions with his business partners in Hong Kong.[7] Masako Okada's studies center on Brodsky's production of *Beautiful Japan* (1918).[8] Ground-breaking work on the legacy of Brodsky and his transnational operations of film business appeared in Ramona Curry's long two-part article.[9] In Part I, Curry teases out some mysteries of Brodsky's biography, clarifying his birthday and birthplace, and examines his private and professional relationships and interactions with a group of Chinese students returning from America and with government officials who helped produce *Trip*.[10] In Part II, Curry provides a critical textual analysis of *Trip*, analyzing the section held by the Chinese Taipei Film Archive. Her review highlights Beijing with a focus on Brodsky's association with a number of Chinese ruling elites, including the then-President Yuan Shikai and his cabinet ministers. She also illuminates Brodsky's marketing and presentational strategies while *Trip* was screened in the United States.

Brodsky's *Trip* was truly a canonical text remarkable in promoting cultural exchanges, cultural transmissions, and cultural transferences between China and the West. Most importantly, it helped shape Chinese identities in the West. In the travelogue, with assistance from his production crew, Brodsky worked as a spirited observer, wandering

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[7] Law Kar and Frank Bren, *Hong Kong Cinema: A Cross-Cultural View* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 29-46.

[8] Masako Okada, "Beautiful Japan, the Film and Its Producer Benjamin Brodsky" (unpublished manuscript, Tokyo, July 30, 1997).

[9] Ramona Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part I, Making *A Trip Thru China," Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 18, no. 1 (2011): 58-94; Ramona Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II, Taking *A Trip Thru China* to America," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 18, no. 2 (2011): 142-180.

[10] Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part I": 61.

around in metropolises (such as Hong Kong, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Suzhou, Nanjing, Tianjin, and Beijing), roaming from street to street and district to district in order to record what he considered the motif of Chinese culture. With his camera, Brodsky also gazed through both the interior lands and the coastal provinces of China, widely documenting urban poverty and primitive modes of labor that produced a vivid image of a pre-modern world. He acted as an ardent voyager who restlessly navigated through one metropolis after another and captured on film the people he encountered along the way. Initially, the travelogue was in part the result of the efforts to satisfy a Western journeyman's curiosity and his desire to tell the story of his personal encounters with another culture. Nevertheless, between 1916 and 1919, *Trip* was openly screened in major cities in the United States, particularly in New York and Los Angeles, for commercial and educational purposes.[11] Brodsky sold the film to American regional distributors in 1917, so that *Trip* was also shown nationwide through the East (Connecticut and New York State), Midwest (St. Louis, Missouri) and to the West (Utah and San Francisco).[12] Intriguingly, some international film archives (for example, in New Zealand) also hold individual reels of *Trip*, suggesting that sections of the film may have been played overseas after 1917.[13] Brodsky's transnational presentations for mass consumption raise several critical issues. Analysis of his cinematic narrative in this piece refers less to the simple questions surrounding the representation of Chinese culture and people: it is more relevant to a crucial debate on the public representation and circulation of filmed culture and people.[14]

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[11] See *Motion Picture News* 15, no. 21 (May 26, 1917). Also see Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II": 152, 154. Curry indicates that the film did not play publicly in San Francisco until almost two years after its premiere in California in 1916.

[12] Ibid., 173.

[13] Ibid., 143.

[14] At this point, my reading of the film has benefitted from Alison Griffiths's *Wondrous Difference:*

Significantly, even if *Trip* looks uncolored and believable to the average viewer, it was hardly an innocent depiction of China as it was manipulated by Brodsky's hand and mediated according to his will.[15] To project a sense of "truthfulness" or "authenticity" to what appears on screen, he employed a highly realistic, documentary style of cinematography, providing rich verisimilitude and objective details. Still, *Trip* is fundamentally Brodsky's subjective perception and conception of China, shifting between matter-of-fact reports of what he had seen and personal evaluations of the local people he had experienced. In essence, *Trip* contains a biased subtext, casting a complex Westerner's gaze on China and its people that remains deeply disquieting.

What is particularly interesting is Brodsky's role as a story teller since his travelogue presents powerful imagery and attributes of China to audiences in the West. In his "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin perceptively pointed out that the truth of narrative is situational in which the work of truth is reciprocal. Wisdom comes from conviction, however you construct it.[16] Edward W. Said's discourse on "Orientalism," in particular, his discussion of how the way one's knowledge of another culture is introduced, produced, and, most importantly, distributed, informs this analysis of Brodsky, though Said did not cover visual arts in China.[17] In line with this critique of Western colonialism, Fatimah Tobing Rony and Alison Griffiths provide critical views that assist in

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Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

15 Although Brodsky had assistants (for example, Roe Errol Hasbrook) to help him do preliminary editing, he made the final decision. See Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II": 161.

16 Peter Brooks, "The Storyteller," in *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 101. Also see Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 83.

17 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 10.

examining travelogues, ethnographic films, and printed visual images.[18] Fundamentally, this paper concerns the power of representations made to oneself and to others, representations that both shape our reception of the cultural other and our adaptation to that cultural other.

Benjamin Brodsky: A Film Mogul or a Showman?

As early as 1912, in an exclusive interview published in *The Motion Picture World*, Brodsky provided American readers with a detailed account of his early career and the establishment of his film business in the Far East.[19] Brodsky stated he was of Russian-Jewish descent from Odessa, and arrived in Asia at the turn of the twentieth century during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). At that time, he worked for the Russian government as an official interpreter. He also had told the interviewer that he could speak eleven modern languages, notably Russian, English, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, and was also fluent in four of the esoteric Chinese dialects.[20] Interestingly, in a later interview, an American newsman also observed that Brodsky's English was strongly tinctured with a particular Chinese accent.[21] However, Brodsky's public persona is quite far from reality. Ramona Curry points out that Brodsky was in fact born in "a small town in Russia near Tektarin," which was rather distant from Odessa.[22] In addition, although Brodsky drafted the English

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[18] Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996). Also see Griffiths's *Wondrous Difference*.

[19] Hugh F. Hoffman, "A Visitor from the Orient," *The Moving Picture World* 12, April-June (May 18, 1912), p. 620-621. A photographic portrait of Brodsky also used to accompany the article.

[20] Ibid. The article says that Brodsky can speak eleven languages, including English, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Corean [Korean], Hebrew, Arabic, and Malayan.

[21] George S. Kaufman, "Bret Harte Said It: The Heathen Chinese is Peculiar," *New York Tribune*, August 27, 1916.

[22] Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part I": 64.

intertitles of *Trip*, he was barely able to read and write.[23] Brodsky's personal narrative style seems to have overstated his origins and language skills.

At the end of the Russo-Japanese War, Brodsky went to San Francisco with all of his savings and was running a successful real estate business when the great earthquake of 1906 put a temporary end to his financial dealings.[24] Out of the chaos of the San Francisco earthquake, he emerged with an old Edison Universal moving picture machine and forty or fifty reels of junk film.[25] The printed portions of these films had been translated into Chinese.[26] With these, Brodsky sailed for the Orient and arrived in the interior city of Tianjin, where no theater houses had yet been opened.[27] In his narrative, Brodsky indicated that, initially, his cinematic exhibitions were given in tents illuminated by means of gas, while natives squatted on the ground.[28] Soon, he found that in some western coastal cities, there were established theaters, but those were separated into different theaters for the Chinese and for the Westerners. Brodsky started to import a number of educational and high-class film reels for the Occidental residents, but for the most part, pictures portraying tough and strenuous living conditions were the kind of movies in demand in China. He also purchased movies in wholesale lots, including some wild western films of American cowboys and Indians as well as feature films such as *The Odyssey, Life of Buffalo Bill*, *Dante*, *Inferno*, and others.[29] According to Brodsky's account, the shows went

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[23] Ibid., 64, 150.

[24] Hoffman, "A Visitor from the Orient," pp. 620-621.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Kaufman, "Bret Harte Said It: The Heathen Chinese is Peculiar."

[27] Hoffman, "A Visitor from the Orient," pp. 620-621. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, there were no established movie theaters in the interior of China.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid. Also see Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II": 163. Brodsky's film dealer Pliny Powers Craft also helped circulate

very smoothly until some cowboys in the movies came tearing down the road, shooting pistols. The Chinese audience rose en masse and fled for safety.

Through a number of interviews, Brodsky provided such humorous anecdotes, at the expense of the indigenous people, as he spun tales about his film business in China. He further suggested that in the beginning, the Chinese audience never derived their full measure of enjoyment from the proceedings because they frequently failed to understand the screened films. One time, he tried to give a show, but the local audiences would not come. The Chinese were afraid of his machine and his pictures, which to them were ghosts.[30] In order to entice local residents to his shows, Brodsky said that he actually hired people from local communities to sit in the audience.[31] For this service, he employed hundreds of persons at the rate of twenty cents per day to act as audience members, in effect, as decoys to bring in viewers.[32] To allay their general fear and establish confidence in his "actors," Brodsky had to explain the entire projection process to them. With diplomatic perseverance, he let them examine the equipment and convinced them there was no danger connected with viewing his films.

In 1916, in an interview with *New York Tribune*, Brodsky told the newsman that with the profits he made by showing films to both Western and local Chinese audiences, he was able to build several dozen theaters in cities all over China.[33] He also pointed out that the theater seating was another difficulty he had encountered:

…[T]o this day there are no seating accommodations for the multitude in

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Brodsky's *A Trip Through China*.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Kaufman, "Bret Harte Said It: The Heathen Chinese is Peculiar."

> the Chinese movie houses —the Interborough would find it a delightful country. A few of the patrician Chinese buy seats and pay handsomely for them ($1.50, in most cases); the common people stand on the great floors, wedged tightly against one another. Many of the Brodsky theatres take care of 15,000 persons in this manner; the smallest of them holds 5,000.[34]

In spite of this story told by Brodsky, it should be noted, however, that in past and current studies of early Chinese films, no specific scholarly works have mentioned or proved Brodsky's establishment of cinema houses in China. Curry suggests that Brodsky's early primary business investments and identity were actually as a "showman," which was a much different title than in Brodsky's narrative of his great success in China.[35]

The aforementioned 1912 interview also revealed interesting details of Brodsky's transnational film business. He did represent the Variety Film Exchange Company of San Francisco, which operated actively in the Orient, as it had well-established exchanges in Honolulu, Yokohama, Tokyo, Vladivostok, Harbin, Shanghai, and Hong Kong.[36] The company at that time was buying twenty-eight prints per week, both licensed and independent; it supplied eleven theaters in Honolulu.[37] The company also supplied the American government with movies with which to entertain its seamen on battleships sailing between distant ports. In addition to his film business, Brodsky also contracted with the Detroit Engine Works to import machinery such as electric lights to interior cities in China.[38] In

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part I": 68.

[36] Hoffman, "A Visitor from the Orient," pp. 620-621.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

the interview, Brodsky was ambitiously planning to open branches of the Variety Film Exchange Company in Manila, Singapore, and Java.[39]

The Production of *A Trip Through China* (1912-1915)

Brodsky's film business in China was marked by the completion of the shooting *Trip* between 1912 and 1915.[40] The travelogue carries the viewer from the southernmost city of China to the north, starting in Hong Kong and then visiting Shanghai, Beijing, and many others. In the work, Brodsky predominately focused on the novelty of indigenous cultures (notably customs, fashions, and religions) and landscapes (the destructive typhoon of 1914 in Shanghai), spotlighting such archetypes of cultural symbols as the Shanghai Longhua Pagoda (Figure 1), the Ming Dynasty Tombs, and the Forbidden City.[41] In addition to scenic features of these cities, cultural and mercantile activities of their people also are depicted, including four of Yuan Shikai's younger sons and their tutors in Beijing.[42] Chinese superstitions and religious parades comprise an integral part of his depiction of the land, as well (Figure 2).[43]

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[39] Curry points out that Brodsky's ambitious plan was not carried out.

[40] Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part I": 70; Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II": 154, 156. Curry suggests Brodsky gained access to political and probably also financial support for making films in China from the American film trade press. In 1912, Brodsky expanded his distributing network and found a collaborative American-Chinese filmmaking enterprise, the China Cinema Company.

[41] George W. Graves, "Brodsky's *Trip Through China*," *Motography* 17, no. 21 (May 26, 1917): 1120.

[42] See *New York Times Film Reviews*, May 22, 1917, 11. Also see Curry, p. 74. Curry suggests Brodsky was in fact acquainted with and as a filmmaker visibly enjoyed the cooperation of powerful national politicians in the mid-1910s in China.

[43] "Screen Reports for the Box-Office," *Exhibitor's Trade Review* 1, no. 26 (June 2, 1917). A decennial religious procession from the Chingan Temple (the temple is not visible on film) brings the crowds into the street. The parade starts from the Longhua Pagoda situated a short distance from the city.

Figure 1. Shanghai Longhua Pagoda. Still from *A Trip Thru China* (1916). This and all still frames appear in this essay courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 2. Still: A decennial religious procession in Shanghai.

A Cross-Cultural Presentation

Through *Trip*, Brodsky presented this distant country to Western spectators in 1916, extensively circulating his unique travel activities and experiences in the Far East.[44] During its public screening period, the film aroused American viewers' curiosity and imagination about this Eastern country. The travelogue was essentially filmed and edited by Brodsky with the assistance of his production crew members, who included a Chinese photographer named Lum Chung and the American Roe Errol Hasbrook.[45] When it was presented at the Eltinge Theatre on Broadway, the main entrance was decorated in exotic Oriental tapestries.[46] A lecturer named Harry Dean appeared on stage between the two halves of the film

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[44] Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II": 161. The film landed in America in February 1916. See Hoffman, "A Visitor from the Orient." Hoffman indicates that Brodsky arrived in China and Japan, and was buying film in wholesale lots. His business card reads: "Variety Film Exchange Company, Honolulu."

[45] The advisement says that Brodsky spent ten years in China, of which five years were devoted to the making of *Trip*. See *The Evening Post: New York*, May 22, 1917. Also see Kar and Bren, *Hong Kong Cinema*, 40. Also see Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II": 143.

[46] *New York Times Film Reviews*, May 22, 1917, p. 11.

Figure 3. "'Flower of the Sun' Bride in the Wedding Ceremony" in *Motion Picture News*, May 26, 1917.

and commented on the authentic Chinese music, which improved the audience members' experience with the Eastern country.[47] *Motion Picture News* praised *Trip* with the following words: "Entertaining. Educating. Amusing."[48] The *News* also contained a still taken from a sequence presenting a "rich Manchu marriage" with caption that read, "'Flower of the Sun' Bride in The Wedding Ceremony in 'A *Trip* Thru China'" (Figure 3). In the picture, the bride wears a traditional wedding gown that looks completely different from Western bridal dresses at the time, highlighting a strange beauty rarely seen in the West.[49] Without a doubt, Brodsky's *Trip* truly raised awareness of the geographical gaps and cultural differences between China and the United States.

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[47] Ibid.

[48] *Motion Picture News* 15, no. 21 (May 26, 1917).

[49] Some American media provided such reviews during the public screening period of the film. See Hoffman, "A Visitor from the Orient."; "'A Trip Through China' offers interesting views of the customs of the country," *Exhibitor's Trade Review* 1, no. 26 (June 2, 1917): 1823. Also see Curry's description of the still in Part II of her article, p. 147. Curry suggests the filmmakers were also invited to the party, revealing Brodsky's contacts with members of the long-standing northern Chinese ruling class.

Shanghai as an Embodiment of the Semi-Colonial Status of China

As mentioned above, scholars have rarely focused on a close textual analysis of *Trip*. Curry did offer a careful examination of the film, highlighting the section on Beijing, in particular, Brodsky's personal relationship with the ruling elites of China. In her analysis of *Trip*, Curry notes that the work did mark a distinction between the East and West: at points, it exuded the condescending tone similar to many ethnographic films. Fundamentally, Curry argues that *Trip* in effect "avoids presenting China as colonized, yet only by insisting on an ahistorical—and evidently brutal—imperial stasis as the nation's essential condition."[50] The present article takes a reading of *Trip* quite different from Curry's, however, and offers an alternative interpretation of the travelogue by focusing on Brodsky's representation of Shanghai. Brodsky's interest in Shanghai is not a surprise. At the turn of the twentieth century, as one of the earliest treaty ports open to foreign trade following the first Opium War (1839-42), Shanghai flourished as a multinational hub of commerce. The metropolis immediately became the gateway to mainland China, showcasing critical gaps between the nation and the West. Shanghai was also recognized for its distinct semi-colonial status. Along with its international settlements, the city blended many of the novelties of Western modernity with the mystique of Chinese antiquity, the charm which allured global entrepreneurs, intellectuals, travelers, explorers, and voyagers. Shanghai indeed was a paradise for adventurous souls.[51]

In the following, the crucial episode (seventeen minutes and fifty seconds) held by the Library of Congress will be analyzed as it provides

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[50] Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II": 148, 156.

[51] Richard M. Barsam, *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 3-28.

a complete view and a classic example of Brodsky's narration of the metropolis. This section of the film, the significance of which lies in Shanghai's unique situation that, at some points, epitomized China's semi-colonial condition after the failure of opium wars in the mid-nineteenth century, has not been previously analyzed.

Since *Trip* was completed in 1916, Brodsky's presentation of Shanghai also prefigured the style of Western film genre about cities, such as *Manhatta* (New York, 1921)[52] by Charles Sheeler and Paul Strand, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (Berlin, 1927) by Walter Ruttmann, and *Man with a Movie Camera* (Odessa and other cities in the Soviet Union, 1929) by Dziga Vertov. Brodsky's *Trip* was made more than five years earlier than *Manhatta*, eleven years earlier than *Berlin*, and thirteen years earlier than *Movie Camera*. Due to its art historical significance, a thorough textual analysis of the section about Shanghai seems necessary to understand Brodsky's cinematic strategy, in particular his construction of the travelogue. The analysis will also explain how Brodsky brought the "outlandish" oriental land to the light of Western eyes, and how he presented it to educated, middle-class American audiences.[53]

One City, Two Lives: The Chinese as a Dramatic Mirror to the West

The section analyzed here comprises twenty acts. At the beginning of each act, a title card written in English announces a particular theme, and has been inserted for its intended audiences in the West (Figure 4).[54] In

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[52] Note that *Manhatta* is the correct name of the film.

[53] The remaining portion of *A Trip Through China* is available for viewing in the division of the film and photography section of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Also see *Motion Picture News* 15, no. 21 (May 26, 1917).

[54] See the Part II of Curry's article, where she has a more detailed description of the introduction of the selected Chinese cities in *Trip*.

Brodsky's cinematic narrative about Shanghai, he accentuates the differences of Chinese and Western motifs. The entire city is characterized by a bizarre cultural mixing, full of conflicts between the indigenous and the modern (or Western). Perhaps, the most intriguing part of the film lies in Brodsky's cinematic construction, notably in his cutting, editing, and organization of the scenes he shot, which further reinforces the gap between the "primitive" Chinese and the "modern" West. Under his camera, the vulgarity of the Chinese working class serves as a mirror image to reflect the urbanity of the Western leisure class.

Figure 4. The caption reads: "Floating City—house boats where millions of poor Chinese live."

Figure 5. The caption reads: "In each small house boat a whole family lives."

In his way of telling the story of Shanghai, Brodsky purposefully divided the city into two worlds that dramatized its semi-colonial status. The first world focused on the poverty and hardships in Chinese communities in the old walled city of Shanghai (Figure 5), which was a favorite place for begging long before the Republican period (1911-1949).[55] The second world highlighted the leisure activities and recreation in the international settlements and foreign concessions (Figure 6) outside the walled city.[56] Through the

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[55] Hanchao Lu, "Becoming Urban: Mendicancy and Vagrants in Modern Shanghai," *Journal of Social History* 33, no. 1 (October 1999): 11.

[56] Zhenchang Tang, Yuezhi Xiong, and Ming Xu, *Shanghai's Journey to Prosperity, 1842-1949*

Figure 6. The preceding title card ascribes: "At the Races"

entire episode, Brodsky carefully and skillfully edited, arranged, and juxtaposed the crude forms of Chinese laborers and their difficult lifestyles with the leisure events of Western burghers. The strong contrast between the two communities creates a compelling imagery in which the Chinese look like a negative inversion of the West. When the travelogue was screened in New York on March 17, 1917, an article printed in *Motion Picture News* further confirmed the sharp distinction between the West and the indigenous Chinese that Brodsky had made:

> Chinese sports, forms of labor, and means of transportation are all handled on a large scale. Comparisons are made, which show that with the advent of European brains, money, and interest, squalor gave way to splendor, and even today in cities where both Europeans and natives reside there is to be seen the marked contrast.[57]

Such a drastic comparison inevitably provokes an inquiry into Brodsky's unsophisticated approach to local culture and an inquiry into the correlation between his narration and representation of the Chinese. By

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(Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 1996), 78.

[57] F. G. Spencer, Review of A Trip Through China, *Motion Picture News*, March 17, 1917, p. 1719. "The beautiful parks, boulevards, colleges and hospitals prove conclusively that a new dawn is awakening and modern methods are fast superseding the old, and the Chinese are slowly but surely abandoning their belief in witchcraft as a curative agency. A school for the deaf, dumb and blind, in which were shown scores of children at work, and also at play, is keenly interesting, proving as it does that the deformed and otherwise imperfect children are not destroyed at birth now as was the custom of old. The rickshaw is still the favorite and fashionable mode of transportation for the well-to-do, as was evidenced in every city visited."

underlining the "modernity" of the West over the "backwardness" of the Chinese, Brodsky presented an absolute demarcation between the East and the West, further reinforcing a binary view of cultural stereotyping.

The Life Inside of the Walled Chinese City

During the colonial period of Shanghai (1843-1945), the Walled Old City remained exclusively inhabited by Chinese residents. Westerners seldom ventured there. Bulwarks of the city had been designed and expanded centuries ago in the Ming and the Qing dynasties. In the past, only the rich lived in the city. However, as the settlement developed at a greater speed than the Old City, to be able to move into the settlement was an occasion for rejoicing. Thus, those living inside the Old City became "country folk."[58] From generation to generation, thousands of the poor lived in small houseboats among junks, sampans, and ferries in the area (Figure 7), which formed the most deprived district in Shanghai. Perhaps with the assistance of his Chinese cameramen, Brodsky was able to include the scenery in this region. By featuring its primitive methods of transportation and living conditions, Brodsky enabled the viewer to peek into the darkest corner of Shanghai. On the Huangpu River, men rock the boats to travel in the city while women laborers serve as a crucial work force, carrying freight as well as local passengers. As part of an urban community (or urban poor), these river residents (or vagabonds)

Figure 7. The caption reads: "The Family Home from generation to generation."

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[58] Tang, Xiong, and Xu, *Shanghai's Journey to Prosperity, 1842-1949*, 78. Around 1911, the city wall was torn down.

were mostly unskilled and illiterate workers.[59] Brodsky exposed the poverty and hardships of the river population that also alluded to hidden dangers of the city. Through his lens, the smell of impoverishment prevails over a "savage" land.

The Street Portraits

Figure 8. Still: The rickshaw is still the favorite and fashionable mode of transportation for the well-to-do.

Figure 9. The caption reads: "The Traveling Shoemaker."

In addition to the indigence of the river dwellers, Brodsky put on display portraits of other Chinese. He captured images of street laborers and coolies, focusing on the bizarre appeal of vanishing trades and small businessmen (Figure 8), in which, for example, the rickshaw is still the favorite and the fashionable mode of transportation for the well-to-do. He also offered first-hand "close-ups" of the primitive lives of these Chinese people. By the river, a traditional traveling shoemaker (Figure 9) is hammering and fixing a shoe. In a narrow alley, a Jitney driver manually transports almost a dozen children to school on a wooden Jitney bus. Soon after, in the process of modernization, these outdated professions, primarily

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[59] Lu, "Becoming Urban: Mendicancy and Vagrants in Modern Shanghai": 8.

Figure 10. The caption reads: "Street paving—steam roller unknown."

Figure 11. The caption reads: "Chinese pile driver in action."

existing in pre-modern or pre-industrial times, would disappear. In Brodsky's narrative, the stunning human power of the Chinese coolies remains the focus of the great hastening metropolis.

Perhaps the most daunting scenes are those of the street-paving steam rollers (Figure 10) and pile drivers (Figure 11). The former represents a group of physical laborers who work as horses, dragging an oversized, moveable street roller manually to make road repairs and to perform maintenance. These road builders made their living entirely through labor-intensive work which exacted a heavy toll on their physical health. The latter features dozens of workers manually hammering or pounding with a stone weighing 1,000 pounds. In this section, Brodsky shot a large amount of footage in order to expose these laborers who earned merely about 12 cents a day.[60] On the screen, these anonymous construction workers lost their individual identities. These portraits serve as images of generic types of collective Chinese, the types of people who work diligently, but mechanically. Here, Brodsky's rendition of urban poverty shows no sign of any sense of decency or humanity.

The power of the city, essentially supplied by these undaunted human forces and their manual labor, is orchestrated into a visual melody

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[60] See "Screen Reports for the Box-Office."

that raises social awareness of cultural differences. This part of Shanghai appears to be a pre-industrialized world in which the urban setting is stained by the crude, subsistent lifestyle and primitive working methods of the indigenous. Of course, Brodsky presented the other side of the city as well, in particular its international settlements, providing a stark contrast. In the film, these foreign concessions serve as an exotic playground for Western residents and visitors. The district is represented as a comfortable antithesis to the plight of the Chinese city.

Life Outside the Walled Chinese City

Figure 12. The caption reads: "Review of the Shanghai International Volunteers who offers their services for the protection of Shanghai."

The French Concession and international settlements were located outside the walled Chinese city where other Europeans and Americans resided, as well. Some prestigious Chinese also lived in the area. In the film, the communities were immersed in festive activities (Figure 12), occasions celebrated by their proud residents and commemoratory events.

Shanghai International Volunteers: The Colonial Armies and Their Administrators

Here, Brodsky featured grand parades of the Shanghai International Volunteers, notably the British and American armies (Figure 13). Dressed in handsome uniforms and carrying advanced weapons, these international officials and soldiers represented the well-trained, well-organized colonial powers. These soldiers on parade starkly contrasted with the abject Chinese coolies whose images appeared in the previous

section about the walled city. Brodsky claimed in the caption that the purpose of these military forces was to offer their services "for the protection of Shanghai."

Figure 13. Still: The British nationals here held a military review.

However, Brodsky's assertion was not entirely correct. In fact, these colonial armies were assembled during 1854 due to the fires that occurred as a result of the uprising of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1850-64). The revolt seriously threatened the safety of the foreign concessions. In a fear-driven response, the British and American consulates in Shanghai established a committee for a joint defense, calling on their nationals to join the volunteer corps.[61] At the time, as an integral part of the colonial treaties, the international settlements acquired a rather high degree of independence. The area functioned as a self-governing entity. In addition to their own militia, these international residents also enjoyed the privilege of full extraterritoriality in Shanghai. Besides their own legislative and administrative rights, these westerners were able to follow their own judicial procedures as they held immunity from local law enforcement. These foreigners were exempt from both civil and criminal actions. In other words, if they committed a crime, they might not be sued or arrested. Their property and residences were also inviolable; they were usually exempt from both personal and property taxes, too. These foreign authorities (both in the International Settlement and in the French

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[61] Tang, Xiong, and Xu, *Shanghai's Journey to Prosperity, 1842-1949*, 39. "Originally, the British Settlement only measured 130 acres or thereabouts. In 1893, it covered an area of over 1,300 acres. By 1899, the British and American Settlements merged into a single whole known as the International Settlement with an area of 5,583 acres. The French Concession originally covered an area of 56 hectares. It grew larger and larger, ending up with an area 20 times as large as the original area."

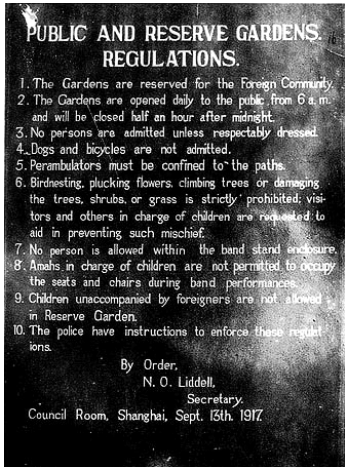

Figure 14. Park regulations, 1917. The Public Garden (renamed Huangpu Park after WWII) was closed to Chinese people between 1890 and 1928.

[Source=enwiki; Author=unknown. The website says that this image is now in the public domain in China because its term of copyright has expired.]

Concession) drove public nuisances, namely, Chinese beggars or vagrants, out of the concessions and into the Chinese territory.[62] As a matter of daily routine, the police in the concessions drove beggars off the streets of the foreign concessions in order to maintain the "decency" of these areas.[63]

Initially, the indigenous Chinese had only limited or entirely restricted entry into the communities due to the rigidly administered regulations enacted by the foreign controlled Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC).[64] For example, the Public Garden (renamed Huangpu Park after World War II) was closed to Chinese civilians between 1890 and 1928 (Figure 14).[65] The Chinese perception of such strict governance was also highlighted by a noted Bruce Lee film, *Jing wu men* (精武門 or *Fist of Fury*, 1972). Situated in early twentieth-century Shanghai, the film paints a poignant image of the semi-colonial situation in the city. A famous scene depicts a British uniformed Sikh guard stopping the protagonist (played by Bruce Lee)

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[62] Lu, "Becoming Urban: Mendicancy and Vagrants in Modern Shanghai": 21.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Robert A. Bickers and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Shanghai's 'Dogs and Chinese Not Admitted' Sign: Legend, History and Contemporary Symbol," *The China Quarterly* no. 142 (June 1995): 444-466.

[65] Ibid.

from entering a public park by pointing towards a wooden sign that reads, "*Guo yu huaren bude runei*" (狗與華人不得入內 or *No dogs and Chinese allowed*). Although the Bruce Lee film exaggerates and even distorts the historical facts, this scene has become quite well-known in Chinese communities, for it captures the unusual status of the British and American settlements that became "states within a state."[66] In a way, the Bruce Lee film reflects the trauma of the colonial experience in Shanghai, which remains in the collective memory of the people.

In his travelogue, Brodsky overlooked or was unaware of the complexity of the aforementioned colonial experience and history. In his cinematic narrative, these international volunteers were organized to protect "Shanghai," but, in reality, these mighty colonial forces were organized to defend solely the international settlements and the properties of the foreign residents. In this sequence, Brodsky underscored the powerful settlement authorities, emphasizing the order, the discipline, and the dignity of the Western armies and their success in seizing jurisdiction over the locals.

Another scene also illustrates the dominance of the omnipresent colonial powers. Brodsky spotlighted heavily armed British uniformed Sikh police officers or administrators who were supervising groups of Chinese prisoners (Figure 15). These captured Chinese inmates look weary, resigned, and defenseless as they trudge, strenuously dragging heavy wagons. The image reveals an uneasy power relationship between

Figure 15. Still: Prisoners must labor twelve hours per day at this strenuous work.

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[66] Tang, Xiong, and Xu, *Shanghai's Journey to Prosperity, 1842-1949*, 37. The British and American settlements appeared in 1898.

the colonists (the British uniformed Sikhs as masters) and the locals (the Chinese as prisoners). These anonymous forced laborers are characters that seem to lack humanity. The scene presents a distressing Western style of dominating, restructuring, and exerting authority over the vulnerable indigenes. This coarse scene also recalls a notion of a well-known term, "sub-colony," that was a concept suggested by the Chinese revolutionary leader Sun Yet-sen in the early twentieth century. Sun argued that the status quo of China at that time was even worse than that of a colony. In the picture, British uniformed Sikh administrators certainly hold power over Chinese prisoners.

Horse Races: The Celebration of Modern Leisure

Figure 16. Still: In 1862, Shanghai Race Club was built.

In the last section, Brodsky featured horse racing at the Shanghai Race Club (Figure 16). During the colonial period, horse racing, together with canoeing, was among the most fashionable sports in the settlements and in Shanghai social circles. Here, Brodsky presented the event as packed with hundreds of middle and upper-middle class viewers, typically men in Western straw hats and ladies in modern styles of dresses. The scene recalls the paintings by the nineteenth century French impressionists, notably Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas. In Western tradition, such as Manet's *Les Courses à Longchamp* (*The Races at Longchamp*, 1866), horse racing was associated with the lifestyle of the leisure class, an activity intended to show off their "noble taste" (Figure 17). The activity was also a display of social status, in which, for outward verification, each owner rode his or her own thoroughbred. Horse races are an excellent example of rank and wealth in modern life.

In the early twentieth century in Paris, prestigious events attracted the best horses and their high-class owners from around the world, and so did the international settlements of Shanghai.

When *Trip* was openly screened in New York in 1917, a professional magazine, *Motion Picture News*, reviewed the film:

Figure 17. A still taken from A *Trip Thru China*.

> The beautiful parks, boulevards, colleges and hospitals prove conclusively that a new dawn is awakening and modern methods are fast superseding the old, and the Chinese are slowly but surely abandoning their belief in witchcraft as a curative agency.[67]

Speaking from a position of authority, the final remark in Brodsky's travelogue expresses a disconcertingly condescending tone toward the indigenous. Brodsky's presentation of the local life in Shanghai, in particular, his stress on the overwhelming presence of physical laborers and their destitution, constructed a believable ethnographic knowledge of the Chinese and, in a way, produced a discomfiting anthology of national, ethnic, and racial identities.

In 1916, when *Trip* was screened in California, a review printed in a San Jose newspaper further confirmed the racial distinction that Brodsky made between China and the West.

> Contrasts between the Far East and the Far West, between the civilization of the Caucasian in California and the ancient civilization

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[67] F. G. Spencer, Review of *A Trip Through China, Motion Picture News*, March 17, 1917, p. 1719.

> of China, between the active and aggressive methods of the American and the resigned and passive fatalism of the oriental can be studied first hand without the trouble and expense of a journey across the Pacific…*A Trip Thru China*…show[s] every phase of the [life] among the pulsating millions of the vast empire.[68]

Vulgarity vs. Respectability

Brodsky's epic travelogue surely established a rather simple antithetical view of the Chinese (as the vulgar) and the West (as the respectable). In the episode about Shanghai, his representation of the former, their communities function as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of most honorable human characteristics. The uncultivated locals show a lack of propriety and good taste. These coolies were backward, oppressed people sticking to traditional practices. Brodsky acted as a wandering journeyman who entered the wasteland at his peril. He was watching and looking for the most diverse situations to compare and contrast. His Western audiences saw and understood the Oriental city completely through his eyes, based on his interests, his beliefs, his selections, and his value judgments. The comparable Chinese ideas, visions, and voices were completely absent from this representation. In her studies of *Trip*, Curry also points out that Brodsky totally ignored modernization and democratic development in China. For instance, Chinese railways were surprisingly not included in the film.[69] Through Brodsky's lens, the indigenous became a living tableau of queerness. The behaviors,

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[68] Re-quoted from Part II of Curry's article, p. 158. The original text, "B. Brodsky, Producer of a *Trip Through China*, with Camorant [sic]" was printed in the *San Jose Mercury Herald*, December 29, 1916, p. 16.

[69] Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II": pp. 156, 159. Here, Curry also states that the *Trip*'s extensive and arguably sympathetic representation of Chinese labor ultimately distinguishes it from other ethnographic travelogues. However, this point seems disputable.

institutions, and characters of the Chinese appeared to be the negation of Western morality. However, his portrayals of the international settlements look quite glamorous, celebrating the advancements of the metropolitan life and modern culture. Brodsky's camera seems to have primarily focused on the genuine arena of this Western culture from which grows all meaningful human life.[70]

In *Trip*, such powerful visuals and accompanying texts produced meanings and gave an artificial context for the filmed subjects. The episode should not have been simply viewed as a historical record, merely documenting the contemporary life in Shanghai. Rather, it contains a biased subtext, suggesting a not-so-subtle colonial prejudice that should be examined and exposed. In his writing about the concept of Orientalism, Edward W. Said asserted, "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony."[71] Although Said's "Orient" does not directly refer to China, his insight is still useful in examining the relationship of power between the colonized Chinese and their colonial authorities. In his studies of culture and colonialism, Chinua Achebe further points out that "There is such a thing as absolute power over narrative. Those who secure this privilege for themselves can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like."[72] Notably, Brodsky's narration was a conscious choice, constructed with both written and visual texts, producing historical records that superficially

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[70] *Beautiful Japan* (1918) represents various aspects of Japanese life after World War I, including Brodsky's ethnographic interests in the Bear Festival in an Ainu village in Hokkaido during which a young pet bear was strangled.

[71] Said, *Orientalism*, 5.

[72] Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24. Achebe also argues that "if colonial writers try to imitate and, indeed, go one better than the Empire, they run the danger of undervaluing their homeland and their own people. He contends that to redress the inequities of global oppression, writers must focus on where they come from, insisting that their value systems are as legitimate as any other. Stories are a real source of power in the world, he concludes, and to imitate the literature of another culture is to give that power away."

portrayed and limited understanding of the facts of local life. *Trip* is hardly an innocent representation of the Chinese. It intentionally creates a particular vision and perception of the nation and its people.

The Return Gaze of the Chinese

The visual power of Brodsky's travelogue is further strengthened by the return gaze of the Chinese subjects, especially that of the children who live in the poor communities of the riverside dwellers as well as the anonymous street coolies, street pedestrians, and street peddlers together with the photographs of British uniformed Sikh policemen (Figure 5, 8, and 15). Their gazes are a mix of surprise, curiosity, and even aloofness, which reinforce a compelling sense of "authenticity" and "credibility" generated by the camera. These return gazes not only reveal the position of the cameraman, they also create an invisible contact zone linking him to the locals. The return gaze reconfirms the status of the cameraman as an outsider to the communities, which in turn fortifies his experience or encounter with another culture. In the scenes about the Huangpu River dwellers, a group of village children gather in front of the run-down houseboats and raise their hands eagerly waving at the camera. Here, the camera functions as a "celebrity" in the eye of the filmed subject. However, it also affirms the subject's social and ethnic identities. The subject's return gaze is complex, as it forms a dialectical process of exchange, interaction, and meaning-production between the cameraman and his subject.[73]

The subject's return gaze also draws attention to the cinematic representation itself as an effective form of cultural encounter. In *Trip*, most filmed subjects were neither vulnerable victims, nor powerful

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[73] This discussion is much inspired by Griffiths's *Wondrous Difference*, in particular in "Chapter Two: Science and Spectacle Visualizing the Other at the World's Fair and Knowledge" and "Chapter Three: Visuality in Nineteenth Century Anthropology," 46-126.

contenders. Many of them were indifferent onlookers, unaware that their presence would soon be transformed into a visual spectacle and exhibited overseas in a public realm for commercial and educational purposes.

Furthermore, Brodsky adapted a documentary style as his cinematic technique, which emphasizes objective reporting. In his film, these underclass Chinese coolies, construction workers, and street laborers appear resigned, primitive, and inferior to Western noble residents, reinforcing typical images of racial stereotypes. At several points, Brodsky drew upon social classes, racial types, and cultural symbols in the film in order to legitimatize his cinematic and ethnic production as authentic and educational. His use of the documentary camera looks rather "artless," lending credence to the images as natural and innocent. This carefully crafted work helped him to objectify his personal travel experiences and cultural encounters, which also contributed to the collective imagery of Chinese national identity. Through this artistic strategy, he created a seamless, convincing visual record of the cultural other. Brodsky certainly was a remarkable storyteller.

Trip might have enhanced the depth and intensity of cultural exchanges between China and the West. However, here the issues regarding how cinema came to assume the role of mediator of cultural differences remain critical. In her in-depth studies of early ethnographic films, particularly in the genre of travelogue, Alison Griffith has noted that the interplay between cinema, tourism, and virtual travel all relate to the questions of authorship and authenticity.[74] A travelogue is essentially a construction, not a reality. The most critical part in the discourse of travel films perhaps lies in the power of the camera's proclivity for mimesis, record-making that served as colonial propaganda, as Griffith suggested.[75]

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[74] Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, 203-227.

[75] Ibid, 229-252.

Audiences in the United States

An examination of the film's original audiences further exposes the crucial issues concerning the ethical and ideological implications of the cross-cultural image-making in the travelogue. Produced primarily for speakers of English, Brodsky's *Trip* reached broader audiences as it was widely circulated in public in the United States. Curry suggests the film was mainly marketed to a middle-class educated audience and middle-class white theater patrons, although some Chinese people overseas in Los Angeles would also have seen it when it premiered in California in June 1916.[76] Brodsky's cinematic display of China and its people thus became a vehicle for mass consumption, generating a visual site through which American filmgoers expected to learn more about the anthropology and culture of China.

On May 21, 1917, *Trip* debuted in New York at the aforementioned Eltinge Theatre on 42nd Street, the center of the professional and commercial playhouses of the city. Distributed by the Supreme Feature Film Company, the work was scheduled to screen there daily, including both matinee and evening shows.[77] A late afternoon "extra" in between for children and their teachers from the public schools of New York was also added.[78] In fact, the public and private schools and colleges of the state also cooperated in advertising the travelogue, endorsing the "authority" and "authenticity" of the film.[79] The cost of the tickets was priced on a scale ranging from twenty-five cents to one dollar, a fairly high rate for seeing a movie at the time.[80] In this cross-cultural

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[76] Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II": 150, 154, 165, 168.

[77] *Variety*, May 18, 1917, p. 23.

[78] "Evelyn Nesbit in Film," *New York Times Film Reviews*, May 22, 1917, p. 11.

[79] *Motion Picture News* 15, no. 21 (May 26, 1917).

[80] Ibid.

presentation, *Trip* certainly offered spectators an easy encounter with the Chinese people who were an ethnic other to Western audiences. Commercial screening of the film, in a way, encouraged peeping at the cultural other, and the observers' pleasant moments of viewing were heightened by their ethnological curiosity. Alison Griffith has insightfully pointed out that the problem with such commercialization of travelogues is that an ethnic attraction is easily turned into a profit-making cinema of attraction.[81]

Consciously or unconsciously, Brodsky's documentary approach to the Chinese seemed ethnographical. His construction of anthropological images and ideological meanings of the cultural other were also imbricated with the broad circulation and commodification of the film. The meaning of the work in this regard does not simply reside in the textual or formal qualities of the cinematic images, but was/is generated and embedded within the sites of the exhibitions (including the theater and its advertisements and professional film reviews printed in newspapers and magazines) and in the viewing contexts, as well.

George S. Kaufman's Cross-Cultural Perception of Early Chinese Cinema

Broad presentation of *Trip* was quite successful, which brought Brodsky more shooting opportunities and also stimulated the general public's interest in the Far East. Brodsky received an invitation from the Japanese government to direct a film, titled *Beautiful Japan* (1918, 100 minutes), a travelogue he made in collaboration with the imperial railways in order to promote international tourism.[82] Furthermore, the American press

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[81] Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, 46-85.

[82] Masako Okada, "Beautiful Japan, the Film and Its Producer Benjamin Brodsky" (unpublished manuscript, Tokyo, July 30, 1997). Quoted from Law and Bren, "The Enigma of Benjamin Brodsky," pp. 7-11.

extensively covered stories of Brodsky and his film business in Asia. Not all reviews were positive; some were quite critical. In his article, "Bret Harte Said It: The Heathen Chinese is Peculiar" (1916), published by the *New York Tribune*, the noted playwright George S. Kaufman interviewed Brodsky and featured Brodsky's film production in China. Kaufman stated he was shocked to learn that the Chinese had been flocking to movie houses for one-half dozen years and had even made movies for five years.[83] Kaufman observed:

> The Chinese films, most of them, are bound up with the traditions and the fetishes that are China. Ancestor worship, of course, plays a prominent part in many of them. The Chinese superstitions, also, are constantly getting in the way of the pictures, and many and horrible are the threats that have to be resorted to in order to persuade actors to perform the prescribed stunts. One performer, for example, refused flatly to be photographed in a coffin, citing the highest religious authorities on the question and declining to put himself in line for the visitations of the evil one. As a method of persuasion he was overpowered, placed in the coffin and made to stay there for 36 hours, with the additional promise that he would be kept there forever if he refused to listen to reason. Thereupon the scene was taken. These little incidents, however, render movie making in China a somewhat uncertain profession. [84]

In spite of the difficulties described by Kaufman, Brodsky actually managed to establish the first Chinese film company, the Asian Film Company (possibly formed in 1909, and transferred ownership in 1913)

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[83] Kaufman, "Bret Harte Said It: The Heathen Chinese Is Peculiar." "But it is a shock, nevertheless, to learn that the Chinese have been flocking their movie houses for half a dozen years, that they have been making their own pictures for five years, and, in short, that the business is highly organized and flourishing."

[84] Ibid.

both in Shanghai and in Hong Kong. The company produced at least four feature movies, including two dramatic films produced in Shanghai, *Empress Dowager* (20 reels) and *The Unfortunate Boy*.[85] The other two works, *Revealed by the Pot* and *Stealing the Cooked Ducks*, were produced in Hong Kong.[86] Moreover, his Hong Kong Company (listed as the Oriental Film Co., in a caption) also produced an eleven-and-one-half-minute short film, *The Revolution in China* (1912), attempting to tell the events of the 1911 Revolution.[87] However, the plot of the film was completely staged and overly dramatized. Kaufman actually reviewed some of the above works and characterized *The Unfortunate Boy* as a "thrilling melodrama." Furthermore, in their interview Brodsky told Kaufman that, in making the film about the empress dowager of China, the Qing government even loaned a huge segment of the Chinese army (60,000 men) for him to use.[88] Since the film is lost, it is uncertain whether Brodsky's claim is true or not. There are no historical records to prove this assertion.

In 1912, for an unknown reason, Brodsky transferred his ownership of the Asia Film Company in Shanghai and some shooting equipment (perhaps not voluntarily) to two managers from the United States Essler and Lehrmann, whose first names are unknown, of the Nanyang Insurance Company.[89] The American bosses employed two local talents, Zhang Shichun (a comprador who worked as an agent for a Western

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[85] See Leyda, *Dianying-Electric Shadows*, 9-10. In *War in Shanghai*, the July fighting in Shanghai, when the revolutionary forces attacked the arsenal and Woosung forts, was recorded on film by the Asia Film Company, which had been revived in Shanghai just in time for this moment in history. Their film *War in Shanghai* was ready to be exhibited at the end of September, along with their other, Shanghai fictional films.

[86] Leyda, *Dianying-Electric Shadows*, 16-17.

[87] Brodsky's *The Chinese Revolution* (11 min 30 sec), 1912, by Oriental Film Co., is a staged drama.

[88] Kaufman, "Bret Harte Said It: The Heathen Chinese Is Peculiar."

[89] Leyda, *Dianying-Electric Shadows*, 9-11, 16-17.

enterprise) and Zheng Zhengqiu (a noted Beijing opera critic), and made *Nanfu nanqi* (難夫難妻, or *The Difficult Couple*, 1913), launching the birth of Chinese feature film.

In the interview, Kaufman also repeated Brodsky's observation about the Chinese style of acting in which most of the actors' performances show "a lack of imagination."[90] Of course, during the development of early Chinese cinema, most local filmmakers had backgrounds in traditional theaters. Many performers, directors, and playwrights copied the theatrical models of Beijing opera and *wenminxi* (文明戲, or civilized drama, a type of spoken stage drama popular in the early twentieth century) in order to produce movies for Chinese audiences. Their exaggerated style of acting and theatrical techniques took root in local tales and costumes that were quite different from any Western traditions. Even if Brodsky had extensively worked with local talents during the early stages of his film career, he was lukewarm about such theatrical traditions, as Kauffman was, too. In the article, Kauffman summarized Brodsky's film business in China with the following headline: "For Ways That Are Dark and Tricks That Are Vain There Is Nothing to Surpass the Charley Chaplins and the Mary Pickfords of the Orient. Movies in China? Well, We Should Remark."[91]

Conclusion

In the early twentieth century, Brodsky's travelogue and the stories of his film business in China bestowed the country and its people with a vivid image, identity, and definition. Although most of his works were produced for commercial, profit-making purposes, Brodsky skillfully transformed his personal view of the people and the nation into the realm

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[90] Kaufman, "Bret Harte Said It: The Heathen Chinese Is Peculiar."

[91] Ibid.

of mass culture in the United States. By so doing, he contributed to a striking, but in essence stereotyped image of the "non-Western other." The danger in the distribution and circulation of such cultural artifacts lies not in its intellectual and artistic successes. Rather, as Walter Benjamin suggested, the peril is situated in the strength of the effectiveness, usefulness, availability, and authority of the images.[92]

As mentioned above, *Trip* conquered American audiences and was extensively screened in the East, the Midwest, and the West of the United States, but Brodsky's second travelogue, *Beautiful Japan*, encountered a quite different outcome. Since Brodsky accepted the commission from the Japan Tourist Bureau and the Imperial Railways, the patrons held the final say in the project.[93] Originally, this production aimed to make a travelogue that would attract potential American tourists. However, due to the underlying tone and cinematic style that Brodsky presented, some powerful Japanese government officials were deeply offended by certain sections of *Beautiful Japan*.[94] Curry explains that some footage Brodsky wanted to include in the film as a way to interest and amuse American audiences actually made the Japanese a "laughingstock."[95] In marketing *Beautiful Japan*, the Japanese government knew exactly what it wanted, which was a thoroughly attractive travelogue that would interest wealthy Western tourists in vanishing Japan, not an ethnographic documentary that would draw clear distinctions between East and West and make Japan look backward.[96] In the case of *Trip*, Curry further points out that the Chinese production crew and those who facilitated Brodsky's

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[92] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 83.

[93] Curry, "Benjamin Brodsky (1877-1960): The Trans-Pacific American Film Entrepreneur - Part II": 176.

[94] Ibid., 178-179.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Ibid.

filmmaking in Hong Kong and China were neither in a position to insist on previewing the work nor had the national government censorship to inspect foreigners' film imports and exports.[97]

Brodsky's presentation of China did not altogether misrepresent the people and the nation. Perhaps his travelogue should be viewed less as a false image of the country than as a coherent, but "incomplete" picture. The film was executed and dispersed for a purpose, according to the tendencies and beliefs held in specific historical, intellectual, and economic settings. *Trip* looked so truthful and authentic, yet it was a fabrication, a social and cultural construction. Without doubt, Brodsky was not only an experienced traveler, filmmaker, and film entrepreneur, but also a compelling story-teller. As Said elaborated further on the central idea of *Orientalism*, Western knowledge about the East is generally not generated from facts or reality, but from preconceived archetypes envisioning all "Eastern" societies as fundamentally similar to one another, and fundamentally dissimilar to "Western" societies. Particularly valuable was that *Trip* and the phenomena it aroused in the United States was not exactly a veridical discourse about China. The indigenous view is omitted. And Brodsky's cinematic text presents an ahistorical vision, one lacking an awareness of cultural, national, and racial affinities. The conundrum of the travelogue lies in Brodsky's unsophisticated, primitive approach to and narrative about local culture, which arguably sharpened national and ethnic stereotyping: China is merely poor, awkward, and indecent as opposed to the honorable, dignified, and respectable West. The travelogue reflects a style of thought that was fundamentally grounded in an ontological and epistemological system of values far more intrinsic to the West than to the East.

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[97] Ibid.

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