
Between Naïveté and Desire: Analyzing Collective Intimacy in Sun Yu's Films with a Time-Based Annotation Tool

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Abstract

The collective affords a prominent presence in Sun Yu's extant silent era films. Along with his dedicated portrayal of athletic bodies and sanguine spirit, family-like communities contribute to his optimistic outlook against a backdrop of national crisis. Sun's collective tends to envelop romantic plots, bringing individuals to a grander national narrative, while at the same time it is alive with tension between childlike innocence and sexual allure. This paper employs time-based annotation tool to analyze the performance and cinematography that contribute to the representation of a loving community. By annotating scenes of reoccurring gestures and collective intimacy in *Wild Rose*, *Little Toys* and *The Big Road* how tension between desire and naïveté often lurks under playful touches and affectionate gazes. It is through such ambiguity and collective interactions that Sun finds room to address serious issues of national salvation and class struggle with cheerfulness and humanistic complexity.

Introduction

"Such romanticized depictions of the collective paved the way for the imagination of an emotionally charged national community."

As one of the most prominent early Chinese filmmakers, Sun Yu is known for his poetic style, kinetic energy, and optimistic outlook against a backdrop of national crisis. His six extant silent era films, *Wild Rose* (*Ye meigui*), *The Blood of Passion on the Volcano* (*Huoshan Qingxue*), *Daybreak* (*Tianming*), *Little Toys*

(*Xiao Wanyi*), *Queen of Sports* (*Tiyu Huanghou*), and *The Big Road* (*Da lu*), all fall into the time period of 1932 to 1934, when national salvation became an increasingly pressing matter after the Japanese occupation of Manchuria and the Battle of Shanghai in 1932.¹ These films demonstrate Sun Yu's belief that a strong physical body and sanguine spirit are fundamental to the strengthening of the nation.² The robust farm women in *Wild Rose* (1932) and *Daybreak* (1932), the professionally trained athletes in *Queen of Sports* (1934), and the strong and upbeat construction workers in *The Big Road* (1934) present a fresh image of a young Chinese generation physically and mentally prepared to fight for the nation (see Figures 1 through 3).



Figure 1. [Wild Rose](#) (1932, left) and [Daybreak](#) (1933, right).



Figure 2. [Queen of Sports](#) (1934).



Figure 3. [The Big Road](#) (1934).

Besides the attention dedicated to the portrayal of individuals, these films also reveal Sun's consistent interest in depicting the dynamics among the collective, especially the family-like working community, which serves as the source of care, support, and inspiration for its members. In Sun Yu's cinematic world, intimate interactions do not occur exclusively, or even primarily, between the romantic leads but frequently appear among peers of the same or opposite sex, to the extent that it might seem confusing to contemporary audiences who are not familiar with his style. From *Wild Rose* to *The Big Road*, romantic plots increasingly dissolve into narratives that stress collective love and solidarity, which find their expression through affectionate interactions and carefully designed cinematography. Such romanticized depictions of the collective paved the way for the imagination of an emotionally charged national community.

Defining the Collective

How exactly does Sun Yu convey a sense of collective intimacy through cinematic language? What are the reoccurring patterns that characterize his directing style in these segments, and how are they related to the rest of the films? What can we learn when we compare Sun's formal features with other silent era filmmakers in and beyond China? This paper presents a preliminary effort to

use time-based annotation tools to analyze the performance and cinematography that contribute to the representation of a loving community. By categorizing annotated scenes of reoccurring gestures

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and intimate interactions in three of Sun's representative silent or partial-sound films—*Wild Rose* (1932), *Little Toys* (1933), and *The Big Road* (1934)— I will lay out his unique technique for depicting intimacy among fellow workers. Designed as a foundational step toward the building of a comprehensive database on early cinema forms, time-based annotation will fully realize its potential through search and analysis across a large amount of film data. In this paper, the tool is mainly employed to demonstrate a preexisting observation. But with the accumulation of manually input and machine-generated annotations, the goal is to discover new research questions and methods through navigating the database.

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Studies on Sun Yu's early works mostly focus on his ambiguous political stance, the entanglement between rural and urban, local aesthetics and Hollywood influence, and the image of modern athletic women, all of which are closely connected with each other.³ The collective adds a new angle that cuts across all these issues. As

many scholars agree, it is not easy to pigeonhole Sun's works in clear categories of left or right. They have never fully satisfied either group since they are too cheerful and follow the nationalist government's policy too closely for the leftists and are too class-centered for the government. Sun's representation of the collective manifests his sympathy for the working poor, but class differences for him are not irreconcilable. In *Wild Rose* and *The Big Road*, the collective comprises people from different backgrounds, and men with overseas education in *Wild Rose* and *Little Toys* are portrayed in a rather positive manner. Moreover, arduous conditions and hard labor do not simply lead to a state of desperation or criticism of exploitation but serve to contrast people's optimism and the appeal of the heartwarming community. Poor as most of his protagonists are, they never lack the vitality, passion, and national consciousness that satisfy the modern imagination of new Chinese citizens.

Even more captivating is the combination of childlike innocence and sexual allure embodied by the characters in their interactions within the community. On the surface, childish behaviors, collective solidarity, and common nationalist goals undercut any sexual implications. However, the tension between desire and innocence often lurks under playful touches and affectionate gazes. It is through such ambiguity and a seeming simplification of collective interactions that Sun finds room to address serious issues of national salvation and class struggle with cheerfulness and humanistic complexity. Detailed annotation of the portrayal of collective interaction will reveal how exactly Sun manages to balance these elements.

Attracted to filmmaking during his study in the United States, Sun is undeniably in debt to Hollywood cinema. His earliest extant film, *Wild Rose*, inherits the Cinderella narrative of his former work *Wild Flowers by the Road* (*Ye Cao Xian Hua*, 1930), which is inspired by *The Lady of Camellias* and Frank Borzage's *Seventh Heaven* (1927). The film centers around the love story between a country girl, Xiaofeng (played by Wang Renmei) and a rich city boy, Jiang Bo (Jin Yan). But throughout their romantic encounter, cohabitation, and reunion, the couple is always surrounded by the collective. They meet in the countryside where Xiaofeng trains her "scouts" to protect the nation. After Xiaofeng is rejected by Jiang's family, they move in with Jiang's poor friends, billboard painter Xiao Li and newspaper vendor Laoqiang. Poverty and patriarchal authority separate them, but the couple eventually get back together when the army calls for volunteers, bringing the narrative of romantic and national love full circle. The popular formula of "love and revolution," as scrutinized

in Haiyan Lee's *Revolution of the Heart*, is evident here, and Sun Yu skillfully uses the image of the collective to bridge the two.⁴

The traditional role of family in determining marital partners is replaced by love formed through the common passion for the nation and strengthened by the presence of the community. In *Little Toys*, the family further liquidates and reemerges in the form of a working community, which provides an ideal space for burgeoning love. A gifted and innovative toymaker, Sister Ye (Ruan Linyu), leads a community of rural artisans. Her beauty and talent attract a university student, Yuan Pu (Yuan Congmei), who intends to take her to Europe but instead leaves with Ye's dream to advance China's toy industry to compete with the imports. After her husband dies and her young son goes missing in the midst of political turmoil, Ye relocates to a suburb of Shanghai with her daughter, Zhu'er (Li Lili), and a group of artisans. Their relatively happy and peaceful life is curtailed by the eruption of war, which takes the life of Zhu'er and other community members who volunteered to assist the soldiers. The film ends with the crazed Sister Ye warning people that the enemy is coming on New Year's Eve. She meets her lost son in the street. Although the two fail to recognize each other, they are connected by the same devotion to protect the nation. Her final reunion with Yuan Pu could imply a shift in her life's trajectory, but the insinuation of romance is completely overshadowed by her forceful awakening of the crowd's national consciousness.

Romantic love further gives way to the collective in *The Big Road*, which presents a group of road builders and their lively interactions with two restaurant girls, Jasmine (Li Lili) and Lilac (Chen Yanyan). If the making of toy cannons and planes in *Little Toys* can be seen as a cinematic metaphor for actual war, the theme of infrastructure building directly refers to national defense efforts. The majority of the film is devoted to the friendship between six workers: Jin (Jin Yan), Luo (Luo Peng), Old Zhang (Zhang Yi), Zheng (Zheng Junli), Big Zhang (Zhang Zhizhi), and Little Six (Han Langen), diverse in personality and family background. Dramatic change occurs toward the end as the leading figures are imprisoned by the corrupt comprador Hu for their refusal to collaborate with the enemy. Despite a successful rescue by fellow workers, all the protagonists except Lilac are killed at the work site during bombing. But the film doesn't end on a tragic note. Instead, it stresses that the road, an army supply line, was finished just in time, and magically, all the dead souls were resurrected by Lilac, who symbolizes the continuation of the revolutionary spirit.

These three films chart a decrease in the weight of romance and an expansion of the portrayal of the collective, but the entanglement between the two remains consistent. As we can see in Tables 1 through 7, which list scenes that contribute to the depiction of collective dynamics—even in the typical love story *Wild Rose*—the presence of the collective is significant. In *The Big Road*, almost 90 percent of the scenes focus on the working community. The collective in each film is not necessarily a fixed entity, and the boundary between a collective and a crowd is not always self-evident.⁵ Ranging from a small group of close friends to a gathering of people with shared goals and passions, the collective refers to a spectrum of interpersonal relations. The people who gather to join the army of volunteers at the end of *Wild Rose*, the crowd that is excited by Sister Ye's powerful speech in *Little Toys*, and the group of nameless workers who rescue Jin and others from comprador Hu's mansion can all be counted as collectives since they serve to reinforce a sense of togetherness and solidarity.

Table 1. Scenes of the Collective in *Wild Rose*

No.	Scene	Time Code	Notes
1	Xiaofeng jumps robe with village kids.	00:01:21– 00:01:28	Bird's-eye view, part of the establishment of the village scene

2	Xiaofeng leads village kids.	00:05:31– 00:08:25	Reoccurring gesture 1: salute, finger touching, handshaking
3	Xiaofeng trains the scouts; Jiang joins.	00:18:10– 00:23:08	Jiang enters the collective with a patriotic statement.
4	Jiang drives a car packed with kids and paints a portrait of Xiaofeng.	00:23:17– 00:24:43	
5	Jiang Bo paints Xiaofeng surrounded by the kids.	00:28:38– 00:29:39	Intercut with Xiaofeng’s father running away after killing the landlord
6	The group sees Xiaofeng’s burning house.	00:29:40– 00:30:22	Jiang and kids try to stop Xiaofeng from running into the fire.
7	Xiaofeng and Jiang move in with Jiang’s poor friends.	00:38:94– 00:43:56	The forming of a new community in the urban space
8	Jiang decides to paint billboards with Xiao Li.	00:46:30– 00:47:23	Reoccurring gesture 2: salute, figure touching, handshaking
9	Lunch on the work site.	00:47:26– 00:49:41	The group pretends to eat a big feast.
10	Walking back home arm in arm.	00:49:43– 00:51:32	
11	Jiang and Li are taken away by the police.	01:00:38– 01:01:52	Everyone tries to protect others by claiming to be the thief.
12	Xiaofeng visits Jiang and Li in the prison.	01:05:45– 01:10:21	
13	Jiang asks his friends to look for Xiaofeng.	01:11:34– 01:12:25	
14	Jiang looks for Xiaofeng with village kids.	01:12:27– 01:14:00	Xiaofeng sees them and hides from Jiang.
15	The three friends listen to the motivational speech of the army.	01:17:41– 01:18:02	
16	Jiang joins the army of volunteers and the group reunites.	01:21:01– 01:22:40	

Table 2. Scenes of the Collective in *Little Toys*

No.	Scene	Time code	Notes
1	Sister Ye gets inspiration for a new toy invention on the street.	00:09:21– 00:11:45	Sister Ye fixes Zhang’s shirt on the street. A group of kids make fun of a street vendor who attempts to take advantage of Sister Ye.
2	Sister Ye expresses her concern for the competition from foreign toys.	00:11:46– 00:16:37	A group of artisans gather at Ye’s place, watching her making a new invention.
4	Sister Ye and a group of war refugees relocate to the suburbs of Shanghai.	00:43:04– 00:44:55	Sister Ye and the group wander to Shanghai and build their own shelters.

5	Ten years later, Zhu'er shows her talent in toy invention.	00:45:01– 00:50:49	Echoing scene 2
6	Zhu'er leads the kids to do physical exercises.	00:51:30– 00:53:21	Strong emphasis on her physical body
7	Zhu'er plays with the kids.	00:53:22– 00:57:47	
8	Zhu'er and A Yong's private date is watched by the group.	00:58:06– 01:02:13	
9	Zhu'er encourages the group to fight during the bombing.	01:13:06– 01:16:45	Intercut with scenes of soldiers fighting
10	The group works to support the army.	01:17:43– 01:23:05	Sister Ye cooks, Zhu'er mends clothes, men participate in labor and leave with the army.
11	Old Zhao, A Yong, and Zhu'er are killed in the war.	01:24:26– 01:29:41	
12	Sister Ye's speech moves the crowd.	01:41:08– 01:43:01	

Table 3. Scenes of the Collective in *The Big Road*

No.	Scene	Time Code	Notes
1	Collective singing of the theme song.	00:01:42– 00:03:36	
2	Jin's father working on road construction with a group.	00:06:32– 00:07:14	Close-ups on legs and faces
3	Jin, Luo, and Old Zhang working on road construction.	00:07:18– 00:08:54	Showing their different personalities
4	Another group coming on a truck.	00:08:55– 00:10:14	Zheng criticizes Big Zhang for throwing pebbles at girls in the street.
5	The five of them meet and are expelled for fighting.	00:10:15– 00:12:29	
6	Cheering each other up.	00:12:30– 00:14:17	Reoccurring gesture: pats on head, hand slides down the face and hits the chin
7	Night scene of the neighborhood.	00:14:18– 00:15:56	Impressive long take that follows Jin and Zheng
8	The five sit and discuss job prospects.	00:15:56– 00:16:52	
9	Little Six joins the group; the six of them decide to go to the hinterland to build a road.	00:17:29– 00:21:39	

10	Calls upon other villagers to join.	00:21:40– 00:22:04	
11	The newly formed construction team march forward.	00:22:05– 00:22:59	Long shot and close-ups of the faces
12	Road construction.	00:23:20 – 00:26:44	Accompanied by the theme song, intercut with Lilac and Jasmine working in the restaurant
13	Jin saves a sick worker from comprador Hu.	00:24:43– 00:29:52	Lilac and Jasmine join the celebration; each holds one of Jin’s arms. Intercut with comprador Hu watching.
14	Workers enjoy their break in the restaurant.	00:29:53– 00:33:04	Fight over a cup sipped from by Jasmine and Lilac
15	Restaurant scene.	00:33:26– 00:41:38	Reoccurring gesture as an indication of Little Six’s admission to the group
16	Road construction.	00:41:39– 00:41:59	Accompanied by the theme song
17	Jasmine and Lilac’s intimate moment.	00:41:59– 00:47:58	Kisses and hugs between the two girls; Jasmine talks about her love for the six men.
18	Jasmine and Lilac run into boys bathing.	00:48:00– 00:52:00	Female gaze on male nudity
19	The group watch Lilac singing for Luo.	00:52:01– 00:56:17	Comparable to the dating scene in <i>Little Toys</i>
20	Jin motivates the workers to build the road for the army.	00:57:16– 01:00:29	
21	Road construction.	01:00:30– 01:01:24	Accompanied by the theme song
22	Jin and five friends are imprisoned and tortured after Hu’s banquet.	01:04:23– 01:14:13	
23	Workers and soldiers run to rescue them.	01:25:49– 01:27:48	
24	Rescue scene, the death of Old Zhang.	01:30:50– 01:35:34	Reoccurring gesture before old Zhang’s death
25	Road construction.	01:35:34– 01:37:04	Accompanied by the theme song, joined by Jasmine
26	All killed in the bombing	01:37:24– 01:40:06	Jasmine and Jin die holding hands.
27	Magic resurrection.	01:41:20– 01:42:46	Superimposed image, accompanied by the theme song

What differentiates Sun Yu’s collective from images of the crowd, especially those that feature the works of the Soviet montage school in the 1920s, is a strong affection among distinct individuals. For Sun Yu, the collective is not the antithesis of individualized characters but a force powerful enough to bond them together. The rest of this article focuses on the two techniques of

visualizing such an affection: repeated gestures and physical intimacy.

Repeated Gestures

In Sun Yu's films, special gestures are lovingly shared and reoccur as a reminder of the group's collectivity. In *Wild Rose*, the gesture of salute–finger-touching–handshaking migrates from Xiaofeng's "code" with her country scouts to an expression of friendship among her new community in the city.

Table 4. Repeated Gestures in *Wild Rose*

No.	Scene	Time code	Gesture	Plot
1	<i>Wild Rose</i> 2	00:05:37– 00:05:49	Double salute, finger-touching, and handshake between Xiaofeng and a boy	Introduction of the boy
2	<i>Wild Rose</i> 8	00:46:59– 00:47:13	Salute, finger-touching, and handshake between Xiaofeng and Zhang and then all four	Jiang decides to paint billboards with Zhang after he fails to sell his painting.
3	<i>Wild Rose</i> 10	00:50:28– 00:50:46	Salute three times	Salute to a passerby and a kid, who reply with the same gestures.
4	<i>Wild Rose</i> 12	01:09:08– 01:09:29	Salute, finger-touching, and handshake between Xiaofeng and Jiang, Xiaofeng and Zhang	Xiaofeng visits Jiang and Zhang in jail as a farewell to



Figure 4. Repeated gestures of salute–finger-touching–handshake in *Wild Rose*.

In *Little Toys*, the action of Zhu'er wiping off her mother's tear on her deathbed and flipping it from her fingers is a copy of what her mother did to her when she was a little kid.⁶ Although such repetition mainly strengthens the emotional bond between mother and daughter, their relation has

also been redefined in the context of the artisan community. It is significant that the father figure present in the earlier scene is now replaced by a community member, Mentis (Han Langen).



Figure 5. Repeated gesture of wiping off and flipping tears in *Little Toys*.

Sun Yu invents a more complicated set of gestures for the male workers in *The Big Road*. Combining a hint of masculinity and naïveté, the repeated actions of patting the head, sliding a hand down the face, and hitting the chin manifest the dynamic among the friends. These gestures signify “You are one of us” or “I am one of you.”

Table 5. Repeated Gestures in *The Big Road*

No.	Scene	Time code	Gestures	Plot
1	<i>The Big Road</i> 6	00:13:57– 00:14:17	Patting a friend’s head, hand sliding down the face, and hitting the chin with a fist	Luo tries to cheer up the friends who just got fired.
2	<i>The Big Road</i> 15	00:30:17– 00:30:19	Big Zhang pats Little Six’s head, slides a hand down his face, and hits his chin.	The workers take a rest at the restaurant after a hard day.
3	<i>The Big Road</i> 17	00:46:58– 00:47:04	Little Six pats his own head, slides a hand down his face, and hits his chin.	Appeared as an illustration of Jasmine’s impression of Little Six
4	<i>The Big Road</i> 17	00:47:08– 00:47:16	Jasmine pats Lilac’s forehead, slides a hand down her cheek. Instead of hitting her chin like the men do, she hits Lilac’s palm, and the two women tickle each other.	Plot: The girls imitate the men’s gestures as a form of play.
5	<i>The Big Road</i> 24	01:35:26– 01:35:29	Old Zhang attempts to make the gesture on Jin but dies before finishing.	At the end of the rescue scene



Figure 6. Repeated gestures of patting the head, sliding a hand down the face, and hitting the chin in *The Big Road*.

Physical Intimacy

Besides the repetition of physical gestures that strengthens the solidarity of the collective over time, intimate physical contact is also extensively used to present the closeness of community members. In an early scene in *Little Toys*, Sister Ye mends Zhang's clothes in the street, and the interaction between them could mislead the audience to regard them as lovers.

Table 6. The Scene of Sister Ye and Zhang's Interactions in *Little Toys*

Time code	Action	Cinematography
00:09:21– 01:09:25	Sister Ye touches Zhang's chest and finds a hole.	Medium shot: Ye and Zhang in profile, Mentis framed in the background
01:09:26– 01:09:38	Sister Ye pulls out a threaded needle and mends Zhang's clothes; Zhang lifts his head and stares at her.	Same shot
00:09:38– 00:09:42	Ye notices his gaze and, smiling, pushes his head to the side (toward the camera).	Same shot
00:09:43– 00:09:45	A street vendor watches them and raises his finger to touch his chin.	Medium close-up

00:09:45– 00:09:49	Ye bites off the thread with her head touching Zhang’s arm; Zhang looks off-screen.	Medium shot: Ye and Zhang in profile, Mentis framed in the background
00:09:49– 00:09:53	Ye pats Zhang’s chest, and the two look at each other.	Same shot
00:09:54– 00:10:10	Ye holds Zhang’s arm, and the two walk away. Ye smiles and waves to people on the street. Zhang walks off-screen. Ye stops and waves at him.	Medium-long shot: Mentis framed in the background. The camera follows them to the left and stops with the vendor framed in the foreground (shot continues).
00:10:40– 00:10:42	Kids attack the vendor; Ye holds Zhang’s arm in the background, watching and laughing.	Long shot
00:10:43– 00:10:46	Vendor being attacked; Ye and Zhang in the background watching	Close-up on the vendor
00:10:46– 00:10:48	Zhang’s arm wrapping around Ye’s shoulder, both are watching to the right.	Medium close-up: Mentis framed in the background



Figure 7. Sister Ye and Zhang act intimately in public.

In the plot, there is no indication of romantic entanglement between Sister Ye and Zhang, and the intimacy they openly display on the street is supposed to be accepted as pure friendship in the diegesis. But the vendor’s desire to take advantage of Ye seems to imply a sexual undertone in Ye and Zhang’s interaction. Sun Yu’s normalization of physical intimacy is realized through the exaggerated, childish performance of the characters—as evident in Ruan Linyu’s facial expressions here, which are startlingly different from her performance in other films. Children and childlike protagonists are trademarks of Sun Yu’s works. Even in the more seductive roles that Li Lili is

famous for, her “athletic sexiness” and “youthful energy,” as Zhang Zhen puts it, undermine negative associations of sensuality.⁷ When contextualized in the community, such as Li Lili’s role of Jasmine in *The Big Road*, her open acceptance of the male gaze and physical contacts “glue” the members together and help to save the group from comprador Hu. It is precisely this combination of excessive innocence and a palpable but disguised sexual attraction that makes Sun’s collectives so appealing.

Another outstanding scene that manifests this tension is the astonishingly sensual interactions between Jasmine and Lilac in *The Big Road*. The six-minute sequence in scene 17 is packed with overt physical intimacy that can be easily interpreted as a daring depiction of homosexuality in early Chinese cinema.⁸ However, close analysis will show that it is more appropriate to understand the scene as the two women playing the role of lover for each other. Their intimacy embodies the physical and emotional closeness of the community.

Table 7. The Scene of Lilac and Jasmine's Intimate Interactions in *The Big Road*

Time code	Action	Cinematography
00:42:00– 00:42:04	Jasmine lying on the couch, smiling, one leg on the couch, the other one swings with the rhythm of the music. She raises her arms and yawns, looking off-screen.	Long shot: Jasmine’s body occupies the lower right half of the screen; theme song bridges over from the previous scene.
00:42:05– 00:42:14	Lilac puts tongs on the fire, blows them to cool down, and wipes them with a piece of cloth.	Medium shot: Lilac at the center, Jasmine framed in the background; music stops at the end.
00:42:14– 00:42:17	Jasmine lying on the couch, smiling and looking off-screen.	Long shot: same framing as shot 1 (00:42:00–00:42:04)
00:42:18– 00:42:24	Lilac trims her hair with the tongs and burns her cheek.	Medium shot: same framing as the second shot
00:42:24– 00:42:28	Lilac wipes her cheek, and Jasmine runs to her and sits down next to her.	Extreme long shot: Lilac in the foreground
00:42:29– 00:42:39	Jasmine fondles Lilac’s cheek and her brow, turns Lilac’s face toward her.	Medium shot of the two girls
00:42:39– 00:42:48		Intertitle: You are so adorable. No wonder Luo thinks of you every single minute.
00:42:48– 00:42:50	Lilac turns her head away from Jasmine and puts her hand on Jasmine’s; Jasmine’s hand stays on Lilac’s cheek.	Medium shot of the two girls
00:42:51– 00:42:53	Jasmine pulls Lilac’s head toward her, kisses Lilac’s cheek, presses her own cheek against Lilac’s. Lilac pinches Jasmine’s face.	Medium shot of the two girls (the same shot as the previous log)
00:42:53– 00:43:18	Jasmine carries Lilac in both arms, walks around the room, sits down on the couch, and rests Lilac on her knees. She holds Lilac in both arms and kisses her.	Extreme long shot

00:43:18– 00:43:23	The two girls hug each other; Lilac holds Jasmine’s chin and whispers in her ear.	Medium close-up
00:43:23– 00:43:30		Intertitle: Jasmine, tell me quietly, who do you love the most?
00:43:31– 00:43:38	Jasmines turns her head toward Lilac, pauses for a second, laughs and leans back, puts her arm behind her head; Lilac lifts one leg and stabilizes it with her arms.	Medium long shot: Lilac in the front
00:43:38– 00:43:47		Intertitle: You ask me to say it quietly, but I want to announce loudly that I love them all.



Figure 8. Lilac and Jasmine's intimate interactions in *The Big Road*.

While the women's interactions mimic those of real lovers, their conversations are exclusively about the men in their community. Lilac's shyness and affectionate reactions to Jasmine respond not only to the latter's initiatives but, more importantly, to her mention of Luo, Lilac's love interest. This is most evident after Jasmine declares her love for all and explains the amiable qualities of Luo. Unlike her smiling response to Jasmine's depiction of other boys, Lilac gets excited, rubs her nose against Jasmine's cheek, and kisses her. She gazes into the distance as if Luo were standing right in front of her. To some extent, Jasmine functions as Luo's physical substitute that allows Lilac to externalize her desire, but their interactions also manifest their sisterly love, a coherent part of the group dynamic.



Figure 9. Close-ups on Lilac and Jasmine kissing and holding each other.

Jasmine's understanding of love demonstrates a transcendence of heterosexual romance in the context of collective life. As she passionately praises the lovable qualities of each man, their images appear on-screen in order, presenting them as both distinct individuals and—more important—members of the community. This point is driven home by concluding Jasmine's account with Little Six's performance of the set of pat-slide-hit gestures that signifies their collectivity as referenced in the previous section. Sun Yu gives the scene a further twist by having the women playfully mimic the gestures that have been used exclusively among the men up to that point. The women's playful enactment not only confirms their sisterhood vis-à-vis male solidarity but can also be read as an act of identification with the workers' community. Female intimacy sets the tone for the entire scene, reframing the community in a sweet, boudoir environment, but underneath the surface is a surging desire, subtly balanced by childlike play and an uplifting sense of collectivism.

The entanglement between desire and innocence is further played out in the following scene (18), where Jasmine and Lilac see the men bathing in the river naked. After a playful discussion between the women and the men, properly separated by a steep hill, the men finally give in and comply with their requests. The sexual tension that gradually builds through Jasmine's voyeuristic female gaze is immediately dissolved by Lilac's innocent answer "My dad will treat you all for dinner tonight." The following sequence shows the men rushing to the shore, getting dressed, and running up the hill for watermelons. Christopher Rae interprets the splitting of a watermelon as "a metaphor for taking a woman's virginity" based on a Chinese idiom.⁹ This reading brings the subdued sexuality to the forefront, but given the context of this and Sun Yu's other films discussed here, a sexual association for watermelon is unlikely to be the emphasis. This becomes evident when compared with the sensual close-ups on cutting, digging into, and eating watermelon as well as the intimate shot-reverse-shot between the protagonists, in Wayne Wang's *Joy Luck Club* (1993), which explicitly utilizes this symbolic meaning. In contrast, Sun Yu's watermelon scene employs long and medium-long shots to foreground bodily strength, energy, and the act of sharing among members of the community. Even though the ambiguity of sexual desire remains an undertone, it is always absorbed into an overarching feeling of collective intimacy energized by upbeat naiveté.

Conclusion

By breaking down scenes that portray the collective in *Wild Rose*, *Little Toys*, and *The Big Road*, this article demonstrates the significance of the working community in Sun Yu's silent era films. Through shared gestures and the display of intimate—even slightly transgressive—physical interactions between members of the community, Sun challenges the defined individual body and

reimagines a collective body that ties everyone to a higher national goal. With his unique mingling of childlike innocence, robust energy, and hints of sexual desire, he successfully offsets didactic clichés, presenting an idealized version of the collective life.

This paper is an example of one of the possibilities for which time-based annotation can be used in film analysis. As we are still at an early stage of exploring the potential of the tool, the logs listed here remain raw data, yet to be processed in a more sophisticated and interactive way across the database. Nevertheless, the simple breakdown of scenes and actions already reveals nuanced and consistent techniques employed by a single director. More data will eventually facilitate a comparison between Sun Yu's collectives and those in Hollywood and Soviet cinema or help study how the same action is performed differently across films. With the advent of searchable moving visual segments, a new research horizon will be cracked open.

A list of external links featured in this essay can be found here.¹⁰

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¹ *The Big Road* is a partial-sound film with composed theme songs.

² Sun Yu, "Daoyan Ye Meigui hou (After directing *Wild Rose*)," *Dianying Yishu* (Film Arts) 1 (1932): 50–52; see also "Dianying zasuiguan: Kaizhang daji (Cinematic chop-suey house: An auspicious opening)," *Xiandai dianying* (Modern Screen) 1, no. 1 (1933): 22–23.

³ See Victor Fan, "The Cinema of Sun Yu: Ice cream for the eye . . . but with a *homo sacer*," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 5, 3 (2011): 219–51, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1386/jcc.5.3.219_1; Corrado Neri, "Sun Yu and the Early Americanization of Chinese Cinema," in *Media, Popular Culture, and the American Century*, Kingsley Bolton and Jan Olsson, eds. (National Library of Sweden, 2010), 227–48, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00835821/>; Li Yueyang, "Zai Nanjing guomin zhengfu yu zuoyi dianying zhijian: yi Sun Yu dianying wei li (Between Nanjing Nationalist Government and Leftist Films: A Case Study on Sun Yu's Film)," *Dianying Yishu* (Film Art) 3 (2010): 117–24; Bao Yan, "Zuoyi, guojia, shangye: Sun Yu dianying, fenghe de zuoyi ji dangxia yishi (Leftism, Nation, and Business: Sun Yu's Film, Sutured Leftism, and Contemporary Consciousness)," *Nanjing Yishu Xueyuan Xuebao* (Nanjing Art Academy Journal) 1 (2021): 157–62. See Miriam Hansen, "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons—Shanghai silent film as vernacular modernism," *Film Quarterly* 54, 1 (2000): 10–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1213797>; Adrian Song Xiang, "Hollywood and Shanghai Cinema in the 1930s," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 15.2 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2225>; Li Xin, "Dui bentu chuantong he haolaiwu dianying de shuangchong gaixie (Double Revision of Hollywood Cinema and Local Tradition)," *Dangdai Dianying* (Contemporary Films) 11 (2010): 156–60. See Yihong Pan, "Crafting the 'New Woman' in China's Left-Wing Cinema of the 1930s: Sun Yu's three films," *Frontier of History in China* 6, 2 (2011): 264–84, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11462-011-0129-9>; Yunxiang Gao, "Sex, Sports, and China's National Crisis, 1931–1945: The 'Athletic Movie Star' Li Lili (1915–2005)," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 22, 1 (2010): 96–161, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41491020>; Sun Meng, "Meili shibaizhe: Sun Yu mopian zhong de nvxing yu xiandaixing (Beautiful Losers: Female Images and Modernism in Sun Yun's Films)," *Beijing Dianying Xueyuan Xuebao* (Beijing Film Academy Journal) 4 (2008): 131–40.

⁴ Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007). <https://www.sup.org/books/title?id=7351>.

⁵ Tie Xiao discusses the formation of the concept of the crowd and its importance in modern Chinese history and literature in his book *Revolutionary Waves: The Crowd in Modern China* (Harvard University Press, 2017).
<https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674977167>.

⁶ This scene is famously reenacted in Stanley Kwan's *Center Stage*, a formally innovative biography of Ruan Linyu.

⁷ Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 290.

⁸ Berry, Chris. "The sublimative text: Sex and revolution in *Big Road*." *East-West Film Journal* 2.2 (1988): 66-86.

⁹ Christopher Rae, *Chinese Film Classics, 1922-1949* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2022), 108.

¹⁰ [Links Featured in "Between Naïveté and Desire: Analyzing Collective Intimacy in Sun Yu's Films with a Time-Based Annotation Tool"](#)

Wild Rose (Sun, 1932): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGrrOid67Yw&list=PLhA05Qf-09xBaz_t_ynYbyZ-Porcj7bui&index=9&t=10s

Daybreak (Sun, 1933): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cE4ZBIHNL3E&list=PLhA05Qf-09xBaz_t_ynYbyZ-Porcj7bui&index=10

Little Toys [Playthings] (Sun, 1933): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ukTQfh2hNNs>

Queen of Sports (Sun, 1934): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5z1SqCRFww&list=PLhA05Qf-09xBaz_t_ynYbyZ-Porcj7bui&index=12

The Big Road (Sun, 1934): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMeafrNCs3o&list=PLhA05Qf-09xBaz_t_ynYbyZ-Porcj7bui&index=15

Clip 1. *Little Toys [Playthings]* (Sun, 1933): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-1-little-toys-playthings-1933>

Clip 2. *Little Toys [Playthings]* (Sun, 1933): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-2-little-toys-playthings-1933>

Clip 3. *Little Toys [Playthings]* (Sun, 1933): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-3-little-toys-playthings-1933>

Clip 4. *Wild Rose* (Sun, 1932): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-4-wild-rose-1934>

Clip 5. *Wild Rose* (Sun, 1932): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-5-wild-rose-1934>

Clip 6. *Wild Rose* (Sun, 1932): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-6-wild-rose-1934>

Clip 7. *Wild Rose* (Sun, 1932): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-7-wild-rose-1934>

Clip 8. *Little Toys [Playthings]* (Sun, 1933): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-8-little-toys-playthings-1933>

Clip 9. *The Big Road* (Sun, 1934): <https://pub.dartmouth.edu/journal-of-e-media-studies-vol-7-issue-1-early-cinema-compendium/clip-9-the-big-road-1934>

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