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Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922-1943

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Chapter Six

The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful: Movie Actresses and Public Discourse in Shanghai, 1920s-1930s

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From a photographic negative . . . one can make any number of prints; to ask for the "authentic" print makes no sense.

—Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936)

Introduction

Movie actresses were some of the most upwardly mobile and visible women in 1920s and 1930s Shanghai. Their rise to fame was part and parcel of a visually oriented mass media revolution, which included the emergence of China's Shanghai-based film industry as well as the pictorial press.¹ Indeed, high visibility and various forms of publicity were the very clouds upon which any actress's career floated.

The use of actresses for female roles had almost disappeared as a popular practice in Chinese drama during the seventeenth century; it only reemerged in the late nineteenth century.² The world of silent film, however, stood in marked contrast to that of live theater, and arguments for the presence of women on the silver screen in a 1927 *Funü zazhi* (Women's journal) article were based upon the purely visual nature of early cinematic representation:

Because movies have no sound and words that might assist in expression, everything depends on movements and gestures. The performance is completely real and is com-

pletely intolerant of disguise. Thus, women must be sought out to play the female roles that must be included in movies.

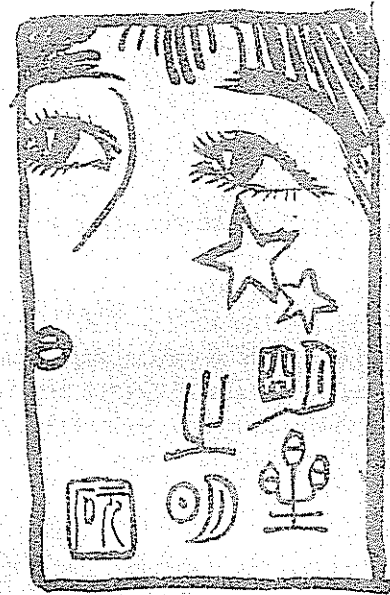
The central points in art are "beauty" (*mei*) and "authenticity" (*zhen*). When speaking of "authenticity," the use of women to play female roles is, of course, the best. When speaking of "beauty," within one type of art, there is also the need for females.³

An even more plausible reason for women taking to the screen was that "in the hearts of the vast audience, they all hope that there is a beautiful woman (*nüxing*) acting in the movie they are watching."⁴ Women's direct participation in the movie-making process was related to issues of visual authenticity and a commercial viability based upon sexual desire. An authentic object called "woman"—to be *seen* and then "known" and "had"—was necessary. Whether based on artistic or commercial criteria, film demanded the physical (sexual) presence of women. In fact, the very "essence" and "brightness of movie stars" was defined in terms of a woman's body—specifically her eyes and her neck (see figs. 10, 11).⁵ But the notion of a female movie star was, from the outset, fraught with tensions generated by such physicality and visibility. Women who participated in such an unprecedented degree of mass publicity, and in such a bodily manner, epitomized the moral ambiguities of urban life—ambiguities that threatened those would-be gentry members who were nostalgic for a patriarchal order that was clearly in decline in the socially and sexually fluid milieu of early twentieth-century Shanghai. During the late 1920s a negative discourse emerged to delegitimize upwardly mobile actresses, and notoriety became the sibling of celebrity. This early discourse on movie actresses was enfolded in a more general and widespread public discourse on dangerous women.

In the 1920s, movie actresses were categorically characterized as degenerate, corrupted, and deceptive "starlets"—amateurs who, like prostitutes, were morally and sexually suspect. But by the 1930s, full-fledged movie stars (*mingxing*) emerged who were individually praised for courtesanlike talent, virtue, innocence, and sincerity. However, these evaluations were clearly linked, via the standards of "true character" (*bense*, literally "original color") and the "good girl," to movie actresses' standing as women.

By the mid-1930s female movie stars in Shanghai were clearly more media darlings than demimondaines. Although the promotional discourse of the 1930s was positive and inclusive, it was as confining or disciplinary as any other discourse. Fiction and gossip, as well as film criticism based upon standards of the "good girl" and "true character" acting, were all critical in defining the bounds of acceptable behavior for movie actresses both on and off screen as well as for urban women in general. Inherent within such discourses were a set of hierarchies and value judgments about how women did and should behave. But instead of drawing attention to itself (its own disciplinary operations and effects,

10. The brightness of movie stars:
the eyes (*Beiyang huabao* [Nov. 13, 1926]).



11. The brightness of
movie stars: the neck
(*Beiyang huabao* [Nov.
6, 1926]).

its own interests and desires), the critical standard of "true character" acting and the "good girl" focused the attention of critics, fans, and actresses themselves on "acting well" with promises of public praise, fame, reward, and assistance.

The entity of *nü mingxing*, then, was a discourse. It "intended to constitute the ground whereon to decide *what shall count as a fact* in the matters under consideration [namely, womanhood and female sexuality] and to determine *what mode of comprehension* is best suited to the understanding of the facts thus constituted."⁶ Seeing *nü mingxing* as discourse does not reduce or trivialize it to a language game, for the identities of individual actresses ("who" they were) could be separated neither from the category of *nü mingxing* ("what" they were), nor from the discourses that marked them (their bodies) as such. Once one acknowledges this point, one cannot but take the discursive entity of *nü mingxing* seriously as something that produces and regulates subjects linked to concrete fields of institutionalized power.

Even when individual women themselves moved to shape and control the production of those discursive structures in which they lived (through such practices as editing their own screenplays, directing and producing their own movies, writing and publishing their own prose, and/or speaking publicly themselves) they could only grasp at an ideal of "liberation." The costs of constituting oneself as a certain kind of subject (*nü mingxing* and *nüxing*) and then entering the discursive fray were quite real, as the case of Ruan Lingyu's (1910–35) suicide demonstrates.

The rise (and fall) of female movie stars in Shanghai during the 1920s and 1930s must be understood within an even broader context of a shifting social structure—namely, the slow decline of former gentry elites and the rise of a professionalized urban middle class. The gradual displacement between the last half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century of those gentry elites, whose socioeconomic power traditionally derived from landowning and office-holding, by a newly emergent and professionalized urban middle class (bourgeoisie), whose power derived more and more from commercialized activities, was accompanied by the "sexualization" of old-style courtesans who served the entertainment and companionate needs of gentry elites and who were pivotal in reproducing those elites' cultural and social hegemony.⁷ The introduction of new technologies such as mechanized printing, photography, and cinematography allowed nouveau riches to assert themselves socially and culturally. The rise of movie actresses in the late 1920s and then of full-fledged female movie stars in the early 1930s coincided with these historical circumstances. As late Qing courtesans, who had once catered to the tastes and values of an urban-based gentry clientele, became more and more "sexualized" in their activities, they eventually melted into the category of common prostitutes. At the same

time, female movie stars rose from the notoriety that accompanied being equated with prostitutes to enjoy fame as the "courtesanlike" companions of China's newly arrived urban elites, who came to full-fledged power and prominence during the late 1920s and early 1930s. My argument here is not one of straightforward causality or of class conflict as the engine of history, but rather suggests a number of historical adjacencies and conjunctures.

In this essay, I do not focus on the texts of films that were so powerful because of their realistic qualities. Instead, I will concentrate upon re-presentations of female movie stars themselves and their "private" lives in fan magazines, popular journals, and newspapers. These texts were even more "realistic" than films because they were filled with direct references to "real-life" people and events outside of the movie theater. The phenomenon of the female movie star was a form of discourse consisting not only of written words, but also of a number of new urban practices such as moviegoing, reading fan magazines, writing fan letters, circulating and collecting personally autographed photographs, writing movie criticism, ranking of stars in contests, and so on. The institutionalization of such practices in a number of discourses delineated the possibilities and parameters for two constitutive elements of social being—physical comportment and emotional expression—and thus collectively produced and reproduced a number of interrelated subjectivities (movie star, fan, critic). The subject position of *nü mingxing* was the pivotal element in this constellation. It produced a set of centered subjectivities (via various discourses) in which *nü mingxing* was understood as a naively reflective role through which some interiorized "self" and authentic fact of "woman" ought to be at once identified and then re-presented both on and off screen.

I have found the term "generation" useful as a way to describe a group of individual actresses who rose to stardom in a similar working environment which was dependent upon developments in the film industry alone. It should be read strictly as a reference to changes within China's early film industry itself, not to larger social changes. Thus, a "generation" of actresses may be separated in age by only a few years, rather than 15–30 years as is usually assumed when discussing "generational" changes in a strictly demographic sense. But who were some of China's first "generation" of movie actresses? And how was their rise to stardom enfolded in a public discourse on movie actresses?

The First Generation: Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei

China's earliest actresses used anonymous performing names like "Miss F F" or "Miss A A" and were mostly part-time amateurs with pretty faces.⁸ Two

of China's first truly individualized female movie stars, however, were Wang Hanlun (1903–78) and Yang Naimei (1904–60) (see figs. 12, 13).⁹

In 1923 a star was born. Peng Jianping, a typist at Shanghai's "Four Brights" *hong* (Siming yanghang), tried out for the female lead in Mingxing Film Company's first full-length feature *Guer jiuzu ji* (The orphan rescues grandfather) at the behest of her co-worker, Ren Jinping, and got the part.¹⁰ *The Orphan Rescues Grandfather* was completed after three months of filming. The film was a huge financial success that put Mingxing in the black and sent the company well on its way to becoming one of Shanghai's dominant film studios in the 1920s and 1930s. After the release of *The Orphan Rescues Grandfather* in the fall of 1923, Peng Jianping's family was disgusted that she had sunk to the level of a mere actor (*xizi*). At the age of 20, Peng cut kinship ties, changed her name to Wang Hanlun, joined Mingxing's full-time roster, and immediately began working on a second film, *Yuli hun* (Spirit of the jade pear, 1924). Wang Hanlun went on to star in more than ten films over the next five years and established herself as one of China's first full-fledged movie stars.

Yang Naimei made her first film appearance in *Spirit of the Jade Pear*.¹¹ In the early spring of 1923 Mingxing director Zhang Shichuan was looking for an actress to play the wealthy socialite protagonist of *Spirit of the Jade Pear*. Screenwriter Zheng Zhengqiu recommended Yang, and director Zhang went along. Yang's performance in *Spirit of the Jade Pear* impressed Zhang Shichuan so much that he asked her to stay on and act in his next film *Youhun* (Seductive marriage, 1924). Yang's father disapproved, since he wanted his daughter to continue her education abroad in England; however, like Wang Hanlun, Yang Naimei went against her family's wishes and became one of China's first movie stars, making more than ten movies in all before leaving the film industry in the late 1920s.

How exactly did Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei rise to stardom? A former actor from the 1920s, Gong Jia'ning, has made a distinction between "fame" (*chengming*), based solely on name recognition, and "achievements" (*chenggong*), based more on genuine skills or talents. In his memoirs Gong recalls that there was no time to formally study acting technique, nor was it valued, for "it was as if once you entered the film world . . . boring dinner parties and social events geared towards a certain purpose occupied all of our free time."¹² Present-day literary and cultural critics have also written about this distinction between "fame" and "achievements." Indeed, some see the entire notion of "fame" based on concrete achievements as an outdated term that should simply be replaced by a vacuous "celebrity" based on high visibility in the age of mass communications.¹³

During the 1920s, movie stardom was still situated squarely within the world



12. Wang Hanlun: an early movie star (*Liangyou*, no. 2 [Mar. 1926]: front cover).



13. Yang Naimei: an early movie star (Gan Yazi et al.).

of live performance and face-to-face interaction. Much of Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei's stardom was generated by promotional tours. After starring in Tianyi's *Dianying nü mingxing* (Movie actresses) in 1926 with the young Hu Die (1907–89) in a supporting role, Wang Hanlun went on a promotional tour of Southeast Asia. She was booked on an eight-month tour in which she would give live *kunqu* performances at numerous movie theaters where *Movie Actresses* was playing.¹⁴ Yang Naimei also relied on the practice of promotional stage appearances at movie showings in making a name for herself. In winter 1927 Yang promoted the release of *Liangxin de fuhuo* (Rekindling of conscience) by performing a musical scene from the movie live on stage at Shanghai's Central Theater.¹⁵ By the spring of 1928 Yang Naimei had generated a sizeable fan base. When she traveled with the Mingxing film crew to shoot scenes for *Hu-bian chummeng* (Spring dream by the lakeside) on location in Hangzhou, hundreds of fans greeted her at the train station. The relationships between movie stars and their fans in the 1920s, however, were limited to these sorts of face-to-face encounters. China's earliest movie fans were not yet cultivated in the flow and exchange of autographs and photos or even fan mail, and the only interac-

tion that Yang Naimei's Hangzhou fans hoped for in 1928 was to catch a harmless glimpse of their idol "in person."¹⁶

The rise of Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei was based more upon their outward appearance and "live" or face-to-face interaction than upon pure acting talent as we might define quality acting today (that is, as the art and skill of convincingly portraying a wide range of characters). Both Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei secured their first roles because they looked the part. This is not to deny that Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei had any genuine acting skills. My point here is only to illustrate that women were not recognized and rewarded for *acting well*, but rather for *acting good* and acting like "themselves." These standards of judgment were specifically gendered criteria that held only for actresses. The tendency to discourage artifice and deceptiveness in an actress's performances on screen became much more apparent and restrictive in the 1930s.

China's fledgling film "industry" did not, however, exclude women like Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei from owning the means by which their fame was produced. By the late 1920s both Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei had made enough connections in the film world and had amassed enough money to finance their own production companies—the Hanlun Film Company and the Naimei Film Company. In 1926 Wang Hanlun purchased the rights to Bao Tianxiao's script *Mangmu de aiqing* (Blind love) and began production. She rented equipment and bought studio time from Mingxing. She starred in the film herself and invited Mingxing's Bu Wancang to direct. Director Bu, however, was unreliable and often failed to show up for filming, and so the project soon devolved into a one-woman show on all fronts—financing, production, and promotion. In the end, Wang bought her own projector and spent forty days editing the movie herself. She then took *Blind Love* on the road and showed it to audiences throughout China. During intermissions, she would take to the stage and get feedback from the audience. The film turned a profit, which Wang Hanlun then used to retire from the film world in 1928.

Yang Naimei's venture into film production was much more financially tenuous than that of Wang Hanlun. In April 1928 Yang was fascinated by the news of a woman from Hong Kong, Yu Meiyan, who had committed suicide in Shanghai at the age of 31, and wanted to shoot a film based on the sensational story.¹⁷ After obtaining the requisite capital from the military governor of Shandong, Zhang Zongchang, Yang set up shop on Jin Shenfu Road in September 1928.¹⁸ She played the lead role in the film version of the Yu Meiyan story, *Qi nüzi* (Extraordinary girl), which was the Naimei Film Company's first and only production; it came and went with little fanfare in 1929.

In the wide-open film industry of the 1920s Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei were movers and shakers in the spheres of both cultural production and con-

sumption. In 1925 Yang Naimei was living a comfortable life as a trend-setter on the Shanghai fashion scene. The reputations of stores such as Yong'an Company and the Huiluo Company located on the Bund were based upon the patronage of stars such as Wang and Yang.¹⁹ All eyes at the Carleton Dance Hall fell on Yang Naimei, decked out in her sequined dresses; and within a week everyone who was anyone was dressed to match.²⁰ Yang's residence on Prince Edward Road also served as a social club for her film industry and journalist friends.

Movie actresses were clearly a prominent, if not a predominant, presence and social and cultural force in Shanghai by the 1920s. But their rapid rise coincided with the proliferation of a negative discourse on actresses, for these new arbiters of value and taste transgressed two social boundaries at once: those of class and gender. This 1920s commentary on actresses was hardly monolithic; a hodgepodge of views and voices ranging from those in the film industry to movie fans to social and cultural critics chimed in. However, all but a few of these early perceptions of actresses during the 1920s were shaped by a discourse on urban women in general that appeared outside of the film world.²¹

Sex, the City, and Cinema: The 1920s Discourse on Dangerous Women

There was an implicit danger embedded in the storyline of young men and women taking off for the big city in search of fame and fortune, for cities were populated by free-floating bodies. The consciousness of dangers in the city was often clearly gendered, since sex (both as a biological distinction and as a physical act) was an overriding concern. The mere presence of women provided the underpinnings for many moral misgivings regarding urban life.²² A woman who had sojourned to the city for the same reasons as men (opportunities for work and advancement) was already suspect and problematic, if not outright dangerous, by virtue of her sex.²³ Such widely shared perceptions were reflected in the characterizations of urban women as pursuers and providers of pleasure and entertainment—as femme fatales, prostitutes, and actresses tied to no kin. The concept of "woman" as a site of moral contention was prevalent in Chinese film and fiction. The portrayal of the city as a corrupting force in women's lives played itself out in many films such as *Yichuan zhenzhu* (A string of pearls, 1925), *Taohua qixue ji* (Peach blossom weeps tears of blood, 1931), *Xiao wanyi* (Little toys, 1933), *Shennü* (Goddess, 1934), *Zimei hua* (Twin sisters, 1934), and *Xin nüxing* (New woman, 1935).²⁴

The perils involved in sojourning to and living in Shanghai were the main

themes of Mu Shiying, a well-known modernist writer in the 1930s.²⁵ Mu's "Shanghai de hubuwu" (Shanghai foxtrot), published in 1932, tells the story of a young man who is financially and sexually duped by a slippery seductress while playing the horses at the Shanghai racetrack (*paoma ting*).²⁶ Mu Shiying was hardly hitting on anything new, for a different story published some seven years earlier—"Dianju yuanzhong" (In the movie theater)—worked off of the same basic formula as "Shanghai Foxtrot."²⁷ The predictable plot of "In the Movie Theater" provides us with contemporary notions of how a stereotypical Shanghai femme fatale operated.

The male protagonist of this story, Wang Lucheng, goes to see a movie by himself one day. Cai Xiaomei (literally "Smiling Plum" Cai), a brash young woman who has American-style curls and wears seductively revealing clothing, is sitting in the row behind him. Cai asks Wang if he has a light for her cigarette. After some bantering back and forth about movies, Cai invites Wang to sit next to her and help her in reading the script-program for the movie.²⁸ Throughout their conversation, Wang is both a paragon and a parody of propriety—all formalities and sweaty brow—while Miss Cai is playful and at ease, telling Wang to loosen up a bit. Once the lights go out, Miss Cai gives Mr. Wang an "unspeakable greeting"—a kiss or something less innocent? Then the newly coupled couple moves to the back row of the theater to exchange more intimacies for the rest of the show. After the movie is over, Wang and Cai leave, both smiling (who wouldn't be?), hand-in-hand. Two weeks later, Mr. Wang wears a long and troubled face. Apparently Miss Cai hasn't bothered to stay in touch. In order to cheer him up, Wang's friends take him out to see a movie, *Shanghai yi furen* (A woman in Shanghai, 1925). Throughout the movie Wang overhears a couple behind him whispering sweet nothings to each other and recalls his own fling with Miss Cai two weeks earlier. Predictably, he is shocked when the theater lights come on and he finds the woman sitting behind him with another man is none other than (ho-hum) Cai Xiaomei.

The plot of "In the Movie Theater" draws upon the same premises as Mu Shiying's "Shanghai Foxtrot." The two stories only differ in their settings and in the fact that the femme fatale of "In the Movie Theater" at least leaves the male protagonist with his wallet, though not his pride, intact. The associations between movies, betrayal, deception, and sex in this story serve to fuse the qualities of the femme fatale, the actress, and the prostitute into one. This was the essence of "a woman of Shanghai."

Another short story published in 1926 and entitled "Dianying mingxing" (Movie star) clearly illustrates the prevalent notion in 1920s Shanghai that movie actresses were nothing more than prostitutes in disguise.²⁹ "Movie Star" parodies the rise of a prostitute named Yan Hong (Crimson) to the ranks of a so-called movie star by setting her success against the backdrop of Shanghai's

fledgling film industry when "everyone seemed to be starting their own film company" and when "almost anyone who made a movie was considered a star." Although the story reads more like thinly veiled reportage than imaginative fiction and is much too blunt and didactic in tone to be effective as a parody, it is still indicative of the dubious image that actresses had in the mid-1920s. The narrator of the story attributes the rise of so-called movie stars to the propensity of yellow journalists and the mosquito press to spin "stars" out of thin air as well as to a shortage of actors and actresses resulting from the reluctance of most families to allow their sons and daughters to enter the degenerate world of film. Yan Hong was lured by the prospect of making big money in the film world and began working for the "Boring Film Company." Shortly afterwards she assumes the appearance of a female student by undoing her smooth braids and fluffing her hair into disheveled curls; donning tortoiseshell glasses; wearing short skirts and high heels; and dropping her fluent Suzhou dialect for a more Westernized Mandarin peppered with a few "Miss's" and "Mister's." Indeed, the protagonist's disheveled hair (a sign of disorder) and Suzhou dialect are clear signs that the narrator views her rise to stardom as a holdover from the courtesan era. But the duplicity of Yan Hong's career does not end there, for the entire film world is full of deceit. "Movie Star" ends by describing how the Boring Film Company sets a new trend by hypocritically making films that address social problems, specifically the immorality of the film world itself. There are other pieces of fiction that one might cite as examples of similarly damning portraits of actresses and the film world;³⁰ however, the negative discourse on actresses spread well beyond the realm of fiction.

In China, actors and actresses had traditionally been associated with less respectable and uneducated members of society—prostitutes, dancing girls, and thieves. These attitudes persisted into the late 1920s as the viability of working as an actress began to attract increasing numbers of young women. A 1927 article in the widely circulated *Funü zazhi* (Women's journal) was derisive of the relationship between women and the fledgling film industry:

Almost all of the women who step onto the stage are the wives of actors, lowly women, and prostitutes who generally lead the disgusting lives of streetwalkers. We can guess what their values, their principles, and their hopes are.³¹

The same article classifies movie actresses into four different types: (1) those who had no other means of livelihood; (2) those who were lured by the promise of higher salaries and thus abandoned old occupations; (3) unprincipled prostitutes who only sought fame, fortune, and power; and (4) registered prostitutes who were disgusted with selling their sexual services. Wang Hanlun clearly fit into category number two, and she herself recalled, "Because many actors and actresses [in the early 1920s] were only part-time, there were second-rate per-

formers, and also prostitutes.”³² Although the author may not have been too far off, his classification scheme reveals more about the anxieties felt by elites whose own social power was being undermined by the emergence of the cinematic medium. The roots of the problem for these declining elites were the purveyors of film, not the medium of film itself; for the purportedly low social origins of moviemakers and “their” women (actresses) threatened to debase the potentially lofty and respectable cultural form of film:

What are the characters of these above-mentioned women? No words are necessary! They simply cannot imagine what morality or art are. The male side of the film world and those playboys look down upon them and thus hunt them as so many pieces of meat (*shijian tamen de lieyan zhuyi*).³³

Here were the beginnings of a discourse on actresses in which the central issue was social mobility of women—an issue of both class and gender. This early discourse on actresses was meant to counterbalance and cordon off the potential for moral degeneracy involved when putting the faces and bodies of women from suspicious social backgrounds up on the silver screen. It was meant to exclude and delegitimize anyone who might become culturally and socially influential via the medium of film. But both delegitimization and exclusion were gendered precisely because they were achieved via the trope of “woman.” The negative commentary of the 1920s focused on actresses, and behind the success of movie actresses lay the prospects of success for a whole new group of cultural players—filmmakers. Morally suspect women were classed with those men who engaged in filmmaking and who were thus guilty of degeneracy by association.

Efforts to maintain class distinctions via the morally charged category of “woman” became more pronounced as the likelihood of mistaking movie actresses for women of high society increased. Urban women from various social backgrounds began to strike the same poses, wear the same clothes, and share the same tastes. The power of actresses such as Yang Naimei and Wang Hanlun in setting Shanghai’s fashion trends attested to the declining influence of traditional arbiters of value and taste. As women moved into new spheres of activity and became independent wage-earners, attempts to hold more upwardly mobile women in check were expressed through standards of feminine virtue. Outward beauty and material trappings could be had by most anyone in Shanghai in the 1920s, even female cotton-mill workers;³⁴ but to be truly educated and thus genuinely moral was still very much a privilege of the the upper classes. Morality was the last enclave of upper-class superiority in a topsy-turvy urban landscape. The story “Movie Star” explicitly highlighted the dubiousness of the movie star and former prostitute Yan Hong who assumed the costume and mannerisms of a female student. Appearance was not moral reality.

Class and gender boundaries were also respectively blurred and reinforced

in the pages of urban pictorials such as *Liangyou* (The young companion) and *Beiyang huapao* (The pei-yang pictorial news). The front page of any given edition of these Republican-era pictorials might feature a photograph of a movie actress, a female student, or the wife or daughter of some powerful personage, all of whom struck fragile poses of femininity—eyes turned demurely away and hands delicately drawn inwards.³⁵ One might not be able to distinguish these cover girls in terms of their social positions, but there was no doubt concerning their gender. Although movie actresses and elite women made the same gendered gestures on the covers of magazines, they remained separated by class. Movie actresses never appeared in “women’s pages” alongside those genteel ladies of high society: writers, painters, socialites (*dajia guixiu* or *minggui*), the educated and the wealthy.³⁶ They were always clearly identified and separated out. The category of “movie actress” simultaneously promulgated the quintessence of feminine comportment, yet guaranteed the maintenance of a visual separation needed to reinforce and preserve crucial class distinctions, not only between women of different moral stature, but also between those men with whom they were associated.

The 1920s perceptions of actresses, however, did not reflect some objective reality. Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei, two of China’s first movie actresses, were both from educated and affluent (yet declining) backgrounds. The discourse on actresses in the 1920s, in effect, served to police the nested boundaries of gender and class. The independent power of *women* was not recognized by the 1920s commentary on actresses, and yet women were its primary object of analysis. It was movie actresses, *not* actors, whose moral characters came under direct attack. Women became the lightning rods for class tensions which were often expressed in explicitly gendered terms as male cultural power-holders used negative terms to describe actresses not only to control women themselves, but also to attack male rivals who might rise to cultural power via the medium of film.

Another distinctive feature of the negative discourse on actresses in the 1920s was that it revolved around a categorical indictment of movie actresses. Individuals were never singled out except as fictional characters in short stories that were meant to be interpreted from the “world-in-a-drop-of-water” perspective of imaginative fiction. However, individual actresses soon came to the fore in the discourse on actresses as Shanghai’s film industry experienced a number of structural transformations in the late 1920s and early 1930s that resulted in a studio-centered form of organization.

During the early Republican period individual artists and entrepreneurs, both foreign and Chinese, were capitalizing and organizing the Chinese film industry in a major way. The first major institutional breakthrough came in the fall of 1917 when Shanghai’s Commercial Press brought together the worlds of pub-

lishing and film by opening a film department under the auspices of its already-established photography section.³⁷ Only five Chinese studios were producing films in the 1910s, but by the early 1920s the film industry took off as the number of studios, theaters, and moviegoers skyrocketed. In 1925 there were some 40 to 60 Shanghai-based production companies, many of which were fly-by-night operations run by amateurs with big ambitions but only enough capital to rent equipment and studio time.³⁸ Two years later the number of production companies had tripled to a nationwide total of 181, with 151 of these in Shanghai alone.³⁹ With the rapid development of film technology and the onset of a global economic depression in the late 1920s and early 1930s, many small studios consolidated themselves into larger and more highly capitalized conglomerates; but the vast majority soon discovered that reality truly does bite, floundered by the way-side, and went belly-up.⁴⁰ Shanghai was soon dubbed "Hollywood of the East" as China's film industry began to revolve around a handful of studios located there—Mingxing (Star), Lianhua (United), Yihua (China Artist), and Tianyi (Unique). These studios went on to reign oligarchically over China's film industry until the Japanese occupation of the entrepot in 1937.

The rise of the studio system and of individual stars were two sides of the same coin, for a studio's success depended on its ability to create and maintain a stable of stars. This generated a new "promotional discourse" that revolved around particular vocabularies of praise. By the 1930s much of the commentary on actresses originated from within the film industry itself and appeared in fan magazines. Those individual women who worked in the film industry after Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei followed quite different paths to movie stardom. They had to deal with much more prolific discourses as well as with a body of knowledge about actresses that was generated by a society much more savvy to the workings of the urban mass media, and their careers and public personae were the creations of a highly efficient promotional apparatus.

The Second Generation: Hu Die and Ruan Lingyu

By 1929 both Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei had faded from the film world.⁴¹ But directors, producers, and film bosses were always on the lookout for fresh faces and new personalities. Following close on the heels of Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei down the road to stardom were Hu Die (Butterfly Wu, 1908–89) and Ruan Lingyu (Lily Yuen) (see figs. 14, 15). Hu and Ruan both started their careers during the mid-1920s, while Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei were still in the business, and went on to become two of the most well-known movie stars in China during the 1930s.



14. Hu Die, a.k.a. Butterfly Wu: the movie queen (ca. 1926, source unknown).

Like Wang Hanlun and Yang Naimei, Hu Die came from a well-to-do family.⁴² She entered the China Film Academy (Zhonghua dianying xueyuan), China's first motion picture acting school, in 1924.⁴³ She made her first movie appearance in *Victory* (Zhan'gong) produced by Zhonghua (China) Film Company in 1925 and signed with Tianyi, appearing in almost twenty films between 1925 and 1927. In 1928 Hu Die joined Mingxing where she worked with well-known directors Zheng Zhengqiu, Zhang Shichuan, and Bu Wancang as well as with Ruan Lingyu. It was Hu Die's dual performance in *Twin Sisters* in 1934 and her role as one of the Chinese representatives at both the Moscow International Film Festival and at the Berlin Film Festival in 1935 that put her over the top.

Ruan Lingyu came from a very different social background.⁴⁴ She did not attend acting school and auditioned for Mingxing director Bu Wancang in 1926 only at the behest of her brother-in-law, Zhang Huichong. Director Bu recognized Ruan's raw talent and signed her on. She appeared in five films while with Mingxing, then followed director Bu to Da Zhonghua-Baihe (Great China-Lily) Film Company in 1929. She made six more movies with Da Zhonghu-Baihe before moving to Lianhua in 1930 where she remained for the rest of her film ca-

15. Ruan Lingyu, a.k.a. Lily Yue the tragic movie star (*Liangyou* no. 30 [Sept. 1928]: front cover)



reer. Ruan's career peaked between 1932 and 1935, when she appeared in many leftist-inspired films.⁴⁵ Her career ended with her death in 1935.

The careers of Hu Die and Ruan Lingyu can each be divided into two distinct periods that coincide with two very different periods of Chinese film history. During the 1920s Hu and Ruan were merely two actresses among a myriad of others, virtually all of whom were churning out frivolous flicks of love and derring-do to keep the masses entertained. As Hu Die and Ruan Lingyu were each coming into their own in the early 1930s, the film industry was changing in fundamental ways. Film historians in the People's Republic of China (PRC) tend to attribute the rise of Hu Die and especially of Ruan Lingyu to the fact that they came under the influence of directors such as Tian Han, Wu Yonggang, Bu Wancang, and others who were sympathetic to the Chinese Communist Party's left-wing film movement, which had infiltrated big-name studios such as Mingxing and Lianhua in the early 1930s.⁴⁶ However, Ruan and Hu's popularity during the 1930s was not simply based upon ideological "progressiveness" and leftist leanings. The institutional structures of Shanghai's studio and promotional systems were also becoming more routinized and refined. New film technologies (namely, the introduction of sound) were changing the pro-

cess of movie-making, and the proliferation of movie magazines generated new promotional schemes and new forms of fame grounded in a discourse on actresses that departed from their overwhelmingly negative image in the 1920s.⁴⁷ New technologies and promotional strategies, not politics, were the decisive factors in Hu and Ruan's success.

With the introduction of "talkie" technology on the cusp of the 1930s, many smaller studios were unable to keep up with the costs of retooling to sound. Undercapitalized companies could not afford to buy new equipment or to build the multiple sound stages needed to efficiently produce sound movies. Likewise, many silent film stars were unable to adapt to the world of the talkies. The biggest obstacle, of course, was that of spoken dialect: many cinematic performers hailed from either Guangdong or the Jiangnan region and did not speak clear or fluid Mandarin, if they spoke it at all. There were also other adjustments that had to be made, such as memorizing one's lines, making sure to project one's voice clearly, and taking directions only in between (as opposed to during) shots. All of these shifts led to a higher standard of professionalization that favored stage-acting skills and Mandarin. Although the impact of sound technology on the film world was jolting, the institutional realities of silent film were not immediately swept away. In fact, silent films lingered on and were widespread well into the 1930s simply because many movie theaters found the conversion to sound projection equipment too costly. Thus, the obsolescence of the silent film industry was not instantaneous. Still, the general trend toward sound movies was clear: it was only a matter of time before silent films would be not only silent, but also invisible.

Hu Die was well poised to make it big in the world of the "talkies" simply because she had spent a number of her childhood years in the Beiping-Tianjin area and could speak standard Mandarin. Prior to the 1930s, Hu Die was a well-known movie actress who appeared in many immensely popular knight-errant films of the day, such as Mingxing's cash-cow series of *Huoshao honglian si* (Burning of the red lotus temple).⁴⁸ Given her popularity and her ability to speak Mandarin, Hu Die was Mingxing's natural choice for the lead in their 1931 sound production *Genii hongmudan* (Sing-song girl Red Peony)—China's first sound movie.

The Third Generation: Professional Skills and the Gewutuan

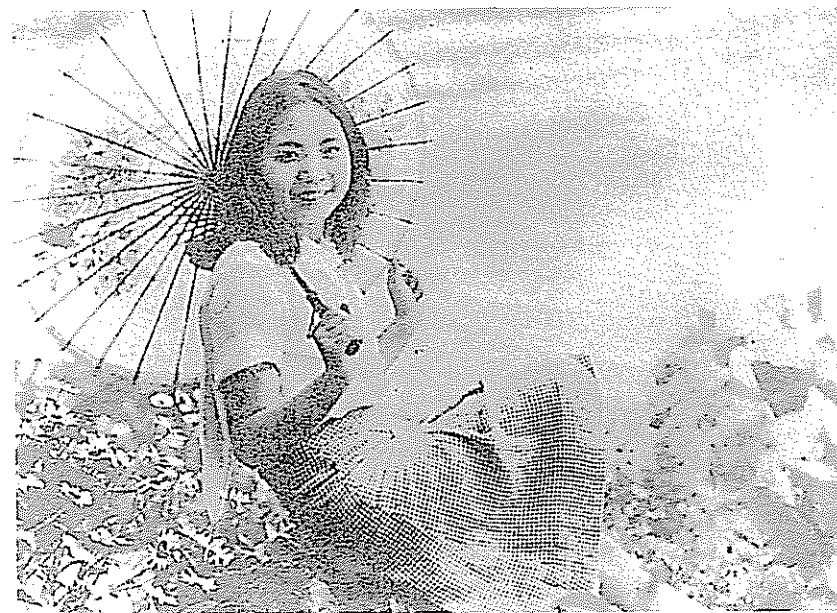
The turn toward song and dance troupes in the early 1930s as pools for new film talent was driven by the technological shift to sound. The world of

"talkies" privileged those who spoke Mandarin and possessed the skills of stage performance. The training that young girls received in China's first song and dance troupes fit the bill perfectly.

The man behind the development of these troupes was Li Jinhui (1891–1967).⁴⁹ In February 1927 Li started the China School for Song and Dance (Zhonghua gewu zhuanmen xuexiao, also known as Gezhuang). In 1927 Gezhuang's first class was made up of 40 or so students including future movie stars Wang Renmei (1914–87) and Li Lili (b. 1915) (see figs. 16, 17). Although Gezhuang recruited fifteen- and sixteen-year-old adolescents of both sexes, formal training was gendered: most of the girls were groomed for performances, while the boys were mainly trained as musicians. Tuition at the school was free and each day's regimen consisted of six class periods: four classes in song and dance (*gewu ke*) which included voice training, musical instruments, and dance; and two classes in "culture" (*wenhua ke*) which included such subjects as foreign language conversation, basic classes in theater history, musical theory, and so on.⁵⁰ When the school was disbanded in late 1927, Li took the remnants of Gezhuang and established the Meimei Girls School (Meimei nüxiao). Li had no idea how long he would be able to finance the Meimei Girls School venture and so began to plan and organize a song and dance troupe to promote China's "national language" in Southeast Asia.⁵¹ Li was forced to disband the troupe in 1929 due to financial difficulties; however, within a few months he had once again reorganized the old members of China Song and Dance into a new troupe called the Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe (Mingyue gewutuan) which he introduced to northern audiences in Beijing and Tianjin in the spring of 1930.⁵² While in the north the Bright Moon Troupe recruited some new members, including future movie stars Hu Jia and Xue Lingxian who, along with Wang Renmei and Li Lili, were dubbed "Bright Moon's Four Heavenly Kings" (*Mingyue si da tianwang*).⁵³

In May 1931 the general manager of Lianhua, Luo Mingyou, proposed a merger between the Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe and his own company. China's first full-length sound film, *Sing-Song Girl Red Peony*, had been released in Shanghai by the Mingxing studio just two to three months earlier, and Luo wanted to increase the viability of his own company in the new era of the talkies. He needed the skills and talents of song and dance girls to do it, for they possessed both the skills and the innocent faces required to play female roles in the 1930s. In June 1931 Li Jinhui and Luo Mingyou struck a deal, and the Bright Moon Song and Dance Troupe changed its name to the Lianhua Song and Dance Group (Lianhua gewuban).⁵⁴

Many actresses who had started their film careers in the 1920s, such as Wang Hanlun, Yang Naimei, and Ruan Lingyu, received no formal training in drama and came to the film industry as amateurs. By the 1930s, however, many of



16. Wang Renmei: the screen wildcat (*Liangyou*, no. 80 [Sept. 1933]: 30).

those women who were to become China's "third generation" movie stars were drawn from the world of "song and dance troupes" (*gewutuan*) and were highly skilled in music and theatrical arts.

The 1930s Discourse on Actresses, I: Acting Talent and the Courtesan Ethic

By the mid-1930s China's second and third "generations" of female movie stars were constituted within the discourse of a well-established urban mass media and a highly efficient promotional system. Their film careers were entirely the products of this system and the speed of their ascendancy attests to the effectiveness of the new promotional machinery.

Hu Die's rise to the top of China's film world provides a convenient window into the construction of *nü mingxing* in the 1930s. Her crowning in February 1933 as China's "Movie Queen" was the result of *Mingxing ribao's* (Mingxing daily's) efforts to boost its own sales.⁵⁵ A new discourse of professionalism presided at ceremonies such as these, where movie actresses were praised for their acting



17. Li Lili: the athletic actress (middle), in a still from *Queen of Sports* (1934), courtesy of the China Film Archive.

skills and talents. Hu's career went ballistic after her coronation, and continued to be fueled by the print media.

Some two years later on February 21, 1935, China's first movie queen, Miss Butterfly Wu (Hu Die), was off to Moscow to participate in the Moscow International Film Festival. She had been specifically invited by representatives in Moscow to be a member of the Chinese delegation, making her a national representative of China. For five months Hu traveled with studio boss Zhou Jianyun and his wife to Moscow, Berlin, Paris, London, Geneva, and Rome. During her tour of Europe, Hu took on the airs of a cultural ambassador, hobnobbing with foreign diplomats, defending China's film and fashion industries as well as China's national pride.⁵⁶ Her letters from abroad were published in every venue from newspapers to women's journals and film magazines. Upon returning to Shanghai on June 7, 1935, Hu Die was bigger than ever.⁵⁷ She built up her image as a learned and studious woman when she wrote, "I feel very happy because I read two great works: one was 'World Knowledge' (Shijie zhishi) and one was 'A Record of Observations on World Film' (Shijie yingtian canguan ji). I gained knowledge that a lifetime worth of diligent research wouldn't give me."⁵⁸ The

publication of a memoir of her travels in Europe entitled *Ou you zaji* (Miscellaneous notes from a European journey) in August 1935 reinforced the bookish image Hu wished to cultivate.⁵⁹

The celebration of Hu Die's artistic abilities in the mass media reflected a clear shift from the discourse of the 1920s. A clear line was drawn between the film industry's early days and the present. A 1933 article published in *Dianying yuekan* (Movie monthly) ran:

When film just came into being, women all shirked away, while men were already a dime a dozen. Because women stayed away, there was a shortage of talent; and there were only a few actresses (*nü yanyuan*) who all became stars (*mingxing*) regardless of their artistic talents.

Those who were reporters or editors all gawked at the female body. . . . Society was enticed and paid attention to her, to the point of calling her a star. And she? She also used the title "star," made herself up, donned fashionable clothes, swaggered down the street, and put on airs using her so-called stardom to attract the opposite sex. . . .

But this is already a fact of the past, for films have been in society for some time now.

In fact, this group of actresses is already past. It's best not to mention them anymore and to discuss the lucky actresses of the present!⁶⁰

The film world of the 1920s was painted as a world of sexpot starlets, while that of the 1930s was a world of genuinely talented artistes recognized and rewarded according to their artistic merits. Even actresses such as Ruan Lingyu, who had not yet made the transition to "talkies" and thus seemed more like a holdover from the 1920s era of silent film "starlets," could be praised and remade as a 1930s "artist."⁶¹ After all, during the 1920s "there were many upright and self-respecting actresses who were dragged down and implicated [by the behavior of 1920s starlets]."⁶²

The promotional discourse in the 1930s played up the education, training, and artistic skills of the third generation, too. Actresses such as Lu Lixia, Hu Ping (b. 1913), and Li Lili were characterized as having "artistic achievements," as being "studious" and as "highly trained."⁶³ Thirties fan magazines portrayed actresses as artists in an effort to distance them from common prostitutes and thus make them more respectable. Actresses frequently posed—their diligent faces studying books in hand—for pictures that were published in fan magazines.⁶⁴ Li Lili was characterized as having a taste for music as well as books: "Although she's a playful girl, there are times when she feels life's sorrows and is silent. But when our sweet sister is happy, she laughs and jumps, and sings. She plays the piano and rides her bike every day to class at the National Conservatory."⁶⁵ And if actresses like Mei Lin were not formally trained painters, the new and democratizing medium of photography enabled them to at least pretend to

practice painterly artistry by displaying their photographs in fan magazines under such headings as "Miss Mei Lin's Photographic Artwork."⁶⁶

Such vocabularies of praise resonated and overlapped with an earlier courtesan culture that was most vibrant, visible, and respected during the late Ming, when gifted courtesans, who began as mere prostitutes, emerged as respectable cultural figures.⁶⁷ This reassertion of a courtesan ethic as embodied in a new breed of public women was made possible by the slow but sure "sexualization" of Suzhou courtesans (*shuyou*) which "accelerated during WWI and was completed by the early 1920's."⁶⁸ Just as artistically talented courtesans were transformed into common prostitutes, actresses shed the trappings of prostitutes and took up the mantle of skilled courtesans. Yet there was an added dimension to the relationship between latter-day courtesans of the silver screen and their "clientele," for *nü mingxing* were the products of urban mass media, while their courtesan predecessors were not.

Aura and Alienation, I: Fame, Photos, and Fans in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

The fame generated by the 1930s film industry was quite different from those forms of fame enjoyed by Ming and Qing courtesans and even of *nü mingxing* in the 1920s. Courtesans as well as China's earliest female movie stars—such as Yang Naimei and Wang Hanlun—lived in a promotional world of three dimensions and face-to-face interaction. By the 1930s, however, the social category of the actress had been more assimilated into a mass-marketed culture in urban China. The aura of fame founded upon commercialized forms and practices of mass publicity simultaneously produced a veneer of social intimacy as well as an increased social distance. Although female movie stars undoubtedly moved out into the public, an increasingly desirous mass audience was cultivated through continually accelerating and flattened-out forms of interaction with their idols, which eventually revealed the fundamentally commercialized and impersonal nature of this media-based "intimacy." Such revelations resulted in a deep sense of detachment and alienation among *nü mingxing* and their fans alike.

One of the most important rituals involved in the creation and maintenance of this imaginary connection between fans and their screen idols was the exchange of fan mail and personally autographed photos. In 1926, Wang Hanlun had left Tianyi after her private mail had been opened by company employees.⁶⁹ By the mid-1930s, however, studios thought nothing of opening the mail of a movie-star wanna-be like Mei Lin, for it was all part of the promotional game:

Although this film [*Wuchou junzi*, or "Unworried gentleman"] hasn't started playing yet and we've only glimpsed a few scenes from the trailers, movie fans have already discovered [Mei Lin's] acting talent. Recently she's received many letters. We have opened a short letter written by a fan and published it for our readers.

Most fan mail consists of requests for a photo of Miss Mei. Dear readers, you can also ask Miss Mei for a personally autographed photo!⁷⁰

A fan wrote, "Recently I've heard that you are very warm and gentle and are willing to be close to your audience, not like the disdainful and arrogant airs of most actresses these days. On this point I really respect you."⁷¹ Given the fawning tone of this letter, it's no wonder that letters were published in the pages of movie magazines under such derogatory titles as "The Foolishness of Movie Fans":

[Chen] Yanyan,

I am a movie fan, but I've only been mystified by your films. No matter what movie you're in, I watch them all. There are a few that I've seen 2 or 3 times in a row! Besides the movies you star in, I only watch a few in which Hu Die stars. I don't watch any other movies. Can you understand? I love you. I love your beauty and your youth, your emotions are exquisite and profound. Am I writing you this letter for no actual reason? I hope that you'll send me an autographed picture of yourself. Could you? Yanyan!

A movie fan.

12/1/34

Address: West Ningbo Gate, Jiaoshi Middle School⁷²

Actresses with aspirations to stardom were expected to play this picture game, and the editors of movie magazines such as *Qingqing dianying* (who were crucial in maintaining the circuits of desire) fell back on time-tested models. The memories of women such as Hu Die and the now deceased Ruan Lingyu were hollowed out and turned into shells—mere stereotypes. Their physical presence was no longer a priority, for they were now simply categories and molds to be fit. Upcoming starlets such as Mei Lin and Diao Banhua were respectively hailed and then marketed as nothing more than rehashed imitations—a younger generation's Ruan Lingyu and Hu Die.⁷³ Miscellaneous words of thanks to young actresses who spent much of their precious time conscientiously signing thousands of autographs were published as evidence of sincerity, meant to endear these budding stars to their future fans:

Thanks to Yuan Meiyun, Li Lili, Gao Qianping, Mei Lin, and Diao Banhua for having all donated personally autographed photos of themselves for Yan Ciping's *Niushen* (Goddess) monthly. They each signed pictures one after another for two days. They all said that their hands were hurting. *Niushen* publishing society gave out more than 3,000 photos.⁷⁴

This ritual of writing to ask for autographed photos of the stars and then receiving them became so routine that the aura of the stars began to wear thin,

and alienation soon set in. In "A Reader's Outline: Notes of a Movie Fan," a man named Zhu Ping offered some advice on such subjects as how to ask for photos of the stars, how to read magazines, and how to write letters to the stars. But Zhu's final remark points to a certain degree of cynicism: "Don't get in too deep, you'll only be disappointed."⁷⁵

The voice of a young movie fan in an essay entitled "Do I Think That I Know Them?" is also riven with doubt and disillusionment. A twenty-year-old narrator describes how he had collected photographs of female stars, embellished their faces and blackened in their teeth with a marker, and then scribbled various questions and conjectures about their lives along the borders of the photos like so many oracle bones. He concludes:

Do I think that by doing this, I have come to know them? There are probably a few people who will know them like I have come to know them [by scribbling on their pictures]. . . . Recently I've heard a lot of people say, "I know her." How can she ultimately let me know her? Naturally, this is a problem. Why is it so difficult to interact (*tan shejiao*) with movie stars and why are we limited to only making little conjectures in our heads or on their faces and bodies? By doing this, have I come to know them?⁷⁶

The question was, of course, rhetorical. The very medium of film and fan magazines along with the idea of a mass audience and movie "fans" had radically altered the dynamics of the relationship between entertaining women and their audiences. The commodified relationship of film star to fan belied the promotional trope of a latter-day courtesan. The game was nearly over, for some fans had already clearly approached the discursive limits of *nü mingxing* as centered and knowable subjects.

The 1930s Discourse on Actresses, II: "True Character" and the "Good Girl"

Although second- and third-generation movie stars were lauded because they possessed all of the requisite professional and artistic skills for making movies, the "true character" (*bense*) standard of acting dominated screenwriting and casting practices during the 1930s. Although well-known screenwriters and directors like Sun Yu were well aware of other theories about acting, they had no aspirations to depart from the standards of "true character."⁷⁷ Wang Renmei's first starring role in Sun's 1932 film *Ye meigui* (Wild rose) was written specifically for the young seventeen-year-old who aspired to nothing else but acting like herself on screen.⁷⁸

The "true character" standard of acting in the mid-1930s was a holdover of

the 1920s notion that it was necessary for women to appear in silent movies because disguise would not work given the realistic quality of photographic and cinematic representation. To attribute the emphasis on "true character" acting in the 1930s to a perception of film as a bald medium of visual realism would be a mistake, however. By the mid-1930s sound technology was in wide use, and directors were already using superimposed images and dream sequences that moved away from a crude realism based on a one-to-one correspondence with reality. In the 1930s, and perhaps in the 1920s too, the "true character" standard of acting functioned more as a *gendered* constraint that held actresses to standards of "authenticity." This "authenticity" was, in turn, grounded in the socially constructed ideal of women as "good girls" who were "natural" (*ziran*), "innocent" (*tianzhen*), and "genuine" (*zhen*). The construction of and adherence to this standard by directors, screenwriters, critics, and audiences as well as actresses themselves reflected an unwillingness to accept and praise women for being anything except centered, knowable, and thus harmless or nonthreatening subjects.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the praise heaped upon Ruan Lingyu. In a 1934 photo spread of stars, a caption reads: "Ruan Lingyu, forever holding a wounded smile. We hope that in the shadow of your wounded smile, even though you powerfully take on genuineness (*zhenzhen*) in your acting, the fruits of that achievement are yours, are yours, do you hear? Lingyu, of all the appearances in the Chinese film world, yours is the most soulful!" (*linghun de*).⁷⁹ This caption emphasizes Ruan's acting achievements *and* the "genuineness" of her acting. Ruan is praised for her acting skill, but only when that skill results in her bearing her genuine and authentic soul.

The "true character" standard of praise for actresses was explicitly articulated in the 1930s; and both fans and critics, male and female alike, accepted it. A young fan wrote to the emerging 1930s star Hu Ping:

I've seen almost all of your movies and the impressions that you give women (*nüren*) are especially deep. Acting that natural, they can hardly find words with which to praise you! I remember there were two girls (*nü haizi*) sitting next to me who didn't stop whispering: "Wow! Those actresses and actors who've received knowledgeable training are really something else. Hu Ping, in my mind, is really beyond many other actresses. Hu Ping really is Hu Ping!"⁸⁰

If Hu Ping really was Hu Ping, women who "acted" in movies were not expected to be anything else but "themselves," too. "True character" discourse held *nü mingxing* to a singularly centered and coherent subjectivity.

Tied to these articulations of "true character" was the cliché of the "good girl"—a moralized media construction of a good woman's "natural" or "genuine" disposition. The captions of a 1935 photo spread featuring a well-known

movie star read, "This girl (*guniang*) [has an] innocent, lively, and beautiful face. How passionate (*duo qing ya*)! You know who it is!"⁸¹ We certainly did. It was none other than Miss Butterfly Wu, the lovely Hu Die herself. A caption for two photos of Yuan Meiyun described her as "an upright and innocent girl [*wuxie de guniang*; literally, "a girl without evil"] who doesn't know about the world's love and hate."⁸² The 1930s was the era not only of the talented artist but also of the "good girl." The talent, virtue, innocence, and sincerity of movie actresses in the 1930s contrasted greatly with the amateur, degenerate, corrupted, and deceptive qualities of actresses in the 1920s. Although such subjectivities were diametrically opposed, they remained equally flat and clichéd.

The 1930s discourse of praise did not displace the more negative discourse of the 1920s, for the 1920s discourse on dangerous women was still in effect in the 1930s. Women, including movie actresses, who were capable of duplicity could be nothing more than femme fatales of the city. Actresses who might deceptively assume the identity of someone else on screen were a direct threat to a centered subjectivity of womanhood based upon chastity and loyalty. Such was not the case for movie actors. Actors were not strictly held to being "genuine," "natural," and "innocent" on screen. In fact, some actors' on-screen and off-screen personalities were explicitly separated. A photo spread showcasing the "four bastards" (*si ge huaidan*) of the Chinese film world—all of whom were men, of course—drew a clear line between the villains that actor Wang Xianzhai played on screen and his "real" personality. Praise for Wang's acting skills emphasized artifice and his ability to pose as a villain.⁸³ Although it was acceptable for a man to merely "pose" as a villain on screen, such was not the case for a woman. Indeed, a woman had to transcend simple "poses" of virtuousness in movies and practice it both on and off screen. "True character" discourse that praised an actresses' qualities of "naturalness," "genuineness," and "innocence" effected both the fusion and the fission of "reality" and "representation," of life and art(ifice).

By the mid-1930s "private lives" of movie actresses became "public" and were packaged and paraded for a mass audience to both see and judge. A four-page photo essay entitled "One Day in the Life of a Movie Actress from Morning Until Night" visualized the life of the actress Gao Qianping, while a smaller four-picture photo essay entitled "The Private Life of Li Lili" showed the young newcomer sleeping, putting on makeup, sitting with her dog, and pumping up her bicycle tires.⁸⁴ Actors, on the other hand, never underwent such scrutiny; photo essays on the "private lives" of actors did not exist. Men appeared in photo essays, but only as fictionalized characters, not as "themselves." Indeed, two of the four criteria used to compile a ranked table of actresses published in 1937 fell under the rubrics of "moral conduct" (*pinxing*) and "private life" (*si shenghuo*).⁸⁵ The very notion of a "private life" in the pages of a magazine, however, was an

oxymoron and belied the idea that actresses were free to behave as they pleased off screen. The lives of *nü mingxing* were, in a sense, perpetually "on screen" and scripted to suit a mass audience. Ruan Lingyu's suicide is a salient example of the disciplining dynamic of "true character" and "good girl" discourse.

Aura and Alienation, II: The Suicide of Ruan Lingyu

Around midnight on March 7, 1935, Ruan Lingyu and her new beau, a wealthy Cantonese tea merchant named Tang Jishan, came home from a dinner party at Lianhua studios.⁸⁶ After Tang fell asleep Ruan ate a bowl of rice porridge along with 30 pills of barbitone-sodium and some tea. She then sat down and penned two suicide notes—one for Tang Jishan and one to be published in Shanghai newspapers.⁸⁷ Tang woke up shortly thereafter and noticed that something was wrong with Ruan's appearance; he rushed her to several Shanghai hospitals, but numerous attempts at reviving her were unsuccessful. Ruan was pronounced dead at 6:38 P.M. on March 8, 1935, at the age of 25.

Ruan's suicide stunned the entire nation and became both the talk and "the walk" of Shanghai.⁸⁸ Magazines ran memorial issues entirely dedicated to Ruan.⁸⁹ There was widespread speculation concerning the cause of Ruan's suicide.⁹⁰ Because her last words were addressed to her estranged husband, Zhang Damin, and Tang Jishan, Ruan's relationships with these two men were at the center of the controversy surrounding her death. Given that Ruan and Tang had never legally married, the reference to Ruan as "Mrs. Tang Jishan" in her funeral announcement was reported with great irony.⁹¹

Zhang Damin and Ruan had fallen in love and were living together before Ruan entered the film world in 1925. This was tantamount to marriage, and the fact that Zhang Damin and Ruan Lingyu were never legally married was of little importance, since marriage was vaguely defined in Republican-era China and included a whole range of formal and informal arrangements. The crucial factor was not the legality of such arrangements per se, but rather their morality. The same could be said of divorce at the time.⁹²

By late 1932 Ruan Lingyu was estranged from Zhang Damin after he had gambled away large amounts of their money and hit her. At this time, Ruan also had feelings for the manager of the Chahua Tea Company, Tang Jishan, whom she had met at a number of social functions thrown by Lianhua studios.⁹³ In February 1933 Ruan hired a lawyer, Wu Chengyu, to draw up and publish a statement of her independence from Zhang in various newspapers—a common and accepted means of divorce at the time.⁹⁴ In April 1933 Zhang Damin returned from a business trip and found Ruan living with Tang Jishan. All the parties involved sat down and signed a settlement written up by Ruan's lawyer,

Wu Chengyu. The main stipulations of the settlement were that it was not to be made public, that both sides agreed to live independently, and that Ruan would pay Zhang a maximum of 100 yuan per month for a period of two years.⁹⁵ Both Ruan and Zhang followed the terms of this settlement until November 1934. Then, Zhang Damin asked Ruan for some money to finance a business venture, for he knew full well that she was only obligated to pay his living allowance for a few more months. When Ruan refused and only agreed to pay him the 500 yuan that she owed him, Zhang hired a lawyer and sued Ruan and Tang for damages. Tang Jishan responded by hiring his own lawyer and sued Zhang for defamation. The case was dropped, but Zhang opened it up again in February 1935, when he sued Ruan and Tang for fabricating documents and forging his seal in order to swindle him out of his property. Two days before the case was to go to court, Ruan killed herself.⁹⁶

While an allegedly spurious set of notes linked Ruan's suicide to a fear of being censured as an immoral woman, a second set of "authentic" notes plainly reveal Ruan's unwillingness to go on suffering the physical abuses and infidelities of both Zhang Damin and Tang Jishan. Still, both sets of suicide notes indicate that Ruan's reasons for committing suicide were ultimately tied to her fear of being stigmatized as an immoral woman. She could not leave her second lover, Tang Jishan, and expect to carry on in her personal and professional affairs as she had previously. Ruan's position as a female movie star only tightened the grip that public opinion had over her and raised the stakes of her reputation. Because the standards of "true character" made no distinction between her talents on screen and her moral character off screen, Ruan's livelihood as an actress and her public image as a harmless and wounded bird were inextricably linked; both were jeopardized by Zhang Damin's legal case against her. The independence and assertiveness that Ruan exhibited in her dealings with Zhang and that she might have exercised by leaving an unfaithful and physically abusive Tang did not coincide with the ideal of her as "forever holding a wounded smile."⁹⁷ The discourses of "true character" and the "good girl" virtually guaranteed that she would be judged by the mass media and the general public in terms of her moral character as a woman. These discourses, within which she was constituted, effectively closed down the possibilities of her actions and of a decentered subjectivity. Lu Xun (1881–1936) attacked newspapermen for their irresponsible sensationalism in a May 1935 essay whose title was taken from one of Ruan's own suicide notes—"Gossip Is Fearful."⁹⁸ Ruan attempted to assert herself as a morally independent subject against the disciplinary effects of *nü mingxing* discourse, yet her ironic manipulation of the mass media only revealed the constructedness of her own subject position as both "woman" and *nü mingxing*. The fact that Ruan became more human in the eyes of some, but only after taking her own life, was merely another twist of irony. A columnist in *Qingqing*

dianying asked: "If Ruan Lingyu hadn't committed suicide, would you still express sympathy with her?"⁹⁹

Ruan Lingyu was not alone in facing the disciplinary effects of being a *nü mingxing*. Hu Die confronted a barrage of criticism and slander when she broke off her engagement with her first lover, Lin Xuehuai. After the Mukden Incident occurred on September 18, 1931, rumors ran rampant that Hu Die had actually danced that fateful night away in Beiping with the traitorous Young Marshal of the northeast, Zhang Xueliang, as Japanese armies invaded and occupied Chinese territory! Such gossip about Hu Die did not subside until she had married again.¹⁰⁰ These rumors may not have been grounded in fact, but they functioned as such because they were legitimated by a discourse of *nü mingxing* founded upon a singular and coherent subjectivity. A movie star was either a "good girl" or a "snake-like woman." Moments of disciplining like these were a clear sign of how threatening such prominent and independent women as Hu Die and Ruan Lingyu could be during politically, socially, and morally uncertain times.

The gossip that plagued Hu Die and that drove Ruan Lingyu to her death revealed a negative side of the 1930s discourse on actresses which was deeply rooted in the 1920s equation of movie actresses with prostitutes. Equating actresses with prostitutes in the 1920s was the flip side of equating them with courtesans in the 1930s. A hierarchy of prostitution in Shanghai during the first half of the twentieth century lent a great deal of elasticity to the term "prostitute" (*jinü*), which was loosely applied to a wide range of women, including elite sing-song girls (*xiansheng*) who performed in "storyteller's residences" (*shuyu*) and regarded themselves as skilled entertainers rather than providers of sexual services, as well as those less fortunate women and girls who worked as streetwalking "pheasants" (*yeji*) or who found employment in "salted pork shops" (*xianrou zhuang*), "flower-smoke rooms" (*huayan jian*), or "nailsheds" (*dingpeng*).¹⁰¹ Of course, movie critics and detractors of the 1920s were undoubtedly referring to the low end of this hierarchy when they associated actresses with "prostitutes." But the overwhelmingly negative discourse on actresses in the 1920s ran along the same continuum as the more promotional formulas of the 1930s. Placing movie actresses on this prostitute-courtesan continuum gave them ambiguous status, since it might serve promotional as well as sanctioning purposes.

The earlier 1920s version of the prostitute/actress never completely disappeared in the 1930s; it was simply reconstituted as a more individuated and commodified form of scandalous gossip. No matter how much pretension was given to the noble cause of art, making movies was still very much about making money. The commercial viability of Shanghai's film industry was not solely based upon the talent and virtue of Shanghai's brightest female movie stars; pure sex appeal was a factor too. The careers of second-rate starlets such as Tan

Ying (b. 1915) thrived on sex and scandal. Tan Ying, a man-eater of a woman who could always be seen in Shanghai's dance halls, was the centerpiece of the gossip columns that described her in bodily detail as "elegant" and "seductive" (*yao de lai*).¹⁰² She was the film world's femme fatale, and she elicited exclamations like, "Ah! It's Tan Ying! Tan Ying, this snake-like woman! Only a snake-like woman can live up to Shanghai's females" (*she yiyang de nüren, cai goude shang Shanghai de nüxing*).¹⁰³ One commentator asked: "If Tan Ying wasn't so licentious (*fangdang*), would Lianhua studios continue their contract with her and ask her to star in a lot of their movies?"¹⁰⁴ Although women such as Tan Ying would never join the ranks of first-rate stars, they had their own niche in the Chinese film world during the 1930s.

Qingqing dianying mapped out these niches in 1937 when it published a ranked table of actresses separated into four classes (*liu*).¹⁰⁵ The practice of marking off different gradations within the category of "prostitute" was clearly at work within the category of "movie actress," and this was the discursive reality in which *nü mingxing* lived.

Conclusion

Public discourse on movie actresses was a function of power, influencing the actions of individual women by opening up fields in which certain kinds of action and production were brought about. The varying discourses of *nü mingxing* opened up specific fields of possibility and constituted entire domains of action, knowledge, and social being via the institutions of mass media and mass culture in which a number of individual women made themselves into *nü mingxing*. Collective understanding of what a movie actress or a female movie star "was" or "should be" shifted from the 1920s as the whole range of moral judgments concerning movie actresses opened up in the 1930s. However, *nü mingxing* (female movie star) discourse, with its standards of "true character" and the "good girl", subtly equated descriptions of "good acting" with prescriptions for "acting good." The discourses on *nü mingxing*, which actually created the very objects and "truths" of their analyses, always did so according to a more familiar trope of "woman," both good and bad.

Cinematic and photographic technology as well as various discourses on *nü mingxing* literally and figuratively "flattened" the social realities and the social relationships through which female entertainers and their fans crafted a sense of themselves. In order to counter the alienating effects involved in marketing the images of individual human beings for mass consumption, it was necessary to recreate and then maintain the aura of genuinely human forms of interaction. The entire enterprise of both making and watching movies floated on the

audience's belief in the sincerity, loyalty, and accessibility of those obscure objects of desire—*nü mingxing*.

Attempts to create and then maintain an aura of personalized interaction in the age of mass media, however, did little to hide the commodified and often alienating nature of the social relationships between screen idols and their fans. Movie stars like Hu Die could live by the dual standard of being both a good actress on screen and a "good girl" off screen as dictated by public discourse. Others, like Ruan Lingyu, fit the ideal of a good actress, but could not and would not allow themselves to serve as lightning rods for the moral and cultural crises of the rest of society.

The artifice and posturing inherent in acting *well* (as opposed to acting good) in movies should have allowed for the separation of cinematic art and the daily lives of those women who worked as actresses; but such a separation into private and public personae tore at the ideal of a unified and unifying subject position (called the "good girl") that is easily knowable and nonthreatening to urbanites living in the vibrant but volatile milieu of 1930s Shanghai. A discourse of praise promulgated by the film industry's promotional machinery in the 1930s strove to constitute an aura of the "good girl" within the lives and bodies of young urban women known as *nü mingxing*. But this idealized persona was a fragile veil for the deceptive dynamics of newly institutionalized mass media and the commodified mass culture that pervaded urban life in early twentieth-century China.